

STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND REFORMATION TRADITIONS

The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden

*Women, Politics and Reform
in Renaissance Italy*



Edited by

Unn Falkeid and Anna Wainwright

Christopher Ocker

SERIES EDITOR

BRILL

The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden

Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions

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Acknowledgments

This book is the result of a collaboration between the two editors which started several years ago. After an enthusiastic discussion about the role of women writers in Renaissance Italy, and specifically about the role of widows and the possible influence of Birgitta of Sweden whose texts circulated widely from the late 14th century to the 17th century, we decided to apply for a grant for an extensive research project. The application was successful. We received funding from the Norwegian Research Council for three years (2018–2021), including funding for a PhD-student, a postdoc, and several workshops and conferences. Little did we know at that point about the obstacles to be caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and which came to delay the project considerably. Still, despite the many hindrances along our way, we were able to organize two conferences, the first in Rome in September 2018 and the second in Oslo in June 2022. The project's core group consisted of the principal investigator (Unn Falkeid), the researcher (Anna Wainwright), the postdoc (Eleonora Cappuccilli), the MSCA-fellow (Clara Stella), the PhD-student (Francesca Canepuccia), and the research assistant (Victor Frans). Between the two conferences, this group managed to gather for several minor workshops, in Rome, in Naples, at Vadstena in Sweden, and in Oslo, although our activities were far more limited than planned. Slowly the volume – the first extensive investigation of the political, literary, religious, and intellectual legacy of Birgitta of Sweden in Renaissance Italy – saw the light of day.

The editors are grateful to many people and different institutions that in various ways have assisted in the publication of this book. We would like to thank the Norwegian Research Council that generously funded the project, and which allowed us to extend the grant by one year. The staff at the Norwegian Institute in Rome and the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas, University of Oslo, provided invaluable assistance with the organization of the two conferences, and hosted many of the team for long periods of research. We would also like to express our gratitude to the staff at different libraries who helped us with finding sources, even in periods with limited access: Carolina Rediviva (Uppsala University Library), the Azzolino Archive in the Biblioteca Comunale di Jesi, Biblioteca Angelica, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Biblioteca Casanatense, Biblioteca Nazionale in Naples, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Biblioteca comunale degli Intronati in Siena, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence, The National Library in Oslo, The New York Public Library, the Morgan Library in New York, the Huntington Library in Los Angeles, and Manuela Michelloni at the Norwegian Institute in Rome. We are

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Introduction

Unn Falkeid and Anna Wainwright

*Empariamo da questa gloriosa santa Brigida, che haveva tolto lo
sposo celeste e lui la mandava hora in questo luogo hora in quest'altro.*

DOMENICA NARDUCCI to Caterina Cibo, 1533



This volume is the result of a research question that originated in a conversation between the co-editors several years ago over coffee in a hotel café. We were discussing widows – Saint Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373) and Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547), specifically – and the more we talked, the more parallels we noticed between the two women. Both were noblewomen with internationally influential connections; were passionate about Church reform; and were keenly engaged in the fashioning of their public personae. Birgitta was born to an important noble family with links to the Swedish-Norwegian royals; Vittoria Colonna to the powerful Roman family who were patrons to Petrarch and boasted numerous powerful ecclesiasts, most famously Pope Martin v (1417–1431). We began to ask ourselves: What influence might the Swedish saint – widow and prophet, pilgrim and noblewoman – have had not simply on Colonna, but on the many women writers of the Italian Renaissance? Were the “celebrity” women of the 15th and 16th centuries aware of her, her revelations, and her influence on the politics and culture of her day?

Our initial research in the coming months revealed a curious and patchwork scholarly history of Birgitta's presence in the Italian tradition, although she lived in Italy for over twenty years, and died there at the age of seventy. Her texts circulated widely in Italy from the late 14th century to 17th century, with her *Liber celestis revelacionum* (or *Celestial Revelations*) copied in Italian scriptoria, translated into vernacular, and printed in several Latin and Italian editions, both *per se* and in different compilations and collections of texts. In the same centuries, an extraordinary number of women writers across the peninsula were publishing their work, including nuns, widows, wives, and single women. Of perhaps equal significance is that they published in all the dominant genres – dialogues, letters, prophecies, orations, poetry, and epic. As scholars have shown, including many with essays in this volume, in the

16th century alone, more than 200 women in Italy published their work, a number that by far surpassed that of other European countries.¹

What role, we asked ourselves, did Birgitta of Sweden play in this revolutionary rise of women intellectuals in Italy, both secular and religious? What echoes might we find of the foreign widow in the history of the Italian Renaissance? The answer begins in Rome.

Echoes: Birgitta as Role Model

On the Festa di Santa Brigida in July 1432, Birgitta appeared in a vision to the Roman aristocrat Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani (1384–1440).² Her appearance came at a moment of international emergency for the Church: the Council of Basel, convened to confirm the decrees from the Council of Constance nearly twenty years earlier (1414–1418), had gone terribly wrong. The Constance decrees ended the painful years of the Great Western Schism of the Church (1378–1418), declaring that the pope was subject to the General Church Council, which drew its authority directly from God.³ Moreover, the decrees required the convening of regular councils in the future to promote reform – something that Pope Martin v had agreed to only reluctantly. This erosion of papal power staged and confirmed by the conciliarists was certainly not good news for Martin, who, following his election in 1418, had tried to restore the papacy to its former glory. The ambitious pope had enough on his plate at home in Rome: notably, escalating conflicts between the city’s barons, including members of his own powerful family. Martin, however, would never have to face another council: he died before the start of Basel in July 1431. His successor,

1 See especially Virginia Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy, 1400–1650* (Baltimore: 2008); Brian Richardson, *Women and the Circulation of Texts in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: 2020); and Diana Robin, *Publishing Women: Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: 2007).

2 The vision in which Saint Birgitta appears is *visio* xli, rendered in *Tractatus de visionibus*, which is the Latin translation of Francesca Romana’s revelations, collected and edited by her confessor Giovanni Mattiotti. See *Santa Francesca Romana. Edizione critica dei trattati latini di Giovanni Mattiotti*, ed. Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli (Vatican City: 1994).

Further information about the life of Saint Francesca Romana can be found on the website of her monastery Tor de’ Specchi in Rome: Tor de’ Specchi – Monastero delle Oblate di S. Francesca Romana – Santa Francesca Romana (tordespeschi.it). See also Emerenziana Vaccaro and Maria Letizia Casanova, “Francesca Romana,” in *Biblioteca Sanctorum*, vol. 5, Roma, 1965, coll. 1011–1028; Angelo Montonati, *Francesca Romana* (Milan: 2008) and Francesca Canepuccia, *How to Become a Prophetess: Strategies for Authorizing a Prophetic Mission in the Works of Francesca Romana* (PhD dissertation, University of Oslo: 2023).

3 For more information about the Great Western Schism, see *A Companion to the Great Western Schism: 1378–1417*, ed. Joëlle Rollo-Koster and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: 2009).

Eugene IV, was not nearly as shrewd a politician, and the participants at Basel found themselves at loggerheads.⁴ The papacy's legitimacy was once again thrown into question.

It was in the middle of this political and religious crisis that Birgitta appeared to the Roman Francesca: "Greetings my beloved daughter, who finds herself in my condition," she greets her.⁵ She herself once lived in the same world as Francesca, Birgitta explains, and she too was married. Positioning herself as Francesca's spiritual mother, she offers the younger woman empathy and understanding born of their shared experience, and reassures the younger visionary that the Divine Word granted her the gift of grace despite having participated in an earthly marriage. "So, console yourself, gentle soul," the Swedish saint urges. "If I was able to live a holy life, you should not doubt your gift."⁶

Birgitta's words are clearly meant to instill confidence and authority in the aspiring Roman saint, as she urges Francesca to follow in her visionary footsteps despite her marital status. Just as Birgitta did not shy away from speaking out against ecclesiastical authorities during the Avignon Papacy,⁷ Francesca should not hold back from acting on the authority endowed to her by God during her own era's ecclesiastical and political crisis. As Birgitta tells her:

I devoted myself completely to the highest Creator, and there was nothing that could move me away from his love. I conquered all obstacles courageously. Justice and reason helped me because the true light illuminated me and clarified my understanding. A deep humility was rooted in my mind, and nothing could exist in me unless it had been renewed. As a foreigner and stranger, I was always taken care of. I possessed nothing transient, but always walked free, always steadfast in obedience, and I never strayed.⁸

4 Not long after his election, Pope Eugene IV attempted unsuccessfully to dissolve the council, which only strengthened the sake of the conciliarists who claimed that the supreme authority resided with the council, and not with the pope.

5 Francesca Romana, *Tractatus, visio* XLI, 3: "Bene veniat dilecta mea filia, que est missa in statu meo."

6 *Tractatus, visio* XLI, 4: "Ergo, anima, confortare, ne dubites de dono tuo, si ego fui in bona vita."

7 In her book *The Avignon Papacy Contested. An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge, MA: 2017), Unn Falkeid explores Birgitta's role in the political debates during the 14th century.

8 *Tractatus, visio* XLI, 7–8: "Ego totam me disposui in altissimo Creatore, nec fuit ulla res alia que me admoveret a suo amore. Omnia vici animose, ius et ratio me iuvabant, quia lux vera me illuminabat et meum intellectum declarabat, et humilitas profunda in mea mente erat fundata, et nulla poterat esse res que michi non esset renovata, tantum stabam semper provisiva et semper eram forensis et advena. Nichil transitorium possidebam, sed semper libera incedebam, semper in obedientia firma, nec ab ea umquam discessi."

Birgitta's status as a "forestiera" was well-known to Roman citizens of the early 15th century. Born in Sweden in 1303, the Swedish "principessa" lived the second half of her life as a foreigner in a strange land: Italy. She died in the center of Rome, in the house of a Roman widow, Francesca Papazzurri, her friend and longtime host. She was thus a pilgrim in the original sense of the word: a resident of Rome, but without Roman citizenship. In Francesca's vision, Saint Birgitta identifies herself as both a pilgrim in Rome, and a pilgrim in the most fundamental of ways: as a temporary guest on earth.⁹ Although Francesca is a member of the Roman aristocracy, she too is a "forestiera" – a temporary guest on earth, a woman speaking up in a world governed by men. It is this strangeness ... like Birgitta's, which gives her the freedom to raise her voice.¹⁰ Birgitta concludes her sermon to Francesca with a reference to their common fate, as well as to the fate of the Church itself: "You see, we received this glory, which we possess for a reason, and it consists of far more than what you see. If you could experience even a hint of the joy within, you would be split in half and yet you would feel no pain".¹¹

This appearance by Birgitta comes in the middle of a cluster of revelations experienced by Francesca which are characterized by a clear political bent. The Roman visionary was keenly aware of the perilous moment in which the Church found itself following the Council of Basel: if the new pope, Eugene IV, did not act prudently, a new schism would tear apart the church. The imagery in Francesca's vision underscores the catastrophe of schism through the suggestion that Francesca's body will be split in half, the fate suffered by the schismatics of Dante's *Inferno*.¹² Embedded in the vision is an interplay between Francesca's body and the body of the Church itself: while Francesca might risk her very life in the struggle to restore Rome as the center of Christianity, the destruction of her own body could never be as painful as the destruction of the church.

9 Jane Tylus describes her as "the paragon, the over-achiever of late medieval pilgrims." For a rich study of the meaning of pilgrimage in Birgitta's literary oeuvre, see Tylus, "Su dunque, peregrino!": Pilgrimage and Female Spirituality in the Writings of Birgitta and Catherine," in *Sanctity and Female Authorship. Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (London and New York: 2020), 35–53.

10 In a famous legend connected to Francesca, a guardian angel illuminated the road before her with a lantern so she could walk safely, the reason Roman taxi drivers still venerate her as their patron today.

11 *Tractatus, visio* XLI, 10: "Non sine causa nos habemus, tu vides, hanc gloriam, quam posidemus, et plus est quam id quod vides. Si minimum illius gaudii, quod hic est, tu sentires, per medium te rumperes et pati numquam posses."

12 On the schismatics in *Inferno*, see Justin Steinberg, "Dante's Justice? A Reappraisal of the Contrapasso." *L'Alighieri* n.s. 44 (2014): 59–74.

Birgitta the Fountainhead

Almost two hundred years later, in May 1608, Ponziani, who was by then known affectionately in Rome as “Francesca Romana,” was canonized. In anticipation of the grand celebration, the Basilica di Santa Maria Nova in Rome was officially rededicated to her, although the church had been known unofficially by the name Santa Francesca Romana by locals since the 15th century. It was where Francesca had been granted the oblate of the Olivetan order, and where the sisters in her congregation first gathered.¹³ It had a connection to Birgitta as well, as the burial place of Pope Gregory XI – the pope who returned the papacy from Avignon to Rome, and who held Birgitta in such great esteem it is reported he kept her portrait in his cell while she was still alive.¹⁴ When Francesca’s mortal remains were discovered a few decades after her canonization, in 1638, she too was buried in the church. As part of the costly renovation of the newly-rededicated Basilica di Santa Francesca Romana, the much in-demand Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) was commissioned to design the majestic confessional in polychrome marble that same year – an indication of Francesca’s continued importance in the centuries following her death.¹⁵

The public, grandiose celebration of saintly Roman women – through expensive artistic commissions, the publication of *vitae*, beatifications, and canonizations – was a conspicuous component of the Catholic Church’s program of reform at the threshold of modernity. Bernini’s sculpture of Saint Teresa in ecstasy in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria (1647–52; Fig. 0.1) as well as of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni (1671–74; Fig. 0.2) in San Francesco a Ripa are among the best-known displays of idealized religious intensity in Baroque Rome. But they are not the only ones, nor are they the first. In the Birgittine convent on Piazza Farnese, once home to Birgitta and her fellows, we find a striking medallion in which Birgitta is represented in a similar state of ecstasy, with her eyes directed upward to Heaven. The medallion has been

13 *Roma*, Touring Club Italiano, 2004. See also P. Ronci, *Basilica di Santa Maria Nova, Santa Francesca Romana al Foro Romano* (Christen: 1973).

14 In a letter from 1378, Birgitta’s youngest daughter, Katarina Ulfsdotter, wrote that the pope reportedly had a picture of Birgitta in his papal chamber in Avignon, and she expressed her surprise that her mother was better known in Italy than in her native land. See Sara Ekwall, *Vår äldsta Birgittavita och dens varianter* (Stockholm: 1965), 99, 129–130. See also Bridget Morris, introduction to bk. iv, in *Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 2: 21 n33.

15 The striking sculpture of Francesca and an angel at the church, which was carved by Giosuè Meli in 1866 and placed at the center of the confessional, is of a later date; it is clearly modelled on the marble relief medallion made by the Bernini school and located close to Francesca’s grave in the crypt.



FIGURE 0.1 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, c.1647–52. Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome
SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY



FIGURE 0.2 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*, c.1617–74. Church of San Francesco a Ripa, Rome
SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY

attributed to the Bernini school, and it is possible that it was even completed by Bernini himself, who also enjoyed the friendship and patronage of the exiled Queen Christina of Sweden when she lived in Rome.¹⁶

André Vauchez has described Saint Birgitta as the fountainhead for a virtual cascade of visionary women to gain prominence in the centuries after her death, and it is instructive to consider this appellation in the context of the Baroque impulse to represent holy women in moments of supreme religious ecstasy.¹⁷ Further to the medallion in the Casa di Santa Brigida, Birgitta was the subject of a dramatic multipart installation by Stefano Maderno in

16 For Queen Christina's patronage and friendship with Bernini, see Lillian H. Zirpolo, "Christina of Sweden's Patronage of Bernini: The Mirror of Truth Revealed by Time". *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 26, No 1 (Spring-Summer 2005), 38–43. According to Zirpolo, the Roman citizens not only hailed Christina as the "Minerva of the North," they also called her "The Patroness of Rome" as her extensive patronage activities enhanced Rome's reputation as a center of culture.

17 André Vauchez, *Laity in the Middle Ages: The Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices* (Notre Dame, IN: 1993 [1987]), 220–24.



FIGURE 0.3 Stefano Maderno, *Statue of St. Bridget*, c.1590's. Basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura, Rome

IMAGE PROVIDED BY FONDAZIONE FEDERICO ZERI, UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA



FIGURE 0.4 Stefano Maderno, *Martyrdom of St. Cecilia*, c.1599–1600. Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome

MANUEL COHEN / ART RESOURCE, NY

the early 1600s in the basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura where, according to popular legend, she had experienced an extraordinary vision while at prayer, in which the figure of Christ hanging on the cross turned his head and spoke to her.¹⁸ (Fig. 0.3) Maderno was also responsible for the moving sculpture of Saint Cecilia (1600, Fig. 0.4) in the Trastevere church dedicated to the saint. We might consider both of Maderno's pieces as precursors to Bernini's later celebrated sculptures of extreme religious devotion by holy women.

The Catholic Church of the 17th century celebrated saintly women such as Birgitta, Cecilia, Teresa, Francesca Romana and Ludovica Albertoni as handmaidens of true Christian faith in the period of restored confidence a century after the Reformation and Christianity's dramatic split. Statues of the women, positioned around the city of Rome in what seems to be a most conscious program, staged the call for conversion evangelized by the expanding, colonizing Catholic Church not only in Europe, but across the world.¹⁹ In pondering

18 See Virginia Cox's chapter in this volume. For a study of this miracle and its impact on the Roman popular devotion, see Claudia D'Alberto, Claudia, "Il crocifisso parlante di Santa Brigida di Svezia nella basilica di San Paolo fuori le mura, e i crocifissi replicati, copiati, e riprodotti a Roma al tempo del papato avignonese," *Studi medievali e moderni. Arte, letteratura, storia*, 15, n. 1–2 (2011): 229–55.

19 On this see especially Peter A. Mazur, *Conversion to Catholicism in Early Modern Italy* (New York: 2016).

the logic behind Birgitta's prominence in this later evangelizing program, we might return to the vision of the "local" Roman visionary Francesca in the 15th century. Why is it the Swedish saint – a "foreigner and stranger" – who appears to Francesca in July of 1432, and not, for instance, Peter or Paul, the patron saints of Rome and those who appear most often in Francesca's political revelations? Indeed, Birgitta is the only contemporary saint other than the celebrated Saint Francis of Assisi to appear in Francesca's visions, depicted as a spiritual adviser or even a spiritual mother. Why did the author of Francesca's visions – whether that author was Giovanni Mattiotti, Francesca's confessor, himself, or Mattiotti and Francesca in collaboration – establish such a clear and intimate link between the two women?²⁰

Birgitta's Life

In answer to this question and the others before it, we must turn to Birgitta's extraordinary life.²¹ She was born around 1303 in Uppland, Sweden. The daughter of Ingeborg Bengtsdotter of the powerful Folkung dynasty and the knight and lawman (*lagman*) Birger Persson, she belonged to the highest echelons of the nobility with close ties to the Swedish Norwegian royal family. Because of her aristocratic background, she is sometimes labelled a *principessa* in Italian sources – "a princess from the Kingdom of Sweden" – and throughout her long life she associated regularly with noble families throughout Europe.²² At thirteen she was married to Ulf Gudmarsson, five years her senior and a knight and

20 A warm thanks for this detail goes to Francesca Canepuccia, who completed her doctoral studies at the University of Oslo on Francesca Romana. Canepuccia, who was employed by the research project *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden. Women, Politics and Reform in Renaissance Italy*, funded by The Norwegian Research Council (2018–2022), has generously provided us with important information about the Roman saint and her visions. We look forward to her forthcoming dissertation, *How to Become a Prophetess: Strategies for Authorizing a Prophetic Mission in the Works of Francesca Romana* (University of Oslo: 2023), which will be the first extensive Anglophone study on Francesca Romana.

21 The main sources on Birgitta's life besides her *Celestial Revelations* are the *Vita*, written by her two Swedish confessors – Peter Olafsson of Alvastra, usually referred to as Prior Peter, and Peter Olafsson of Skänninge, or Magister Peter, as he is called – and the materials gathered in connection with her canonization process, the *Acta et processus canonizationis beate Birgittae*. Bridget Morris is the main modern biographer of Birgitta of Sweden. See Bridget Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden* (Woodbridge, UK: 1999).

22 Birgitta's last confessor, Alfonso Pecha da Vadaterra, bishop of Jaén, describes her as a "principessa de regno Suecie," both in his *Informaciones* § 3 and his *Prologus Libri Celestis* § 2. See Arne Jönsson, *St. Bridget's Revelations to the Popes. An Edition to the So-Called Tractatus de summis pontificibus* (Lund: 1997), 63.

lawman like her father. The couple settled at Ulvåsa, an estate near Lake Boren in Östergötland, and there Birgitta bore eight children.

According to the hagiographic sources, the saint *in spe* struggled to find the balance between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* before her husband's death. To a degree, she lived a pious and ascetic life. Birgitta represented the new and more sentimental lay piety which characterized the late Middle Ages. In contrast to earlier centuries, where personal piety was primarily the realm of the clergy, by the 14th century lay people also observed the liturgical year: fasting, praying, reciting the rosary, celebrating holidays, and attending masses – and this was certainly true in Birgitta's home.²³ And yet Birgitta was probably a highly practical woman – a necessity in the running of a large medieval estate, with barns and stables, brewery, laundry, storehouse, loom house, and smithy. Despite a staff of servants, Birgitta took part in the work at Ulvåsa herself. This is at least the impression her later revelations give us: as scholars have argued, Birgitta's imagery and prolific use of parables boast a robust and sensual realism, obviously inspired by the world that surrounded her.²⁴ Her metaphors are taken from every aspect of human life, from agriculture, farming, trading, fishing, and mining, to breastfeeding, cooking, embroidery, and weaving. Moreover, Birgitta practiced her piety by taking care of people in need, such as beggars and prostitutes, and she organized the construction of hospitals, not only at Ulvåsa, but also around Sweden. She is even reported to have nursed patients herself.²⁵

In the middle of the 1330s, Birgitta was called to the royal court in Stockholm, where she was made *magistra* for the young Queen Blanca of Namur, the wife of the Swedish king Magnus Eriksson. We do not know how long she stayed at the court, but she doubtless had a great influence on the royal couple. In the beginning it seems she felt affection for the young king, a relative through her mother. Over the years, however, she became frustrated with him, as is evident in her visions: according to Birgitta, Magnus was unable to fulfill his role as exemplary king. He surrounded himself with corrupt counsellors, she believed,

23 A good study on the lay piety is Andre Vauchez's book, *Layty in the Middle Ages*. See also Barbara Newman, "What Did It Mean to Say 'I Saw'?" The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture," *Speculum*, 80.1 (2005), 1–43.

24 Janken Myrdal, "The Revelations of Saint Birgitta and Everyday Life in the Fourteenth Century," in *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena: Papers from a Symposium in Stockholm, 4–6 October 2007*, ed. Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg, and Mia Åkestam (Stockholm: 2010), 231–45.

25 Birgitta's daughter Katarina testified about the many hospitals Birgitta established in Sweden. See *Acta et Processus*, 315. See also Birgit Klockars, *Birgittas svenska värld* (Stockholm: 1976), 96.

and his foreign policy was bad; she was especially critical of the king's disastrous crusade against Russia. Birgitta's disapproval would grow over the years: from Rome, many years later, she organized a conspiracy to oust him.²⁶

As the sources depict her, a unique air of authority characterized Birgitta from a young age; despite her lack of formal education, she was quite learned and possessed rare political insight.²⁷ She was soon also a well-traveled woman. By the end of the 1330s, Birgitta and Ulf had gone on pilgrimage to Nidaros in Norway, and a couple of years later, they travelled across Europe to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. It was on their journey home from Spain that Ulf became sick, and he died not long after their return to Sweden. Thus began Birgitta's "second career" as holy widow.²⁸

Widowhood was alternately a privileged and vexed identity in late medieval Europe.²⁹ In the Middle Ages, there were a set of expectations for how a widow should behave, based on both Christian doctrine and societal practice. A widow's principal duty was to preserve the memory of her husband on earth, and to pray for his soul to facilitate his way through Purgatory.³⁰ This was specific to women who lost their husbands, of course: there were no similar expectations of widowed husbands, who could proceed in life without comparable worries. The widow, however, was expected to live an isolated existence, modeled on the biblical exemplum of Anna of Phanuel; a "true" widow's days, in the model following Saint Paul, were taken up with fasting, praying, and little else. Birgitta's response to these powerful, culturally ingrained expectations was swift, dismissive – and revolutionary. When Ulf died, she is said to have removed the ring he had given her on his death-bed declaring: "When I buried

26 *Revelaciones extravagantes* 80 is usually dubbed Birgitta's vision of rebellion. Bridget Morris offers an analysis of the vision and its political context in *St. Birgitta of Sweden* (1999), 31. See also Olle Ferm, "Heliga Birgittas program för uppror mot Magnus Eriksson", in *Heliga Birgitta – budskap och förebilden*, ed. Alf Härdelin and Mereth Lindgren (Stockholm: 1993), 125–143.

27 In the volume *Birgitta och böckerna. En undersökning av den heliga Birgittas källor* (Stockholm: 1966), Birgit Klockars offers a thorough study of Birgitta's library. A more recent study is Päivi Salmensvuori, *Power and Sainthood: The Case of Birgitta of Sweden* (New York: 2014).

28 The expression is taken from Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski. *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Western Schism, 1378–1417* (University Park: 2004), 7.

29 On the "profession" of widowhood, see Katherine Clark Walter, *The Profession of Widowhood: Widows, Pastoral Care and Medieval Models of Holiness* (Washington, D.C.: 2018); Allison M. Levy, ed., *Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: 2003); Louise Mirrer, ed., *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor: 1992).

30 See Katherine Clark, "Purgatory, Punishment, and the Discourse of Holy Widowhood in the High and Later Middle Ages." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (2007): 169–203.

my husband, I buried with him all carnal love, and although I loved him with all my heart, I should not wish to buy back his life, not with the least money.”³¹

For the 43-year-old Birgitta, widowhood meant not isolation, but a new freedom and a new “career” as a prophet. Not long after her husband had passed away, Birgitta is reported to have received what is usually dubbed her “calling vision”:

After some days, when the bride of Christ was worried about the change in her status and its bearing on her service of God, and while she was praying about this in her chapel, she became rapt in spirit; and while she was in ecstasy, she saw a bright cloud from which she heard a voice saying to her: “Woman, hear me [...] Fear me not,” he said, “for I am the Creator of all, and not a deceiver. I do not speak to you for your sake alone, but for the sake of the salvation of others. [...] You shall be my bride and my channel, and you shall hear and see spiritual things, and my Spirit shall remain with you even until your death.”³²

Some scholars have argued that Birgitta should be considered a “visionary” or a “prophet” in the biblical sense, both of which are more gender-neutral terms than “mystic,” the label more commonly used to describe religious women with visions in the later Middle Ages.³³ It is, of course, almost impossible to discern

31 *Acta et Processus*, 479: “Quando sepeliui virum meum, sepeliui cum eo omnem a, orem carnalem. Et licet dilexerim eum sicut cor meum, nollem tamen cum vno denario contra velle Dei redimere vitam eius [...]”. See also Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 62. On Birgitta as influential exemplum of a holy widow who abandoned her duties to her husband and took on a new role as active political widow, see Chapter Three, “*Vere vidua: Holy Women and Models of Widowhood*” in Wainwright, *Widow City: Gender, Politics and Community in Renaissance Italy* (forthcoming, University of Delaware Press).

32 Collijn, *Acta et processus*, 80–81: “Post aliquos dies cum sponsa Christi sollicita esset de mutacione status sui ad seruiendum Deo et super hoc stabat orando in capella sua, tunc rapta fuit in spiritu, et cum esset in extasi vidit nubem lucidam et de nube audiuit vocem dicentem sibi: ‘Mulier, audi me. [...]’ ‘Noli’ inquit, ‘timere, quia ego sum omnium conditor, non deceptor, non enim loquor tecum propter te solam, sed propter salutem aliorum. [...]’ tu eris sponsa mea et canale meum et audies et videbis spiritualia, et spiritus meus permanebit tecum vsque ad mortem.” Translation by Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 64–65.

33 On Birgitta as a prophet, see for instance Anders Piltz, “Inspiration, vision, profetia: Birgitta och teorierna om uppenbarelsen,” in *Heliga Birgitta – Budskapet og förebilden: Föredrag vid jubileumssymposiet i 3–7 oktober 1991*, ed. Alf Härderlin and Mereth Lindgren (Stockholm: 1993), 67–88; Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 64–67; Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*; Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, “Mistica, profezia femminile, e poteri alla fine del Medioevo,” in *Il Liber di Angela Foligno e la mistica dei secoli XIII–XIV in rapporto alle nuove culture. Atti del XLV convegno storico internazionale, Todi, 12–15 ottobre, 2008* (Spoleto: 2009), 485–515.

the difference, and Birgitta's visions contained both mystical and prophetic characteristics. The most remarkable aspect of her calling vision is, however, its retrieval of the vocation of the prophets from the Old Testament. Rather than dictating an inner, spiritual journey culminating in her mystical union with God, the vision emphasizes Birgitta's active role in the world's salvation. As God tells her, he is not speaking for her sake, but for the salvation of others, and she shall be his *sponsa et canale* – his bride and channel.

While Birgitta never explicitly claimed the exalted title of “prophet”, she nevertheless managed, slowly but surely, to craft herself as one. This was a daring project, especially in the wake of the cruel fate suffered by the popular beguine movement of pious, religious women who had organized in collectives across Europe without taking monastic vows since the middle of the 13th century.³⁴ Their chosen good works, such as teaching, evangelizing, and nursing, in addition to their ability to move freely around urban spaces without male control, caused a great backlash, and in 1317 Pope John XXII banned the movement. Women were forced to enter conventional convents to avoid the severe punishment some suffered, such as the visionary Marguerite Porete (1250–1310), who was burned alive. Because of these restrictions, Birgitta and her supporters had to be most careful in how they conducted themselves, and her enemies grew as her fame grew. According to the sources, she was attacked both in the street and at the royal court, and at a certain point it was deemed necessary to have her visions judicially examined. Was she a mouthpiece of God, or of the Devil? Archbishop Hemming Nilsson established a commission in Uppsala, probably in 1346, to investigate the legitimacy of Birgitta's visions.³⁵ The commission consisted of three bishops, a magister, and an abbot – all of them, according to Morris, powerful clerics in Sweden who were well-known to Birgitta. Despite the often deeply provocative content of her revelations, the commission ultimately recognized them as fully authentic.

From a proto-feminist point of view, it is not difficult to see how effective taking on the role of a prophet could be for a woman eager to influence the greater world, especially in an era when women were excluded from educational institutions, such as cathedral schools and universities. While monastic

34 For a thorough study of the medieval beguines, see Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries* (Philadelphia: 2003); Rosalynn Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices. The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries* (York: 1999); Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: 1954).

35 On the commission, see *Sancta Birgitta Revelaciones Book 1, with Magister Mathias' Prologue*, ed. Carl-Gustav Undhagen (Uppsala: 1978), 47–50. See also Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 79.

life did offer possibilities for women to pursue intellectual, practical, or artistic interests, women were still restricted from achieving any higher positions in the ecclesiastic hierarchy (as, of course, they still are by the Catholic Church today). Moreover, women were forbidden from preaching in public and from teaching men; regardless of social status and background, they were still subject to a strict and dominant gender hierarchy.³⁶ By convincing many powerful people, including several European monarchs and princes, that she was a channel and vessel for divine powers, the “prophet” Birgitta and her supporters achieved a rare authority for her.

A few years after she received her calling vision and after the judgment by the Swedish commission, Birgitta went on pilgrimage to Rome. The aim of the trip was threefold: First, she went to take part in the Holy Jubilee of 1350, which had been proclaimed by the pope after years of suffering due to the plague. Second, in Rome she hoped to witness the pope and the Roman emperor together, as Christ had foretold in a vision she received while she was still living in Sweden.³⁷ Third, she intended to obtain the pope’s approval for her planned monastic order, the *Ordo sanctissimi Salvatoris*. One of the most important visions Birgitta received in Sweden had instructed her to found her order: the *Regula Salvatoris*, which forms a part of her *Celestial Revelations*.³⁸ Birgitta envisioned a double monastery, one for both women and men, but with a female majority, and ruled over by an abbess. Birgitta probably intended to be the first abbess at her planned monastery at Vadstena, Sweden, but her order was not approved until 1378, five years after her death. Following

36 For a thorough examination of the centuries of arguments grounded in Pauline injunctions against women’s public speech, see *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley, CA: 1998). For the debates in the Middle Ages and the theological roots of the resistance against women preaching, see especially Katherine Ludwig Jansen’s chapter “Maria Magdalena: Apostolorum Apostola,” 57–99.

37 In a vision Birgitta received while still in Sweden, Christ told her: “Go to Rome, where the streets are paved with gold and reddened with the blood of saints and where there is a short cut, that is, a shorter way to heaven [...] Moreover, you are to stay in Rome until you see the supreme pontiff and the emperor there at the same time in Rome, and you shall announce my words to them.” *Acta et Processus*, 94: “Vade Romam, vbi platee sunt auro et sanguine sanctorum rubricate, vbi compendium, id est brevior via, est ad celum [...] Stabis autem ibi in Roma, donec summum pontificem et imperatorem videbis ibidem insimul in Roma et eis verba mea nunciabis.” Translated to English by Bridget Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 93.

38 Birgitta of Sweden, *Opera minora I: Regula Salvatoris*, ed. Sten Eklund (Stockholm: 1975). For an introduction to the rule and its textual history, see Bridget Morris’ introduction in Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 4 vols. (Oxford: 2006–2015), vol. 4, 109–122.

the order's approval, however, Birgittine convents quickly popped up across Europe, including in the Netherlands, England, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Spain, Germany, and Italy.³⁹

Birgitta's Celestial (and Earthly) Revelations

After a long journey across plague-ridden Europe in fall 1349, Birgitta reached Rome shortly before Christmas, just in time for the opening of the Holy Jubilee. As a noblewoman, she was able to befriend members of the most powerful Roman families, and several of them would follow her faithfully throughout her life. The *Revelations* reveal her extraordinary network of correspondents – knights and friars, popes and cardinals, monarchs, and Italian noble families including the Visconti of Milan, the Acciaoli of Florence and the Colonna and Orsini of Rome – which places her at the center of the urban and courtly galaxies emerging at the threshold of the Italian Renaissance. Likewise, the subjects that preoccupied her – reform, political and social justice, the place of women in society – connect her to future generations of Italian reformers in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Birgitta quickly established herself in Rome as a prophetic activist with a far-reaching reputation. Her many visions show her engaged in contemporary, male-dominated debates over the escalating wars between England and France; the bloody conflicts among the Italian city-states; poverty in Rome; the slave trade in Naples; prostitution; simony; the corrupt nobility; and the equally corrupt clergy. The revelations are clearly the product of a sharp and subtle thinker with a sophisticated understanding of contemporary political and religious life, and she sent them as direct political interventions to the people concerned.

Among the myriad motives and subjects in her visions, two issues stand out as especially important in the *Revelations*. One is her advocacy for the thorough reform of the church: a moral rearmament of the faithful. The other is her attempt to persuade the papacy to return from Avignon to Rome. For Birgitta, the two issues were strongly connected: reform was impossible, she believed, until Rome was restored as the religious and institutional center of Christianity.

Birgitta was, of course, not alone in her belief in the urgency of a Roman political, spiritual and cultural renaissance. Birgitta's contemporary Petrarch

39 For a rich study on the Birgittine convents in Europe, see *Birgitta Atlas. Saint Birgitta's Monasteries. A Transeuropean Project*, ed. Ulla Sander-Olsen, Tore Nyberg, and Per Sloth Carlsen (Uden: 2013).

(1304–1374), also in Rome during the Holy Jubilee, claimed in a famous letter (*Fam.* VI, 2) that Rome could not rise again without embracing its past glory. Describing his walks together with his friend Giovanni Colonna around what he describes as a broken city (*fracte urbis*), Petrarch recalls Rome's glorious past: "For who can doubt that Rome would rise again instantly if she began to know herself?"⁴⁰ For Petrarch, the loss of history meant the loss of identity, and that identity could only be restored through the humanist project: the intellectual process of remembering and recovery. Birgitta expresses the very same idea in one of her visions from her early years in Rome:

O Rome, if you knew your days, you would surely weep and not rejoice. Rome was in olden days like a tapestry dyed in beautiful colors and woven with noble threads. Its soil was dyed in red, that is, in the blood of the martyrs, and woven, that is, mixed with the bones of the saints. Now her gates are abandoned, in that their defenders and guardians have turned to avarice. Her walls are thrown down and left unguarded, in that no one cares that the souls are being lost. Rather the clergy and the people, who are the walls of God, have scattered away to work for carnal advantage. The sacred vessels are sold with scorn, in that God's sacraments are administered for money and worldly favors.⁴¹

The image of widowed Rome, the "new" widowed Jerusalem of Lamentations, was already a popular motif in political laments, used by authors such as Dante, Petrarch, and the Roman chronicle of the Anonimo Romano.⁴² Two

40 Petrarch, *Fam.* VI, 2, 14: "Quis enim dubitare potest quin illico surrectura sit, si ceperit se Roma cognoscere?" English translation: Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum familiarum libri, I–VIII*, ed. and trans. Aldo S. Bernardo (Albany, NY: 1875). For further readings of Petrarch's letter, see Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: 1993), 14–33; David Galbraith, "Petrarch and the Broken City," in *Antiquity and its Interpreters*, ed. Alina Payne, Ann L. Kuttner, and Rebekah Smick (Cambridge: 2000), 17–26; Unn Falkeid, "Petrarch and the Vision of Rome," *Acta Ad Archeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 25.11 (2012), 195–207.

41 *Rev.* III: 27, 23–28: "O, si cognosceres dies tuos, o Roma, fleres utique et non gauderes. Roma quippe in diebus antiquis erat quasi tela colorata omni colore pulcherrimo et contexta nobilissimo filo. Terra quoque eius erat colorata colore rubeo, id est sanguine martirum et contexta, id est commixta ossibus sanctorum. Nunc autem porte eius desolate sunt, quia defensores et custodes earum inclinati sunt ad cupiditatem. Muri eius depressi sunt et sine custodia, quia iam non curant animarum dampna, sed clerus et populus, qui sunt murus Dei, disperguntur ad faciendum utilitatem carnis." English transl., vol. 1, 313.

42 See Cristelle Louise Baskins, "Trecento Rome: The Poetics and Politics of Widowhood," in *Widowhood and Visual Culture*, ed. Levy, 197–209. See also Ronald Musto, *Apocalypse in Rome: Cola di Rienzo and the Politics of the New Age* (Berkeley, LA: 2003).

years before Birgitta's arrival, Cola di Rienzo had commissioned a series of frescoes during his revolution in Rome in 1347, which depicted the city as a mourning widow. While she had rejected the traditional role of mourning widow in Sweden, after her arrival Rome, Birgitta took on the role in a new way, as widowed Rome embodied, performing the city's deplorable situation both in person and through the many letters she sent to Avignon and in which she energetically tried to persuade the pope to return as soon as possible.⁴³

Birgitta followed the same pious and ascetic life in Rome as she had done at home. The members of her household, as well as the growing group of devoted pilgrims who visited her house on what is now Piazza Farnese, reportedly had to follow the same strict life as she did, with regular fasting, prayers, and duties. From what we know, however, Birgitta was probably also eager to be on the move. According to several witnesses who testified at her canonization process, she became a familiar face around the city. Every day and in all kinds of weather, the energetic woman would scurry around the streets to visit the churches and the many holy shrines of Rome.⁴⁴ She visited the hospitals to care for patients and she helped the poor, sometimes by begging in the streets herself; in keeping with her vow of poverty, she had relinquished all her belongings to Magister Peter, one of her Swedish confessors.⁴⁵

Birgitta was in perpetual motion throughout her long life. She was an eager pilgrim, and her pilgrimages continued after she settled in Italy. In the more than 23 years she lived in Rome, she went on pilgrimages across the peninsula, to holy shrines and sites such as Pavia, Assisi, Naples, Amalfi, Ortona and Bari, some several times. In May 1371, Christ reportedly told her it was the moment for a new and more ambitious pilgrimage: to the Holy Land (Rev. VII:6).

Birgitta's experiences from this final pilgrimage are gathered in the seventh book of the *Celestial Revelations*. It is a remarkable book, in part because of the dense biographical details, such as her meetings with friars, knights and courtiers, encounters with Queen Joanna I of Naples and Queen Eleanor of Aragon in Cyprus, and the descriptions of the dangers and challenges of the long journey. The seventh book is also unique in the beauty of its text and the high aesthetic standard of some of the revelations. These include her two famous visions of the Crucifixion and the Nativity (Rev. VII: 15 and VII: 21; Fig. 0.5), which would have an important influence on Renaissance iconography, and

43 On this see especially Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested*, 95–120, and Wainwright's forthcoming monograph.

44 Collijn, *Acta et processus*, 94. See also Morris' chapter about Birgitta's years in Rome in *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 93–117, and Birger Bergh's chapter on the same subject in *Heliga Birgitta: ättebarnsmor och profet* (Lund: 2002), 93–115.

45 Collijn, *Acta et processus*, 262, 316, 367, 478, and 498.



FIGURE 0.5 Niccolò di Tommaso, *Saint Bridget's Vision of the Nativity* [center], c.1375–76. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA
 THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART / ART RESOURCE, NY

which both reveal an author at the peak of her intellectual and imaginative potential. A painting by the Tuscan artist Niccolò di Tommaso (c.1373) depicting Birgitta in the moment she receives the vision in the Nativity cave in Bethlehem, is among the first extant devotional images of the coming saint.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The image belongs to a group of three paintings by Niccolò di Tommaso, now in, respectively, the Pinacoteca Vaticana, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Yale University

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the seventh book, however, is the intense and bold political tone of her revelations, which reveal both the authority and the reputation that Birgitta had achieved by the end of her life.

On her return from Jerusalem, Birgitta fell ill, like her husband had over three decades earlier on their return from Santiago. She was nearly 70 years old. After a longer stay in Naples, she returned to Rome, where she died in her house on a summer's day, 23 July 1373.

Birgitta's Legacy as Woman Intellect

Modern scholarship has focused almost exclusively on Birgitta as a product of Sweden, and an important bedrock of the visionary tradition of Northern Europe. But what about her impact on religious and secular culture, and on the women writers and thinkers who came after her, in her adopted home of Italy? Like them, including most prominently her admirer Catherine of Siena, she was an intellect who operated almost exclusively in the vernacular.⁴⁷ According to the sources, Birgitta wrote down many of her revelations in Swedish before having them translated by her male spiritual advisers into Latin, the language of the church. She was a stringent editor, and supervised these translations from Swedish to Latin with painstaking attention, as this famous passage from the canonization material explains:

The words that were given her from God she wrote down in her mother tongue with her own hand when she was well and she had us, her father

Art Gallery. For discussions of the painting, see Jan Svanberg, "De allra äldsta bilderna av den heliga Birgitta och hennes vision av Jesu födelse," *Kungl. Vitterhets, historie och antikvitets akademien årsbok* (Stockholm: 1997); Erling Skaug, "St. Bridget's Vision of the Nativity and Niccolò di Tommaso's Late period," *Arte Cristiana* 89, 804 (2001), 195–209. On the impact of Birgitta's Nativity vision on art, see Maria H. Oen, "Iconography and Visions: St. Birgitta's Revelation of the Nativity of Christ," in *The Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art: Iconography, Iconology, and Interpreting the Visual Imagery of the Middle Ages*, ed. Lena Liepe (Berlin: 2009). For more general studies on the impact of Birgitta's revelations on art, see Nirit Ben-Aryeh, "St. Birgitta in Florentine Art," in *The Brigittine Experience: Papers from the Birgitta Conference in Stockholm 2011*, ed. Claes Gejrot, Mia Åkestam, and Roger Andersson (Stockholm: 2013), 171–89; Anette Creutzburg, *Die heilige Birgitta von Schweden. Bildliche Darstellungen und theologische Kontroversen im Vorfeld ihrer Kanonisation (1327–1391)* (Kiel: 2011); Maria H. Oen, "The Iconography of Liber celestis revelacioum," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and Her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Maria H. Oen (Leiden: 2019), 186–222.

47 Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others* (Chicago: 2009). See also Tylus' chapter in this volume.

confessors, make a very faithful translation of them into Latin. She then listened to the translation together with her own writing, which she herself had written, to make sure that not one word was added or subtracted, but was exactly what she had heard and seen in the divine vision. But if she was ill, she would call her confessor and a scribe, especially appointed as secretary for this, whereupon with great devotion and fear of God and sometimes in tears, she spoke the words to him in her native language in a kind of attentive mental elevation, as if she was reading them in a book; and he wrote them down there in her presence. When the words had been written down she wished to hear them and she listened very carefully and attentively.⁴⁸

This attention to detail on Birgitta's part is especially important when we consider her multiple male scribes over the course of her prophetic career. The first to translate Birgitta's revelations was her Swedish friend and confessor, Magister Mathias of Linköping. After Mathias' death, the "two Peters" who accompanied Birgitta to Rome, Prior Peter Olafsson and Magister Peter Olafsson, became the main translators and transcribers of her revelations. They were also the authors of her *vita*, which would later constitute a significant part of her canonization process.⁴⁹ However, it was her Spanish confessor, Alfonso Pecha (c.1327–1389), who came to be the most important translator, and later, the general editor of Birgitta's revelations.

Alfonso Pecha, the former bishop of Jaén in Andalusia, was reportedly deeply impressed by Birgitta when he came to Rome in the late 1360s, and they soon initiated a fruitful collaboration. Due to his profound knowledge of

48 Collijn, *Acta et processus*, 84: "[...] verba diuinitus ei data scribebat in lingua sua materna manu sua propria, quando erat sana, et faciebat illa translari in lingua latina fidelissime a nobis confessoribus suis et postea ascultabat illa cum scriptura sua, quam ipsa scripserat, ne vnun verbum ibi plus adderetur uel deficeret, nisi que ipsa in visione diuinitus audierat et viderat. Si vero erat infirma, vocabat confessorem et scriptorem suum secretarium ad hoc specialiter deputatum, et tunc ipsa cum magna deuocione et timore Dei et aliquando cum lacrimis referebat ei verba illa in uulgari suo cum quadam attenta eleuacione mentali, quasi si legeret in libro, et tunc confessor dicebat illa verba in lingua latina illi scriptori, et ille scribebat illa ibidem in sua presencia, et postea cum erant verba conscripta, ipse volebat illa ascultare et ascultabat valde diligenter et attente." English translation, Morris, "General Introduction," in *The Revelation of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. 1, 12. Other witnesses also testified to Birgitta's literacy. See *Acta et processus*, 270, 328, 384, and 518.

49 Morris, "General Introduction," in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. 1, 13. According to Morris, Prior Peter did not follow Birgitta to Rome when she left in 1349, but travelled regularly between Sweden and Rome in the years that followed.

canon law and his connections in the papal curia, Alfonso came to play a central role in Birgitta's attempts to secure papal authorization for her monastic order.⁵⁰ Moreover, Alfonso was a key figure in Birgitta's canonization process, and it was he who at Birgitta's request copied and organized her visions into the form known to us today, the eight books of her *Liber celestis revelaciones*.

Not long after Birgitta's death, Alfonso established a scriptorium in Naples where her revelations were neatly edited and copied on expensive parchment and illuminated with acanthus vines and scenes from her life.⁵¹ In the spring of 1377, the first version of the *Celestial Revelations* was completed, consisting of seven volumes. The redaction was part of an extensive campaign for Birgitta's canonization, and was presented to Pope Gregory XI along with a petition signed by a who's who of European monarchs, including Queen Joanna of Naples, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, and Queen Margaret I of Denmark-Norway. The process was not a quick one. In addition to the time and effort it took to gather testimony on Birgitta's many miracles and saintly acts in the *Acta et processus*, the process was further delayed by the Great Western Schism beginning in 1378, which led to two competing popes, even three for a period. It was in this troubled setting that the campaign for Birgitta's canonization took place; her revelations arguing for the return of the papacy to Rome would be viewed with deep suspicion in the years following the Schism by ecclesiastical figures including the Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson.⁵² In 1380, Alfonso was at last able to present a new and extended version of the *Celestial Revelations*, now including the eighth book, and on October 7, 1391, the canonization finally took place.

Birgitta's canonization was the very first to occur in Rome in more than 100 years; the first since the return of the papacy to Rome from Avignon. It was thus an important moment for the Roman papacy to demonstrate its renewed power, and the celebrations in Rome were extravagant. No one had fought with more fervour and constancy than Birgitta did for the return of the papacy to Rome from its long exile in Avignon; for the reform of the church; and for the restoration of Rome as the political and institutional centre of Christianity. It was now time for Rome to celebrate the widowed pilgrim from the far north.

50 In 1346 the Swedish king, Magnus Eriksson, bequeathed his palace in Vadstena to Birgitta for her planned monastery. His desire was that he and his wife should be buried at the monastery. See Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 86.

51 Hans Aili, "The manuscripts of Revelaciones S. Birgittae," in *Santa Brigida, Napoli, L'Italia*, ed. Olle Ferm, Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese, and Marcello Rotili (Naples: 2009), 153–160.

52 See especially Anna Fredriksson's chapter "Challenging and Championing St. Birgitta's Revelations at the Councils of Constance and Basel," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 103–31.

According to the Vadstena abbey chronicle covering the period from 1344 to 1545, *Diarium Vadstenense*, on 7 October 1391, the cardinals and Church prelates met in the early morning in the pope's palace, where, together with Pope Boniface IX, they entered the great chapel, which was decorated with light and torches and adorned with tapestries, the floor strewn with leaves and sweet-smelling herbs. From vespers the day before and throughout the whole day and night, the bells were rung in all the churches across Rome to mark the great event. After Pope Boniface IX's sermon praising the blessed widow, which was followed by a series of antiphons, he declared the canonization finalized.⁵³ Boniface granted indulgences to all who visited St. Peter's and the monastery of San Lorenzo in Panisperna, where Birgitta was buried, on the day of canonization and the days following. On the second day after the canonization, the pope celebrated a mass in honour of Birgitta in St. Peter's, where 30,000 lamps burned alongside a host of candles and torches from midnight until after the mass.⁵⁴

Birgitta's canonization was but the beginning of her legacy in Italy. In the decades following, her profile across the peninsula continued to grow. In addition to the popularity of her cult in Rome and in Naples, the first Birgittine monastery in Italy, the Paradiso in the Pian di Ripoli in Florence, was established in 1394. Paradiso was followed by the opening of other convents, such as Scala Coeli in Genoa (1406), and Santa Cecilia in Rome, which was entrusted to the Birgittines from 1419 to 1438 (of note, this was during Francesca Romana's most fruitful years as a visionary across town).⁵⁵ Meanwhile, Birgitta's visions circulated in both Latin and Italian, and the *Celestial Revelations* were translated in their entirety into Italian by a follower of Catherine of Siena years before they appeared in other languages, including English, German, and Dutch.⁵⁶ Manuscript evidence of her *vita* in the vernacular also suggests early interest; the Biblioteca Angelica in Rome, for example, is in possession of an

53 Roger H. Ellis, "The Swedish Woman, the Widow, the Pilgrim and the Prophetess: Images of St. Bridget in the Canonisation Sermon to Pope Boniface IX," in *Santa Brigida, Profeta Dei Tempi Nuovi* (Rome: 1993), 93–150.

54 Claes Gejrot (ed.). *Diarium Vadstenense. The Memorial Book of Vadstena Abbey*. Acta universitatis stocholmiensis. Studia Latina Stockholmensiana 33 (Stockholm: 1988), 124–126.

55 For the Birgittine convents and houses in Italy and Europe, see *Birgitta Atlas: Saint Birgitta's Monasteries*, ed. Sander-Olsen, Nyberg, and Carlsen.

56 For the first translations of Birgitta's revelations in Italian, see Silvia Nocentini, "The Transmission of Birgittine and Catherinian Works within the Mystical Tradition: Exchanges, Cross-Readings, Connections," in *Sanctity and Female Authorship*, ed. Oen and Falkeid, 93–112.

early 15th-century manuscript which contains Italian translations of her miracles and part of the *Sermo Angelicus* alongside the *Vita Sancte Brigide*.⁵⁷

Despite this textual evidence, there is not a great deal of scholarship that explores Birgitta's influence in Italy. Most Birgittine scholarship has been connected to Sweden (e.g. Klockars 1976); to the Birgittine monasteries in Europe (i.e. Nyberg 1991; Gejrot et al. 2010; Sander-Olsen et al. 2013); to the saint's place among late medieval holy women (i.e. Morris 1999; Sahlin 2001; Salmesvuori 2014); or to her late medieval legacy (i.e. Oen 2019).⁵⁸ And yet, this important contemporary scholarship has revealed more of Birgitta's life, work and reception, and suggests that she had a broader influence than previously explored. Conferences, anthologies, and monographs on Birgitta, alongside Bridget Morris' recent translation and publication of her complete works in four volumes by Oxford University Press (2008–2015) and the significant *Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, edited by Maria H. Oen (2019), testify to this attention, and this important new understanding of her impact.

Some have long pointed to Birgitta's importance in Italy. The Swedish scholar Isak Collijn has done some fundamental research in Italian archives and libraries.⁵⁹ Adriana Valerio has explored the Birgittine context in Naples, as well as Birgitta as a model for the 15th-century Florentine visionary Domenica Narducci.⁶⁰ Ottavia Niccoli has briefly pointed to the presence of Birgitta's voice in vernacular prophecy.⁶¹ Domenico Pezzini has examined a small number of the translations that were produced in the 14th and the 15th centuries,

57 Enrico Narducci (1893), *Catalogus codicum manuscriptorum praeter Graecos et Orientales in Bibliotheca Angelica olim coenobii Sancti Augustini de Urbe*, Tomus I [mss. 1–1543], complectens codices ab instituta Bibliotheca ad a. 1870. Romae, typis Ludovici Cecchini. 573–574. Further important research by Silvia Nocentini on early editions of her vitae make up the appendix to this volume.

58 See Birgit Klockars, *Birgittas svenska värld*; see also *Birgitta. Hendes værk og hendes klostre i Norden*, ed. Tore Nyberg (Odense: 1991); *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena*, ed. Gejrot, Risberg, and Åkestam; *Birgitta Atlas: Saint Birgitta's Monasteries*, ed. Sander-Olsen, Nyberg, and Carlsen; Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*; Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*; Salmesvuori, *Power and Sainthood; A Companion of Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen.

59 Isak Collijn, *Birgittinska gestaltar. Forskning i italienska arkiv och bibliotek* (Uppsala: 1929).

60 Adriana Valerio, "Brigida di Svezia a Napoli: Da una presenza politica ad un culto devozionale," in *Birgittiana* 5 (1966), 81–94; "Caterina Cibo e la spiritualità savonaroliana attraverso il magistero profetico di Domenica da Paradiso," in *Munera Parva. Studi in onore di Boris Ulianich*, ed. G. Luongo (Naples: 1999), 141–54.

61 Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Princeton, NJ: 1990).

and which remain in unpublished manuscript form.⁶² Pezzini is one contributor to the slim anthology *Santa Brigida, Napoli, L'Italia*, edited by Olle Ferm, Alessandra Perricoli Saggese, and Marcello Rotili (2009) which explores the Neapolitan context.⁶³ Moreover, the recent volume, *Sanctity and Female Authorship. Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena* (2020), co-edited by Oen and Falkeid, focuses on the intertwined lives and networks of Saints Birgitta and Catherine.⁶⁴

The significant imprint Birgitta and her extensive oeuvre left on Italian monastic, humanist, philosophical, political and book culture in the three centuries after her death – the pivotal years of 1400–1700 – has not, however, been explored holistically or systematically. This includes but is not limited to the circulation of her *Celestial Revelations* in Latin and vernacular, manuscripts and prints; apocryphal texts attributed to her; her reemergence as a figure of prophetic authority during the Italian Wars; her influence on Renaissance and Counter-Reformation theology; and how women writers engaged Birgitta's voice and writings to shape their own authorial identities. While she is “Birgitta of Sweden,” a third of her life was spent in Italy. She most likely spoke Italian; many of her interlocutors and friends were figures who are famous today for their impact on Italian culture, literature, and art. We might consider her alongside other Northern European intellectuals of the premodern age whose work was enriched by the Italian context, and as a precursor to another Swedish woman to take Rome by storm, Christina of Sweden.

The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden in Ten Chapters

The present volume offers an opening into the rich world of Birgitta's legacy in Renaissance Italy, with ten interdisciplinary chapters written by an international group of scholars of Italian Renaissance literature, book history, and material culture. The investigations herein are the result of a multi-year research project generously funded by a grant from the Research Council of Norway (2018–2022), and which involved the ongoing collaboration of

62 In his book, *The Translation of Religious Texts in the Middle Ages: Tracts and Rules, Hymns and Saints' Lives* (Bern: 2008), Domenico Pezzini offers three chapters on the early translations and circulations of Birgitta's *Revelations* (Chapters 2, 6 & 7).

63 Domenico Pezzini, “Il primo volgarizzamento Italiano delle Ribelazioni e degli altri scritti di S. Brigida: il codice I.V.25/26 della Biblioteca degli Intronati di Siena (1399),” in *Santa Brigida, Napoli, L'Italia*, ed. Ferm, Saggese, and Rotili, 61–73.

64 Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid, eds., *Sanctity and Female Authorship: Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, (New York and London: 2020).

researchers, postdoctoral fellows, and PhD students working in Italy, Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States. This volume is by no means the project's final product: contributions to "The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden" that have been completed or are underway include one dissertation, two scholarly monographs, one trade publication, multiple articles and conference presentations, and a database.⁶⁵ This last digital component also signals perhaps our most ambitious aim: the continued study of Birgitta of Sweden's legacy in Italy, as well as the study of early modern women's voices in politics more broadly.⁶⁶ Through the online mapping and cataloguing of the Italian and Latin manuscripts and early print editions of Birgitta's literary work, the project has achieved a systematic overview of the extant materials that were produced and circulated in late medieval and early modern Italy. The results, which include a substantial bibliography, maps, brief biographies of relevant actors, and links to manuscripts and to early printed editions, serve to provide an important point of departure for researchers of early modern religious, gender, political and book history. We believe that Italy is but a first step in the examination of her influence across early modern Europe, for Birgitta's work had a strong impact in other countries as well.

65 Publications in alphabetic order: Francesca Canepuccia, *How to Become a Prophetess: Strategies for Authorizing a Prophetic Mission in the Works of Francesca Romana* (PhD-dissertation, University of Oslo, 2023); Francesca Canepuccia, "Santa Francesca Romana e papa Eugenio IV: profezia e potere a Roma al tempo del Concilio di Basilea," *Scienza&Politica* 34. 66 (2022): 3–44; Eleonora Cappuccilli, "Specchi della riforma. Individualità, profezia e potere in due donne del Rinascimento," *Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine* 34.66 (2022), 61–82; Eleonora Cappuccilli, "In the steps of Birgitta of Sweden: the reluctant authority of Paola Antonia Negri (1508–1555)," *Renaissance Studies* 34 (2021), 582–599; Eleonora Cappuccilli, *La strega di Dio. Profezia politica, storia e riforma in Caterina da Racconigi (1486–1547)* (Rome: 2020); Unn Falkeid, "Stupor et mirabilia! The Ascend of an Early Modern Redeemer," *Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine* 34. 66 (2022), 15–29; Unn Falkeid, *Den hellige Birgitta. Enken som utfordret Europa* (Oslo: 2021); Unn Falkeid, "'Magistra apostolorum.' The Virgin Mary in Birgitta of Sweden and Vittoria Colonna," in *Vittoria Colonna: Poetry, Religion, Art, Impact*, ed. Virginia Cox and Shannon McHugh (Amsterdam: 2021), 75–94; Unn Falkeid, "The Political Discourse of Birgitta of Sweden," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 80–102; Clara Stella, "I Only Show A Little Of Her: The Life of a Forgotten Dominican Sister, Fantina Gambarà (1436–1517)," *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo* 19. 1 (2022), 115–34; Clara Stella, "Umanesimo e profezia: per una lettura delle Epistole Familiares di Laura Cereta (1469–1499)," *Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine* 34. 66 (2022), 45–60; Clara Stella, "Speaking with Authority: Reading Catherine of Siena in the Times of Vittoria Colonna," *Renaissance and Reformation*, 44. 4 (2021), 9–50; Anna Wainwright, *Widow City: Gender, Politics and Community in the Italian Renaissance* (forthcoming with University of Delaware Press).

66 The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden: A Database of Networks and Texts in Renaissance Italy, <https://birgitta.hf.uio.no/>.

As this volume makes clear, Birgitta's voice – prophetic and eloquent – was present, and remarkably influential, during the construction of Italian Renaissance literary, spiritual, and political culture as we understand it today. The transmission and impact of her words in the centuries after her death can be traced from the first transcriptions, translations and circulations of her texts of the 1380s and 1390s to the reform movement and the women writers who published in the 16th century. In the 1540s Olaus Magnus (1490–1557), the Swedish bishop, cartographer and humanist who chose the Catholic side during the Reformation, moved to Rome. He took charge of the Casa di Santa Brigida in Piazza Farnese, where Birgitta had lived and died, and which had become a house for Swedish Catholic pilgrims in the 15th century before falling into disrepair in the first decades of the Reformation.⁶⁷ There, he established a small printing press, where he published the work for which he is best known, the *History of the Northern Peoples* (1555). Magnus was also invested in amplifying the importance of his countrywoman Birgitta in the Italian Catholic milieu in which he was exiled. In 1553, Magnus produced an abridged version of her *vita* (1553), which was translated in 1558 into the vernacular for the noblewoman Margherita Acciaiuoli by the important publisher and polygraph Lodovico Domenichi, who was then finalizing his important anthology of women's writing published in 1559 by the Lucca publisher Busdraghi.⁶⁸ Magnus also published a landmark edition of Birgitta's *Revelaciones* in 1557, which would be the last complete edition published in Italy for half a century.

Magnus' efforts helped to solidify Birgitta's legacy among Catholics in the troubled years during the Council of Trent (1545–1563). While there was a significant gap after Magnus' edition in which her work was not published, Birgitta's popularity continued well into the 17th century: of note, new important editions of her *Revelaciones* by Consalvo Durante were published in 1606 and 1628, as well as many other books about her, including Girolamo Alle's biography *La vedova svedese* (1648).⁶⁹ The essays in this volume investigate the long centuries from the first circulation of Birgitta's *vita* and revelations after her death to the end of the Counter-Reformation.

67 See Aron Andersson, *La Casa e La Chiesa Di Santa Brigida Nella Storia* (Rome: 1989); Carl Bildt, *S. Birgittas hospital och den svenska kolonien i Rom under 1600-talet* (Stockholm: 1895).

68 Lodovico Domenichi, *Vite de Santa Brigida e Santa Caterina di Svezia*. Edizione critica, introduzione e note di Enrico Garavelli (Rome: 2016); on Domenichi's 1559 anthology of women poets, see Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 105–106.

69 See database for full bibliography.

The first chapter, “Birgitta and Pseudo-Birgitta: Textual Circulation and Perceptions of the Saint,” explores the popular image of Birgitta in Renaissance Italy. Brian Richardson asks: what did Italians know of Saint Birgitta and her writings during the Renaissance? While she was renowned for her saintly widowhood in the decades after her death and canonization, the circulation of her revelations was still relatively limited. They were available in manuscript, in Latin and in vernacular translations, among members of her order in Florence and Genoa, and among some devout laypeople, at least in the urban centres of Naples, Siena and Florence. For perhaps the majority of Renaissance Italians, however, Birgitta’s name was best associated not with her revelations, but instead with two groups of texts composed mainly in the 15th century and falsely attributed to her. The first are the *Quindici orazioni* or Fifteen Prayers on Christ’s passion, which proliferated across Italy and are still popular today (you can even pick up a free copy at the Casa di Santa Brigida in Rome). The others were numerous vague verse prophecies interpreted as relating to the conflicts between France and the Holy Roman Empire and between Christians and Ottomans. Richardson establishes the important manuscript and print history of these extremely popular texts, showing that the circulation of vernacular prophecies was partly associated with non-élite readers, and that there is evidence of their oral transmission. He concludes that it was difficult for many secular readers in Italy to separate the “real” Birgitta from these apocryphal texts.

In the **second chapter**, “Making Birgitta Italian: The Time of Translation,” Jane Tylus explores the impact of Birgitta in 14th- and 15th-century Tuscany. In the spring of 1374, Catherine Benincasa wrote that Pope Gregory XI had sent to Siena “il padre spirituale di quella Contessa che morì a Roma” – the confessor to the countess who died in Rome – “to say that I should offer special prayers for him and for the holy Church.” The countess is Birgitta, the confessor Alfonso Pecha. Thus, our first indication that Catherine was being groomed to continue Birgitta’s legacy and carry out her dream of returning the papacy to Rome. Over the next century, Birgitta would be definitively transferred to Tuscany, and the Dominicans – such as Catherine – would be particularly welcoming of her message and her unfinished projects. The chapter focuses on roughly a century of this alliance with Birgitta in Florence, Siena, and elsewhere, as evident in paintings, manuscripts, and treatises produced within Dominican contexts through the late Trecento and Quattrocento.

What is the connection between prophecy, women, and theology? Isabella Gagliardi raises this question in the book’s **third chapter**, “Prophetic Theology: the Santa Brigida da Paradiso in Florence,” and suggests that spiritual and devotional literacy in the Florentine convent of Santa Brigida al Paradiso may offer an answer. Between the 14th and 15th centuries, the Birgittine Paradiso was a

remarkable *microcosmos* boasting an important scriptorium which produced beautiful editions of both Birgitta's true *and* apocryphal works. The convent's library also possessed the oldest copy of the *Mistica Theologia*, responsible for the idea of *devotio moderna* in Italy, as well as one of the most significant books to legitimate the personal relationship between God and humans. The chapter demonstrates the "prophetic" construction of the monastic library; moreover, Gagliardi identifies the interpretative problems caused by the nuns' gender, and the strategies they used to solve them.

In 1533, the nun Domenica Narducci delivered a sermon in the convent of *La Crocetta* in Florence to the Duchess of Camerino, Caterina Cibo. In the **fourth chapter**, "A Lineage of Apocalyptic Queens: The Portrayal of Birgitta of Sweden in Domenica Narducci's Sermon to Caterina Cibo (1533)," Clara Stella provides a close reading of the sermon, in which Narducci presents Birgitta to the Duchess as a spiritual, civic, and intellectual role model. Narducci envisioned the Swedish saint as the last in a parade of allegorical queens, with special recourse to the apocalyptic traits of Mary, and imagery that blended John's *Apocalypse* with Birgitta's *Revelations*. As she applies Marian apocalyptic elements to historical figures, Narducci positions the saint as the supreme tabernacle of military and intellectual virtues: in other words, her *ideological leader*. As addressee, Cibo is invited to take part in this parade, or lineage, of allegorical and historical queens and link her personal identity to the universality of history. The chapter also touches upon private forms of dissemination of Birgitta's cult among secular noblewomen and aristocratic families in the years when Birgitta was a focus for Church censors.

In the **fifth chapter**, "The Fifteen Prayers Attributed to Birgitta and Their Circulation in Early Modern Italy: Private Devotion, Heterodoxy, and Censorship", Marco Faini explores the circulation in print of the *Quindici orationi* or Fifteen Prayers attributed to Birgitta of Sweden, as well as their changing relationship to early modern Italian spirituality. Extremely popular, the Fifteen Prayers were printed several times from the late 15th century onwards in the form of tiny booklets, often adorned with a woodcut and accompanied by rubrics stating the power of each prayer, as well as by other prayers. Later in the 16th century, they began to circulate in collections of prayers, such as the successful *Selva di orationi* by Niccolò Bonfigli, which had at least twelve editions from 1569 to 1616. In the mid-16th century, however, the Fifteen Prayers came to represent, almost par excellence, a "superstitious" form of devotion for the so-called *Spirituali*. The prayers thus became the target of criticism by figures such as Celio Secondo Curione, Vittore Soranzo, and even Pietro Aretino – despite the fact that they make explicit allusions to the predestination of the elect and to salvation through Christ's passion. Later in the century, the Church also targeted the Fifteen Prayers. Although they never featured on

the official Index of prohibited books, from the 1570s, they did appear on local, semi-official lists of prohibited prayers, often with specific instructions as to the censorial interventions they should undergo. The Church was seemingly more concerned with their “superstitious” content than with their potential allusions to Reformer ideas. Exploring a number of publications, Faini investigates if, how, and to what extent printers applied the instructions handed down by censors, while also analysing the Prayers themselves, situating them within Italian private devotional culture from the late 15th to the mid-17th century.

Birgitta’s prophetic voice, legitimated by her canonization in 1391, was in high demand by the 16th century, as evidenced by the direct juxtaposition of her image in the Ponzetti Chapel (Baldessare Peruzzi, 1516) with Raphael’s frescoes of the Four Sibyls heralding the arrival of Christ on the walls of Santa Maria della Pace (1514). Indeed, in a woodcut in Lichtenberger’s 1488 *Pronosticatio* and its Italian translations over the following decades, Birgitta is positioned directly next to the Sibyl, a classical symbol of female prophecy, as a Christian prophetic counterpart within the context of political and military upheaval. As Brian Richardson’s contribution to this volume shows, manuscript and, later, printed prophecies attributed to her flourished during the 15th and 16th centuries. The **sixth chapter**, “Ventriloquizing Birgitta: The Saint’s Prophetic Voice During the Italian Wars,” co-authored by Jessica Goethals and Anna Wainwright, examines how those prophecies were revisited and transformed during the Italian Wars. Similar to historical laments, which were often delivered by personified female cities, Birgitta’s ventriloquized voice was appropriated as a means of making sense of the terrible destruction visited on Italian cities, as Italy itself was described alternately as *Italia putta* (Italy the whore) and *Italia vedovella* (Italy the little widow). The chapter explores these prophecies within the context of Birgitta’s broader prophetic profile and the gendered representation of devastated cities against the backdrop of military violence in Renaissance Italy.

The controversial prophet Paola Antonia Negri (1508–1555) lived in a period of intense trouble for Northern Italian cities and the Catholic Church, and authored more than one hundred spiritual letters. She was the leader of the Angelics, the female branch of the Barnabites, but exerted an absolute authority over the whole order. Following the start of the Council of Trent in 1545, her ideas and behavior started to provoke hostile reactions from Church institutions and local authorities, until she was banned from the Barnabites. In 1576, 21 years after her death, 70 of her spiritual letters were published together with her *vita* penned by Giovan Battista Fontana De Conti, who explicitly links Negri’s experience with those of Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. Amid the Counter-Reformation, Birgitta’s name re-emerged to legitimate the

charisma of a much-debated godly woman who might have been confined to the silence of history. In the seventh chapter, “The Semantics of Obedience: Birgittine Influences on Paola Antonia Negri’s Letters,” Eleonora Cappuccilli sheds light on some of the ways in which the Birgittine prophetic model continued to be a relevant issue in Counter-Reformation Italy.

Chiara Matraini’s *Breve Discorso sopra la vita e laude della beata vergine Maria* (1590) is one of four religious works published in the last years of the writer from Lucca, best known for her *Rime* (1554). Matraini’s *Breve Discorso* can be inscribed within the genre of the “life of the Virgin”, hugely popular in Italy during the post-Tridentine period. However, the text includes some unusual characteristics which may be better understood in light of the possible influence of Birgitta’s *Sermo Angelicus de excellentia beatae Virginis*. While Matraini’s use of Jacopo da Voragine’s *Legenda aurea* has long been noted, and, more recently and convincingly, her use of the Italian translation of Ludolph of Saxony’s *Vita Christi*, the influence of Birgitta of Sweden’s Marian writings has not been explored. In the **eighth chapter**, “Discourses on the Virgin Mary: Birgitta of Sweden and Chiara Matraini,” Eleonora Carinci proposes a comparison between the *Breve Discorso* and the *Sermo Angelicus*, underlining the elements that suggest Matraini’s Birgittine inspiration. Matraini’s attention to specific themes and words, as well as her relationship to the Virgin, recall Birgittine devotion, and suggest that Matraini’s work is an important example of Birgitta’s legacy in the post-Tridentine period. Carinci also considers the channels which may have inspired Matraini’s direct or indirect interest in Birgitta.

The critical reputation of the Benedictine religious poet Angelo Grillo (1557–1629) has grown impressively in recent decades, and he is now rightly seen as a key transitional figure between the Renaissance and Baroque poetic traditions in Italy. In the **ninth chapter**, “Consenti, o pia, ch’in lagrimosi carmi ...:’ Saint Birgitta in the Verse, Thought, and Artistic Commissions of Angelo Grillo,” Virginia Cox considers a little-explored aspect of Grillo’s religious poetics: the influence of Birgitta, whose *Revelations* Grillo identifies in his *Cristo flagellato* (1607) as the poetic matrix of his work. Cox locates Grillo’s allusions to Birgitta within the publication history of the *Revelations* at this time, with special reference to the 1606 Rome edition by Durante.

In the **tenth chapter**, “The Most Illustrious and Divine of All the Sibyls’: Saint Birgitta in the Prophetic Visions of Tommaso Campanella and Queen Cristina of Sweden,” Unn Falkeid explores Birgitta’s role in two texts composed in the wake of the Thirty Years’ War and the prophetic revival in Rome. During his long, torturous years in a Neapolitan prison, Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639) wrote the treatise *Monarchia del Messia* (1605). While far less

studied than his famous dialogue *La Città del Sole*, written in the same period, *Monarchia del Messia* is of crucial importance and reveals some of the most central, though troubling, strands of Campanella's writings. In his visions of uniting all of humanity in "a single fold under one shepherd," Campanella frequently quotes Birgitta, at a moment when the *Celestial Revelations* were the focus of renewed interest, as this introduction has discussed. The other source explored in this chapter is an *oratorio* written in 1673 by Cardinal Decio Azzolino, three hundred years after Birgitta's death, and dedicated to Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–1689). In the oratorio, a fictive Birgitta hails the queen as the expected liberator of the world. What Campanella's text uncovers, together with the intense commitment to prophetic ideas among Christina's circle of friends and acquaintances, is a most curious embracing of Birgitta's revelations at the threshold of modernity.

Following the essay chapters, we include in appendix an important new study of Birgitta's *vitae* by Silvia Nocentini, "One Life, Many Hagiographers: The Earliest *Vitae* of Birgitta of Sweden." The earliest Latin hagiography of Birgitta of Sweden is characterized by a stratification of (at least) three Latin versions of the confessors' *Vita*, all datable to before her canonization process (1391) and very close to each other: the so-called *Vita* C15, which is the shortest one; the *Vita* later included in the acts of the canonization process; and the *Vita retractata* or *Vita Panisperna*, enriched with several additional miracles. Given Alfonso of Jaén's key role in spreading Birgitta's writings, one might think the hagiographic tradition would be centralized and stable. The philological evidence, however, suggests something very different: every step towards her canonization was marked by a different arrangement of the *Life*, with different readers given different texts. This multiplicity is a challenging issue for philologists as well as for historians, and Nocentini argues that new editions are necessary. Without reliable critical texts, we can only speculate about which of the three versions was the earliest, who its readers were, and how wide its diffusion was in Europe.

Conclusions

At the close of this introduction, the co-editors would like to reflect on the findings of the scholars who have contributed to this volume, ourselves included. One of the most exciting aspects of this project has been that, to a great extent, our results were not entirely what we expected. Rather than a direct, easily identifiable link between Birgitta and one or more prominent Renaissance women, we instead found her embedded in Italian culture in a variety of strange, even

mystical ways. That she became an exemplum in Italy is indisputable, and not only to holy women like Catherine of Siena and Francesca Romana, but to noblewomen like Caterina Cibo and Vittoria Colonna.⁷⁰ What is perhaps more surprising is that during the tumult of the Italian Wars and Reformation, and even well into the Counter-Reformation and the Baroque, Birgitta continued to represent an important touchstone with a unique authority that could be activated by both men and women. Throughout the tempestuous three centuries following her death, Birgitta's voice remained audible and clear.⁷¹

70 On Birgitta's influence on Francesca Romana, see *Santa Francesca Romana. Edizione critica*, ed. Bartolomei Romagnoli; Canepuccia, *How to Become a Prophetess*; and Wainwright, *Widow City*. On Cibo see Clara Stella's contribution to this volume; on Colonna, see Falkeid, "Magistra apostolorum".

71 We would like to thank Elissa Weaver, the groundbreaking scholar of early modern Italian women and religion, for her illuminating and important observations on this point in conversation with us.

Birgitta and Pseudo-Birgitta: Textual Circulation and Perceptions of the Saint

Brian Richardson

During the Renaissance, many Italians would have known of St. Birgitta, but they would have had diverse perceptions of her and of her legacy. Tuscans could have seen devotional images of her, painted around the early 15th century, in churches such as Santa Maria Novella in Florence and San Domenico in Pisa.¹ This chapter concerns the perceptions that were derived from writings of two kinds: on the one hand, those composed by Birgitta herself and, on the other hand, those ascribed to her but in fact composed after her death. There is a connection between these two sets of works, in the sense that false attributions were made on the strength of her personal reputation and of the reputation of her authentic works. However, works by Birgitta and those that merely masqueraded as hers were different in nature and were circulated in different ways.

The Circulation of Authentic Works

Direct access to Birgitta's authentic writings in late medieval and Renaissance Italy centred on circles of her followers in a few cities. At the end of the 14th century and at the start of the 15th, copies of her *Revelations* and other works in Latin were made from the redactions put together by her confessor, Alfonso Pecha of Jaén. Hans Aili estimates, perhaps rather generously,

1 Ann Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art: The Convent of San Domenico of Pisa* (Aldershot: 2008), 81–94; Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, "The Images of Saint Birgitta of Sweden in Santa Maria Novella in Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 18 (2004): 509–26; Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta of Sweden in Tuscan Art and Sermons," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Maria H. Oen (Leiden: 2019), 223–46. See also the chapters in this volume by Jessica Goethals and Anna Wainwright and by Virginia Cox.

Abbreviations used in this essay: BAV = Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana; BMV = Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana; BNCf = Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale; BRf = Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana; ISTC = Incunabula Short Title Catalogue, <https://data.cerl.org/istc/>.

that between 30 and 50 manuscripts of the *Revelations* were written in the late 1370s and 1380s, on the assumption that individual copies were made for all members of the two commissions appointed to examine Birgitta's canonization.² Carl-Gustaf Undhagen, in his critical edition of the first book of the *Revelations*, lists seven manuscripts of Italian provenance that date from the late 14th or the 15th century.³ In any case, copies would have been available only to devotees of the saint in certain centres. One of these was Naples, where the three earliest extant manuscripts of the original corpus of the *Revelations* were produced around 1377–91. Another strong focus of interest was Florence. The notary Lapo Mazzei wrote to Francesco Datini, the merchant of Prato, on 13 November 1395 that he was reading Birgitta's *Rule* of her order, that he had read accounts of her miracles and that he knew the subject matter of the *Revelations*, of which he was hoping to obtain a copy, perhaps from the bishop of Florence, Onofrio Visdomini:

Hundreds of her miracles are found written by disciples and her confessor, in the first year, and I have read them all [...]. And although I have not yet been able to obtain the great book that she leaves to the world, called the *Book of Revelations* that Christ made to her and dictated to her word for word, nevertheless, as far as I have read in the *Rule* she leaves to her monks and nuns, the sum and effect of Our Lord's intention in these times, that is, in our age, is this: that He sees his Church destroyed and sees that He can no longer bear not to provide for the salvation of Christians. [...] I have been with the Bishop, who I was told has managed to obtain that book of the secret Revelations of God.⁴

2 Hans Aili, "The Manuscripts of Revelaciones S. Birgittae," in *Santa Brigida, Napoli, l'Italia: atti del Convegno di studi italo-svedese (Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 10–11 maggio 2006)*, ed. Olle Ferm, Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese, and Marcello Rotili (Naples: 2009), 153–60 (155–57). On early manuscripts of the *Liber celestis revelationum*, see also Maria H. Oen, "The Iconography of *Liber celestis revelationum*," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 186–222; F. Thomas Luongo, "Inspiration and Imagination: Visionary Authorship in the Early Manuscripts of the *Revelations* of Birgitta of Sweden," *Speculum* 93, no. 4 (October 2018): 1102–50.

3 *Rev.* 1: 148–70.

4 "Truovansi scritti da' discepoli e dal confessore suo, di lei, nel primo anno, centinaia di miracoli, i quali tutti ho letti [...]. E come ch'io non abbia ancor potuto avere il suo grande libro, ch'ella lascia al mondo, che si chiama *Libro delle Revelazioni*, che Cristo le fece, e dettolle di parola a parola; pure, per quanto ho letto nella *Regola* ch'ella lascia a' suoi monaci e monache, la somma e l'effetto della 'ntenzione del Nostro Signore in questi tempi d'oggi, cioè nella nostra etade, è questa: ch'egli vede guasta la sua Chiesa, e vede che e' non può più sostenere che non provenga alla salute de' cristiani. [...] Io sono stato col Vescovo, che mi fu detto ha tanto fatto, ch'egli ha quel libro delle Rivelazioni segrete di Dio." Cited in Roberto Rusconi,

Yet in 1402 the newly founded convent of Santa Maria e Santa Brigida al Paradiso on the outskirts of Florence, the first Birgittine house in Italy, did not own a copy of the *Revelations*, and the Spanish brother Luca Jacobi, who became confessor general of the convent in 1418, had to ask for another brother to bring one from the order's mother house in Vadstena.⁵ Birgitta was said to have spent a month in Genoa in 1349 while on her pilgrimage to Rome,⁶ and there was early interest in her works in the Ligurian city: a section of the *Revelations*, containing the revelations directed to popes concerning the transfer of the papacy from Avignon to Rome and the reform of the Church, was copied in Genoa in 1401–02 in a monastic congregation recently established by Alfonso de Jaén.⁷ Silvia Nocentini points out that, around 1400, Birgitta's works were known among Dominican Observant preachers such as Tommaso Caffarini in Venice, but that “this was a circulation restricted to specific and elite circles of readers.”⁸

The diffusion of Birgitta's texts to those who could not read texts in Latin with ease, including of course the great majority of women, would have depended on the availability of translations into the vernacular. At the very end of the Trecento, a complete translation of all Birgitta's major works was made in Siena, commissioned or perhaps carried out by the notary Cristofano Guidini, and it is now in Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, MSS I. v. 25/26.⁹ However, most manuscripts of the *Revelations* in the vernacular

Lattesa della fine: crisi della società, profezia ed Apocalisse in Italia al tempo del grande Scisma d'Occidente (1378–1417) (Rome: 1979), 114–15. See also Silvia Nocentini, “The Transmission of Birgittine and Catherinian Works within the Mystical Tradition: Exchanges, Cross-Readings, Connections,” in *Sanctity and Female Authorship: Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (London: 2020), 93–112 (100).

5 Hans Cnatingius, *Studies in the Order of St. Bridget of Sweden*, 1: *The Crisis in the 1420's* (Stockholm: 1963), 38.

6 Margherita Giordano Lokrantz, “Intorno al viaggio italiano di *Birgitta* di Svezia: il soggiorno milanese (autunno 1349),” in *Vestigia: studi in onore di Giuseppe Billanovich*, ed. Rino Avesani and others, 2 vols (Rome: 1984), 1: 387–98 (398).

7 Rusconi, *Lattesa della fine*, 119.

8 Nocentini, “The Transmission,” 99–100. See also the essay by Jane Tylus in this volume.

9 Domenico Pezzini, “The Italian Reception of Birgittine Writings,” in *The Translation of Religious Texts in the Middle Ages: Tracts and Rules, Hymns and Saints' Lives* (Bern: 2008), 139–65 (143); id., “Il primo volgarizzamento italiano delle Rivelazioni e degli altri scritti di S. Brigida: il codice I.v.25/26 della Biblioteca degli Intronati di Siena (1399),” in *Santa Brigida, Napoli*, ed. Ferm, Perriccioli Saggese, and Rotili, 61–73 (63). Pezzini suggests that the Siense original may be the source of manuscripts containing parts of the *Revelations*, such as BNCF, MSS II 11 393 and II 130: “The Italian Reception,” 164. See also Carl Nordenfalk, “Saint Bridget of Sweden as Represented in Illuminated Manuscripts,” in *De artibus opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, 2 vols (New York: 1961), 1: 371–93 (382), 2: 122–27. On Guidini and this translation, see also Nocentini, “The Transmission,” 101–05, Cristofano Guidini, *Cantari sulla*

contained not the work in its entirety but extracts of varying extent. An early 15th-century example is a Florentine manuscript, British Library, Add. 38022, whose title begins: “Cominciano certi capitogli tratti del libro della be[a]ta Brigida.” It includes 113 chapters from Books I–IV, VI, and VII, out of 321 chapters in the complete text. It is noted that “nothing is dealt with here from the fifth,” the *Liber questionum*.¹⁰ Throughout the Quattrocento and until at least 1571, Florence remained a major centre for copying translations of works by or concerning the saint, thanks largely to the clergy of the Paradiso. In this double convent, both monks and especially nuns copied books of, or extracts from, the *Revelations*, accounts of the saint’s life and her miracles, and prayers revealed to her.¹¹ Substantial parts of the *Revelations* were transcribed in the 15th century by a monk of the convent called Antonio. He included 115 chapters, from the same six books as the British Library manuscript; his selection was thus very similar in size, but it differed in its contents.¹²

The colophons of several manuscripts from the Paradiso suggest that they were intended to be used within this community in the long term, but that they could occasionally be lent, given or even sold to those outside the convent. Suor Cleofe Lenzi, who died in 1546, wrote in a copy of the *Revelations*, I and II, dated 10 August 1494: “I pray that whoever reads this may keep it diligently, and whoever borrows it may return it.”¹³ Birgitta’s *Sermo angelicus* in the vernacular appears in a spiritual miscellany transcribed in 1414 by an anonymous nun of the convent, and the manuscript was owned by Lionardo di Giovanni Carnesecchi at the end of the Quattrocento.¹⁴ At least one manuscript from the Paradiso was sold: a copy of the life and miracles of St. Birgitta, in the hand

Legenda aurea’ e altri, ed. Attilio Cicchella and Thomas Persico (Rome: 2022), 8–9, and the essay by Jane Tylus in this volume.

10 “[D]el quinto qui non si tratta alcuna cosa,” fol. 96r.

11 On copying in this convent, see especially Rosanna Miriello, *I manoscritti del Monastero del Paradiso di Firenze* (Florence: 2007). See also Brian Richardson, *Women and the Circulation of Texts in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: 2020), 105–08, and the essay by Isabella Gagliardi in this volume.

12 Pezzini, “The Italian Reception,” 145, 153–59, and “The Prophetic Voice in St. Birgitta’s *Revelations*: An Analysis of *Incominciano certi capitoli*, a Late Fifteenth-Century Italian Compilation (MS Florence, Bibl. Naz. Centrale MS II, II, 391),” in *The Translation of Religious Texts*, 167–95, 387–91. On Antonio and this manuscript, see also Miriello, *I manoscritti del Monastero*, 35, 70–71, Pl. 18.

13 “Priego che chi llo legge con diligentia lo tenga, e cchi ll’acatta sì llo renda.” BNCF, MS II_130, fol. 154v. Miriello, *I manoscritti del Monastero*, 69–70.

14 “Fu iscritto nel mille 14,” that is, 1414. BRF, MS 1345, fols. 90r–114v. Miriello, *I manoscritti del Monastero*, 152–53, no. 70.11 and fig. 70. See also Teresa De Robertis and Rosella Miriello, *I manoscritti datati della Biblioteca Riccardiana di Firenze*, 3 vols (Florence: 1997–2006), 2: 35–36, no. 65; Nocentini, “The Transmission,” 95.

of suor Raffaella Bardi (who died in 1527), has the ownership note: “This book belongs to Bartolomeo di Leonardo di Piero di Tomaso Masi, coppersmith, Florentine citizen, who bought [it] on 22 October 1515.”¹⁵ An anonymous nun in the second Italian Birgittine convent, Scala Coeli of Genoa, copied and probably translated almost all the writings of St. Birgitta in 1624–26, primarily for her sisters and possibly for others, as her note “To the gentle reader” suggests: “This work has been translated in this way only to encourage all our sisters, and others if perhaps they read it, to greater devotion.”¹⁶ There is thus evidence that copies of translations of Birgitta’s works that were made in the two Italian convents of her order either were or may have been diffused beyond the convent walls to a limited extent. Some scribal circulation took place outside convents. For instance, a parchment copy of a translation of Book VIII of the *Revelations*, including the *Epistola solitarii ad reges* and the *Liber celestis imperatoris ad reges*, transcribed in a humanistic cursive script and finely decorated, must have been produced professionally in Florence in the second half of the 15th century.¹⁷

Short texts by Birgitta were also circulated in manuscript. A single prayer by the saint was sent to Margherita Datini in 1395 with instructions that it was to be taught to other women.¹⁸ Extracts from the saint’s *Revelations* and her *Regola del Salvatore* were included during the 15th century in Florentine miscellanies, including those made in the convent of the Paradiso, as we have seen.¹⁹ An “epithoma” of the *Revelations* was included in a compilation put together near the end of this century by the Augustinian friar Adamo di Montaldo, and it is

15 “Questo libretto si è di Bartolomeo di Leonardo di Piero di Tomaso Masi chalderaio, ciptadino fiorentino, il quale chonperò a dì XXII d’ottobre 1515.” BNCf, MS Magl. XXXVIII 15, fol. iv. Miriello, *I manoscritti del Monastero*, 136.

16 “Al Benigno Lettore. Questa opera, così tradotta è stata solo, per eccitar a maggior Divo-tione, tutte le Sorelle nostre, et altri, se forse la leggeranno.” New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS Z111 0141, fol. 4r. See Hugh Feiss, “The Many Lives and Languages of St. Birgitta of Sweden and her Order,” *Studia monastica* 35 (1993): 313–29.

17 Oslo, Nasjonalbiblioteket, MS fol. 1992, https://www.nb.no/items/URN:NBN:no-nb_digi manus_214694.

18 Nocentini, “The Transmission,” 95.

19 For examples, see Maria H. Oen, “Introduction: Birgitta Birgersdotter and the *Liber celestis revelacionum*,” in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 1–24 (20). One of the manuscripts mentioned here, BRF, MS 1939, was written mostly between 1443 and 1446: see De Robertis and Miriello, *I manoscritti datati della Biblioteca Riccardiana*, 3: 62. Another miscellany of works by Birgitta, BAV, MS Chig. L. IV 126, is recorded in Paul O. Kristeller, *Iter Italicum: A Finding List of Uncatalogued or Incompletely Catalogued Humanistic Manuscripts of the Renaissance in Italian and Other Libraries*, 6 vols (Leiden and London: 1963–92), 2: 487.

significant that he juxtaposed it with a prophetic text with political resonance, the *Vaticinium Sibillae Erithraeae*.²⁰

The art of printing initially made little contribution to the circulation of Birgitta's works in Italy. While the entire text of the *Revelations* in Latin was printed in Germany, at Lübeck, in 1492, there was no complete Italian edition until that published in 1557 by the press set up by the Swedish bishop Olaus Magnus and operated by Italian printers in the saint's house in Rome.²¹ Only two editions from Italy printed before the 1550s offered extracts from the *Revelations*. They both focused on admonishments about contemporary sinfulness, but these do not predict political conflict and they are not obscure in tone. One was a work composed in the first half of the 15th century by Johannes Tortsch, the *Onus mundi, id est prophetia de malo futuro ipsi mundo superventuro* (The world's burden, that is, prophecy of the evil that will befall this world), which was printed in Rome by Eucharius Silber in 1485.²² Among passages that Tortsch cites from the *Revelations* are statements that Christ will abandon evil Christians in favour of devout heathens (I:57); that Christ will not spare the unjust (IV:37); that the pope must reform the ways of the clergy (IV:49); that Christ is like a bee that seeks flowers with the sweetest scent (VI:44); and that Christ urges his enemies to return to Him (VII:30). Tortsch's concluding chapters, 23–26, set Birgitta alongside figures such as the Sibyl and Joachim of Fiore. The other edition, entitled *Incomenciano certi capitoli tratti in volgare de li libri di sancta Brigida da Dio allei revelati*, also included reprimands on sinfulness drawn from the *Revelations*, and it was related to the compilation copied by Antonio of Santa Brigida al Paradiso, mentioned above. Printing was carried out in a peripheral centre, Mondovì, in 1518 by Giuseppe Berruerio for Stefano Allegro, who was from Savona but had a bookshop in Genoa, and was

20 Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, MS 11549. See Kristeller, *Iter italicum*, 4: 570a; Christian Jostmann, "Sibilla Erithraea Babilonica: Papsttum und Prophetie im 13. Jahrhundert (Hanover: 2006), 467; Cécile Caby, "La pessima et periculosa lingua de l'Augustin Adam de Montaldo: étude d'un recueil de prédictions dans l'Italie de la fin du xv^e siècle," in *Expériences religieuses et chemins de perfection dans l'Occident médiéval: études offertes à André Vauchez par ses élèves*, ed. Dominique Rigaux, Daniel Russo, and Catherine Vincent (Paris: 2012), 233–54 (239, n. 13).

21 Valentino Romani, "Per la storia dell'editoria italiana del Cinquecento: edizioni romane 'in aedibus S. Brigidae' (1553–1557)," *Rara volumina* 1998, no. 1, 23–36. Another edition of the *Revelationes* appeared in 1606, ed. Consalvo Duranti (Rome: Stefano Paolini for Giulio Burchioni).

22 ISTC ib00675000. See Ulrich Montag, *Das Werk der heiligen Birgitta von Schweden in oberdeutscher Überlieferung: Texte und Untersuchungen* (Munich: 1968), 151–96, 251–335; Pavlina Rychterová, "The Revelations of St. Birgitta in the Holy Roman Empire," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 247–68 (259–60, 266–67).

no doubt keen to exploit the connection of Birgitta with the latter city.²³ The main reason for the sporadic nature of the printing of the saint's works before 1557 must have been economic. The Birgittines were a small order that had only two convents in Italy, in Florence and Genoa, each with a maximum number of 60 nuns and a smaller number of males who were to assist the nuns.²⁴ Even if one took account of devotion to the saint on the part of laypeople, the sponsorship of printing would have entailed a severe financial risk.

There are passing references to Birgitta in the *Tractatus quidam de Turcis*, a compilation of prophecies put together by Dominicans. Although she is named as a prophet alongside legendary figures such as Merlin and the Sibyl, the authors were aware of the defence of the *Revelations* made in 1435 by the Dominican Juan de Torquemada, since they write: "The fifth presage is drawn from the revelations of St. Birgitta, which are also approved and are held to be very authentic in the Church, as is seen in the book that the late Cardinal of St. Sixtus, Torquemada, put together against those who were attacking the said revelations."²⁵

The Circulation of Spurious Works

Alongside this somewhat restricted Italian circulation of Birgitta's own works, in Latin and in vernacular translation, the saint was frequently credited as the author of other texts, in order to give them greater prestige. Anne Jacobson Schutte lists 18 editions under Bridget of Sweden in her bibliography of Italian vernacular religious books printed up to 1550, but only one of these contains authentic texts, the *Capitoli* of 1518 mentioned earlier.²⁶ The first set of texts

23 Nicolò Giuliani, *Notizie sulla tipografia ligure sino a tutto il secolo XVI* (Genoa: 1869), 278; Marina Bersano Begey and Giuseppe Dondi, *Le cinquecentine piemontesi*, 3 vols (Turin: 1966), 2: no. 1050; Pezzini, "The Prophetic Voice."

24 Tore Nyberg, "Paradiso Copying Activity (15th Century Florence) and Hugh of Balma," in *The Mystical Tradition and the Carthusians*, ed. James Hogg, Analecta Cartusiana, 130, vol. 3 (Salzburg: 1995): 87–95 (87); Cnattingius, *Studies*, 15.

25 "Quantum presagium habetur ex revelationibus sancte Brigitte que etiam approbate et plurimum autentice habentur in ecclesia, quod patet ex libro quem felicis recordationis Cardinalis sancti Sixti de Turrecremata confecit contra impugnantes prefatas revelationes." *Tractatus quidam de Turcis* ([Rome: Johannes Schurener, de Bopardia, about 1474–75]), fols. [a]10v–[b]1r (ISTC it00501000). On the *Tractatus*, see Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: 1969), 335–37. On Torquemada's defence, see Anne Jacobson Schutte, *Aspiring Saints: Pretense of Holiness, Inquisition, and Gender in the Republic of Venice, 1618–1750* (Baltimore: 2001), 45–46.

26 Anne Jacobson Schutte, *Printed Italian Vernacular Religious Books 1465–1550: A Finding List* (Geneva: 1983), 106–08.

wrongly attributed to Birgitta consists of fifteen prayers on the Passion of Christ, known as the “Fifteen Oes” because they all begin with the words “O Jesu.”²⁷ Undhagen has suggested that they might be derived from certain passages of Birgitta’s *Revelations*, but there are no precise links.²⁸ Although these are complex texts, they were widespread among all social classes in many European countries. Eamon Duffy is confident that they were composed far from Sweden or Italy: “They are English in origin, probably composed either in the devotional world of the Yorkshire hermitages associated with figures like Richard Rolle and his disciples, or in the circle of the English Brigittines.”²⁹ There are plentiful Italian manuscript copies of all or some of the prayers in the original Latin or in the vernacular.³⁰ They can be found together with parts of the *Revelations*, as in Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS D 89 sup., fols. 57r–59r, and BMV, MS Lat. III 117, fols. 72v–74r. Transcription of these prayers continued until at least the end of the 16th century: Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, MS A 963, fols. 66–74, copied in 1596, contains all fifteen, following a “Leggenda e vita” and the “Miracholi” of Birgitta.³¹ The prayers were printed several times on their own from around 1495 onwards in Rome, and they were included in the *Divi Bernardi abbatis Meditationes devotissimae ad humanae conditionis cognitionem, alias liber de anima, ac alia quaedam eiusdem, et aliorum pia opuscula*, of which at least five Venetian editions were printed between 1535 and 1553 in small formats, sixteens or twenty-fours.³² The censorship of printed editions is studied in Marco Faini’s chapter in this volume.

Vernacular prophecies of the future constitute the second type of spurious text that could be linked with the name of St. Birgitta in the 15th and 16th centuries. The saint herself does not claim to foretell specific events; rather, God reveals insights to her, and she proclaims them for the sake of human salvation. From time to time, her revelations predict God’s judgement on those who do not obey His will, as we have seen already with reference to Tortsch’s *Onus mundi*. Other examples are her warning about God’s vengeance on those citizens of Rome who do not repent (*Rev.* IV:10) and her foretelling

27 Claes Gejrot, “The Fifteen Oes,” in *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta*, ed. Morris and O’Mara, 213–38.

28 *Rev.* I: 154, n. 5.

29 Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: 2005), 249.

30 Two manuscripts containing translations of these prayers are Ravenna, Biblioteca Classense, MS 16, and Cremona, Biblioteca Statale, MS 47, which has six prayers only. See *Inventari dei manoscritti delle biblioteche d’Italia*, founded by Giuseppe Mazzatinti, 116 vols (Florence: 1890–2013), 4: 150, and 70: 39; Pezzini, “The Italian Reception”, 161–62.

31 Kristeller, *Iter italicum*, 5: 9b.

32 Giovanni Padovano and Venturino Ruffinelli, 1535; Bernardino Stagnino, 1537; Luigi Torti, 1538; Bernardino Bindoni, 1543; al segno della Speranza, 1553.

of punishment for the kingdom of Cyprus, again unless its inhabitants mend their ways (*Rev.* VII:19.24). It is only after Birgitta's death, in the context of her canonization process, that her supporters start to describe her explicitly in terms such as "true prophetess of God" and to compare her with prophets.³³ A perception of Birgitta as a diviner of the future persists in the biography published by the priest Guglielmo Burlamacchi at the end of the 17th century. His chapter entitled "On her spirit of prophecy" describes her as a "true prophetess," comparable with Deborah and Elijah in the Old Testament. Burlamacchi attributes to the saint predictions of events that are not in fact specified in the revelations that he cites, such as a plague in Rome (*Rev.* IV:22, God will punish sinners), the Western Schism (*Rev.* IV:48, a warning that a king's days may be cut short), the downfall of the Greek empire (*Rev.* VII:19, the reprimand to the people of Cyprus mentioned above), and even the institution of the Jesuit order (*Rev.* II:6 and 22).³⁴

Around the start of the Quattrocento, pseudo-Birgittine prophecies, often cryptic in nature, began to appear in manuscripts and then in printed editions, sometimes together with similar texts, sometimes together with historical works. One of the most widely circulated prophecies regularly attributed to Birgitta is a frottola that begins, in one version:

Destati, o fier lion, al mio gran grido,
 ch'i' ò presa la spada
 per far con quella strada al mie sermone.

Muovemi el tempo omai et la stagione
 della tua gran superba
 che tanto è suta acerba a maturarsi.

Noterai i miei decti non iscarsi
 al tuo grave periglio
 che si farà vermiglio nel tuo seno.³⁵

33 Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: 2001), 35, 40–41, 153 ("vera prophetissa Dei"), 174–76.

34 Guglielmo Burlamacchi, *Vita della serafica madre e gloriosissima vedova S. Brigida di Svetia principessa di Nericia* (Naples: 1692), III.18, "Del suo spirito di profetia," 506–14. "Profetessa veridica," 506.

35 *Prophetia di sancta Brigida* ([Rome: Johann Besicken and Martinus de Amsterdam, 1500]), fol. [a]2r. On this text, see Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton: 1970), 56–57; Rusconi, *L'attesa della fine*,

Rise up, proud lion, at my great cry, for I have taken up the sword to make a path with it for my words. I am moved now by the time and the season of your great pride, which has taken so long to ripen. You will note my words, not few in number, at your great peril, which will turn scarlet in your breast.

In 103 strophes and a *congedo* of two hendecasyllables, the poet addresses the lion and predicts dire events in the form of an allegory that involves a cast of characters such as a beautiful lady, a bridled horse, a bird from Montefeltro, and a gryphon. The text evidently originated in Florence, and the lion must represent the Marzocco, emblem of that city. According to the colophon of one 15th-century copy, this was a vernacularization composed by Iacopo Del Pecora, also known as Iacopo da Montepulciano, when he was imprisoned for political reasons in Florence between 1390 and 1407 and turned to writing verse: “Here ends the prophecy of St. Birgitta that tells of what is to happen from 1460 to 1470, turned into vernacular verse by Iacopo da Montepulciano while he was in the prisons of the *comune* of Firenze.”³⁶ In any event, “Destati, o fier lion” was circulated swiftly and widely. An early copy appears in a miscellany dating probably from the first decade of the 15th century.³⁷ The poem was added after 1472 in a manuscript owned by the Davanzati family of Tuscany.³⁸ Suor Cleofe of Santa Brigida al Paradiso transcribed it in 1495 after a translation of the *Revelations*, Books III and IV.³⁹ It was copied in the late Quattrocento in a manuscript owned in modern times by Leo S. Olschki.⁴⁰ It was added to Pescia,

115–16; Michele Lodone, “Santa Brigida in Toscana: volgarizzamenti e riscritture profetiche,” *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia* 73 (2019): 69–84 (80–83).

36 “Finita la profetia di sancta Brigida la quale tratta di quello à da venire dal 1460 infino al 1470, ridotta in volgare in versi da Iacopo da Montepulciano mentre era nelle carcere del comune di Firenze.” BNCF, MS II IX 125 (*Inventari dei manoscritti delle biblioteche d’Italia*, 12: 13). On Del Pecora, see Liana Cellierino, “Del Pecora, Iacopo (Iacopo da Montepulciano),” in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* 38 (Rome: 1990): 219–20.

37 Modena, Biblioteca Estense, MS Càmpori App. 37 γ.0.5.44, fols. 10r–12r; see *La Guerra di Troia in ottava rima*, ed. Dario Mantovani (Milan: 2013), II.1, <https://books.openedition.org/ledizioni/1866>.

38 BRF, MS 1251, fols. 100r–02v. See De Robertis and Miriello, *I manoscritti datati della Biblioteca Riccardiana*, 2: 25, no. 41.

39 BNCF, MS Pal. 77, fols. 177v–80v. See Miriello, *I manoscritti del Monastero*, 144–45.

40 E. Vajna De Pava, “Di un codice della Collez. del Comm. Leo S. Olschki contenente la ‘Sfera’ del Dati e altre opere italiane dei secoli XIV e XV e di un codice Laurenziano contenente la ‘Sfera’ di Andalò di Negro,” *La Bibliofilia* 7 (1906): 343–55 (350). This article notes the presence of the prophecy in several other manuscripts of the BRF and the Fondo Magliabechiano of the BNCF. It is cited from Magl. xxv 349 in Niccolò Rodolico, *La democrazia fiorentina nel suo tramonto (1378–1382)* (Bologna: 1905), 78–79. Other

Biblioteca Capitolare, MS XXIII VI 11 11, fols. 150r–60r, in the late 15th century, among other prophetic texts that followed a translation of Leonardo Bruni's *Commentarii primi belli Punici* and other short works.⁴¹ The composition spread beyond Tuscany. An anonymous Venetian transcribed it among many other prophetic texts around the second decade of the 16th century in Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, MS 3898, fols. 112v–21r;⁴² perhaps he would have understood the poem as referring to the lion of St. Mark. In 1590, the abbé Jean Picard included it in his manuscript collection of Italian *Prophéties et prédictions*.⁴³ Its opening words must have inspired an anonymous sonnet, found in a 16th-century manuscript anthology of verse, that begins “Destati, o fer liono, che sta’ tu a fare?” (“Rise up, proud lion, why do you delay?”).⁴⁴ The poem was also printed as a *Prophetia di sancta Brigida* in at least three editions from Florence and Rome towards the end of the 15th century. Two of them establish a link with the historic St. Birgitta through a woodcut, on their title page, that depicts a saint identified as “S. Brigida. Roma,” praying before the crucified Christ.⁴⁵ Yet, as Roberto Rusconi has pointed out, there is a gulf between this prophecy and the previsions contained in most books of the *Revelations*, “whose point of departure is constituted by a dark portrait of the conditions of society and of the Church.”⁴⁶

The first item in an edition entitled *Prophetia de Santa Brigida con alcune altre Prophetie*, printed in Venice by Francesco Bindoni around 1525, is a poem in ottava rima beginning “Ave Iesu Christo figliol di Maria.” It is preceded here by a woodcut of a saint kneeling before the crucified Christ (different from that

manuscript copies include: BNCF, MSS II I 249, fols. 210r–11v; II I 203, pp. 355–70; II II 349, fol. 241v, after another “Profezia di s. Brigida,” “Fieno del gran tumulto tutti ispersi;” II X 57, fols. 55r–64r; Volterra, Biblioteca Guarnacci, MS 252, fols. 15–20 (*Inventari dei manoscritti*, 8: 77–78; 9: 56–58; 9: 101; 12: 47; 2: 233–34); Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 16021, in a collection dated c.1470 (Jostmann, “*Sibilla Erithea Babilonica*,” 479–80).

41 *I manoscritti medievali della provincia di Pistoia* (Florence: 1998), 130.

42 Auguste Molinier, *Catalogue des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Mazarine*, 4 vols (Paris: 1885–98), 3: 229–31; Roberto Rusconi, *Profezia e profeti alla fine del Medioevo* (Rome: 1999), 192–96.

43 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS ital. 627, fols. 25r–44r. See Rusconi, *Profezia e profeti*, 198.

44 BNCF, MS Magl. VII, 727, fol. 94 (*Inventari dei manoscritti*, 13: 159).

45 [Florence: Bartolommeo di Libri, c.1486], ISTC ib00685500, where line 3 reads “per franchare qui la strada;” [Rome: n.pr., about 1500?], ISTC ib00686000; [Rome: Johann Besicken and Martinus de Amsterdam, 1500], ISTC ib00686500. The last two have the woodcut. I am grateful to Zoe Hill of the Houghton Library, Harvard University, for information on this library’s copy of ib00686000.

46 “[I] cui punto di partenza è costituito da un cupo ritratto delle condizioni della società e della Chiesa.” Rusconi, *Lattesa della fine*, 116.

found in editions of “Destati, o fier lion”). Rusconi judges the first of the two versions of this prophecy to have been composed around 1411 by a supporter of the Avignon papacy.⁴⁷ When it appears in manuscripts, it is attributed only once to Birgitta. For example, a miscellany put together in Perugia, found in BAV, MS Lat. 4834, fols. 30v–38v, presents it as a prophecy of Joachim of Fiore, and the text has several variants in respect of Bindoni’s version. The poem, cited here from the latter source, begins with an invocation to Christ:

Ave Iesu Christo figliol di Maria
 che per noi pendesti in su la croce,
 a te ricorro che me insegni la via
 ch’io possa dir con parlar atroce,
 ch’ognun intenda la parola mia,
 che al peccare non sia sì feroce,
 però che ’l mondo aspetta gran tormento,
 poco tempo gli è al finimento.

Hail Jesus Christ, son of Mary, who hung for us on the cross, I turn to you so that you can teach me how to talk with monstrous speech, so that all can understand my words, so that they may be less driven to sin, because the world awaits great torment, the end is nigh.

The author goes on, in stanza 11, to predict slaughter in a city that is again identified through the Marzocco, and glosses in the Vatican copy (fol. 32r) confirm that this is “Fiorença:”

Qui se proverano l’arme feroce
 e fia di rosso sangue occisione;
 olditi pianti e cridi ad alta voce,
 che mugerà per forza Marzochone,
 il sangue correrà fin alla foce
 per loro ferir senza remissione,
 et fia l’Arno la sua aqua vermiglia
 et quivi fia trista molta famiglia.

Here fierce arms will be put to the test and there will be red-blooded killing; hear loud weeping and cries, for the great Marzocco will have to roar, blood will flow to the river’s mouth from their relentless wounding, and the Arno’s water will turn scarlet and here many families will be sad.

47 Rusconi, *L’attesa della fine*, 158–63. See also Lodone, “Santa Brigida in Toscana,” 83–84.

A collection of prophecies made by Luca di Antonio Bernardi, a Latin teacher of San Gimignano, was probably begun in 1442 with a transcription of this prophecy, taken “from the copy of a friar of Monte Oliveto,” that is, from a Benedictine monk.⁴⁸ Either this poem or “Destati, o fier lion” might have been the text found in the “profetie di santa Brigida” that were printed in the Florentine convent of San Iacopo a Ripoli before 25 January 1479, in an edition of which no copy survives.⁴⁹

Pseudo-Birgittine prophecies were copied in states other than Tuscany. At the start of his *Notabilia temporum*, Angelo de Tummullis, a notary born near Cassino, transcribed in 1419 at the court of Naples a “Prophetia beate Brigide” in Latin prose, beginning “O desolata civitas” and referring to the Western Schism that began in 1378: “O forsaken city, that not only will have destroyed by force but will yourself be forsaken. For your deeds cursed and damned you and moreover that cursed division will befall you through the agency of crime.”⁵⁰ This was included in a collection made in the 1460s by a Benedictine monk from a Venetian patrician family, Andrea Garzoni, that forms part of BMV, MS Lat. III 177 (2176).⁵¹ There is a copy on parchment in BMV, MS Lat. III 229 (2791), fols. 15v–16v.⁵² “O desolata civitas” is attributed to Birgitta in BAV, MS Lat. 3816, fol. 62r, and in the two editions entitled *Abbas Ioachim magnus propheta* that appeared in Venice, the first printed by Lazzaro de’ Soardi on 5 April 1516 (promoted by the Augustinian friar Silvestro Meucci) and the second printed some months later by Bernardino Benagli.⁵³ In the manuscript from Pescia mentioned earlier, “O desolata civitas” follows “Destati, o fier leone” on fols. 160v–61r, but in this instance there is no reference to Birgitta and the text is described as “A certain prophecy corrupted by scribes” (“Prophetia quaedam scriptorum vitio depravata”). Another prophecy claimed as a work of Birgitta, a poem in *settenari* beginning “Verà il gran mastino | come lupo rapace” (“The

48 “[D]a la copia d’uno frate de Monte Oliveto.” BNCF, MS Magl. VII 1081, fol. 6v; see Rusconi, *Profezia e profeti*, 163–65.

49 Melissa Conway, *The Diario of the Printing Press of San Jacopo di Ripoli 1476–1484: Commentary and Transcription* (Florence: 1999), 165, 294, 308.

50 “O desolata civitas, que non solum viribus destrueris set te tu ipsa desolaberis. tua namque operatio te maledixit et dampnat, et praeterea cadet in te ipsa maledicta divisio crimine mediante.” Angelo de Tummullis da Sant’Elia, *Notabilia temporum*, ed. Costantino Corvisieri (Livorno: 1890), 4–5. See Rusconi, *L’attesa della fine*, 120.

51 “O desolata civitas” appears on fol. 16r: Reeves, *The Influence*, 538.

52 Kristeller, *Iter Italicum*, 2: 237a; Jostmann, “*Sibilla Erithea Babilonica*”, 484.

53 Reeves, *The Influence*, 339, n. 2, and 538. On the editions, see Dennis E. Rhodes, *Annali tipografici di Lazzaro de’ Soardi* (Florence: 1978), 76–77, nos 111 and 112; Bernard McGinn, “Circoli gioachimiti veneziani (1450–1530),” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 7 (1986): 19–39 (29–31).

great mastiff will come like a ravenous wolf”), is associated with Venice. It was added to two Venetian collections mentioned earlier: to BMV, MS Lat. III 177 on 10 January 1466 (fols. 48r–49v), and to MS 3898 of the Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris, under the heading “Prophetie dive Brigide,” with variants noted alongside the text (fols. 58r–61r).⁵⁴ The latter manuscript also mentions “el dicto de S. Bricita” (fol. 71v) and gives extracts from prophecies purportedly by Birgitta in Latin prose (fols. 78v–79r).

Venetian interest in the prophetic figure of Birgitta is evidenced further in two sources just mentioned, BMV MS Lat. III 177 and the editions of Joachim of Fiore printed around 1516.⁵⁵ The manuscript reveals that, in the mid-1450s, the Venetian patrician Domenico Morosini gave to the Dominican friar Rusticiano da Brescia a copy of the *Liber de magnis tribulationibus* attributed to Telesforo da Cosenza and asked him to summarize and arrange the prophecies that it contained. The friar explained in a prologue to the *Liber*, addressed to Morosini, that he had added some predictions of Vincent Ferrer and Birgitta. The *Liber* was included, with an updated version of Rusticiano’s prologue, in the editions of 1516, where the passage concerning Birgitta reads:

you urged me to gather in brief and put in order whatever seemed worthy, the book that a certain hermit Theolosphorus collected nearly seventy years ago from the predictions of new prophets, because he also names Joachim, Merlin, Cyril, Dandalus, and the old Sibyls who prophesied around two hundred years before. I added, in suitable places, a very small number of predictions by our St. Vincent and Birgitta, removing obscure ones from those that were clear. I gathered these and prophesied nothing out of my own head.⁵⁶

A translation of this letter then appeared in an edition entitled *Profetie certissime stupende et admirabili, dell’Antichristo, et innumerabili mali al mondo* (se

54 Rusconi, *Profezia e profeti*, 205, n. 51.

55 Raymond Creytens, “Les ‘Consilia’ de S. Antonin de Florence O.P.,” *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 37 (1967): 263–342 (284–90); Reeves, *The Influence*, 173, 262–64, 343–45, 538–39; McGinn, “Circoli gioachimiti”; Rusconi, *Profezia e profeti*, 169–70, 190.

56 “[H]ortatus es ut in brevi decerperem ordinaremque que digna viderentur, quem librum quidam Theolosphorus heremita collegit ante annos ferme 70 ex vaticiniis novorum prophetarum, quod et nominat Joachim, Merlinum, Cirillum, Dandalum veteresque sibilas qui circiter 200 ante prophetarunt. Addidi sane paucissima, locis opportunis, predicta a sancto Vincentio nostro et Brigida, obscura vero eiciens ex hiis que clara erant, ista decerpsi et nihil ex proprio capite vaticinatus” (fol. B1r).

presto non si emenderà) preparati, et donde hanno da venire, et dove hanno da cominciare, printed in Venice by Vincenzo Valgrisi around 1540.⁵⁷

A prophecy in Latin prose on Church reform was consistently associated with Birgitta from the second half of the 15th century onwards. In BAV, MS Lat. 5119, fol. 102v, it is entitled “Brigide sancte Prophetia” and begins “Ecclesia reformabitur” (“The Church will be reformed”).⁵⁸ In 1494, suor Cleofe of the convent of the Paradiso recorded its presence in the church of an Augustinian convent in Venice:

In the church of Santa Giustina in Venice in a convent of nuns on the right-hand side St. Birgitta was painted long ago. On one side are friars and sisters and on the other the pope with a figure just like the Turk, to whom these two verses are addressed: The church will be renewed and will become obedient to God, as in the time of Peter my vicar. The door of faith will be opened to the people and they will be ruled in Christian virtues. Amen.⁵⁹

The text was copied in 1539 by the Augustinian friar Cornelio da Vicenza in Verona, Biblioteca Civica, MS 780, following the *Chronicon Veronense* of Paride da Cerea (fol. 56v).⁶⁰ In a printed edition of 1542, this prophecy follows a letter by Anzolo Pegolotto, Venetian chancellor of the Sindaci di Levante, that claims that the Golden Gate of Jerusalem, walled up by the Turks in the previous year, has been opened. The title page reads: *Una littera la quale narra come novamente è aperta la Porta Aurea de Hierusalem, con la dechiaratione come fu serrata, et etiam narra del sito di essa città de Hierusalem, et de tutte le città che*

57 Rusconi, *Profezia e profeti*, 176–77. On the printer, see Dennis E. Rhodes, *Silent Printers: Anonymous Printing at Venice in the Sixteenth Century* (London: 1995), 272. The passage in question reads: “tu mi hai pregato ch’io abbreviassi et ordinassi detto libro, il quale settanta anni fa Thelesforo Romita Cosentino ha raccolto delle profetie di Ioachino, Merlino, Cirillo, Dandolo, et delle Sibille, le quali molti anni avanti hanno profetato. Io ho aggiunto in qualche luoco di santo Vincenzo, et di santa Brigida quasi del nostro tempo, senza mettere del mio, over del superfluo” (fol. D2r).

58 Jostmann, “*Sibilla Erithea Babilonica*”, 447.

59 “Nella chiesa di sancta Iustina in Vinegia inn uno monasterio di monache a mano ritta è dipinta sancta Brigida già grandissimo tempo, dall’uno lato à frati et suore e dall’altro Il papa, con una fighura, che è tutto il turcho, verso i quali si diricçano questi due versi: Rennovabitur ecclesia, et fiet obediens Deo, sicut tempore Petri vicarii mei. Aperietur gentibus porta fidei, e dominabuntur cristianis in virtutibus. Amen.” BNCF, MS II_130, fol. 154v. See Miriello, *I manoscritti del Monastero*, 70, no. 11. Only the façade of the church remains today.

60 *Il “Chronicon Veronense” di Paride da Cerea e dei suoi continuatori*, ed. Renzo Vaccari, 4 vols (Legnago: 2014), 2.1: 39.

sono circum circa. Et de una Prophetia di santa Brigida, la quale è nella Chiesa di Santa Iustina in Venetia (“A letter that tells how the Golden Gate of Jerusalem has just been opened, with the account of how it was closed, and also it tells of the site of the said city of Jerusalem and of all the surrounding cities. And of a prophecy of St. Birgitta that is in the church of Santa Giustina in Venice”). This text, at least, could have an indirect source in one of Birgitta’s *Revelations*, in which Christ appeals to Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome and to renew the church: “Start to reform the church that I purchased with my own blood in order that it may be reformed and led back spiritually to its pristine state of holiness, for nowadays more veneration is shown to a brothel than to my Holy Church.”⁶¹

Pseudo-Birgitta was an important presence in the renowned *Pronosticatio* of the German astrologer Johann Lichtenberger, which studied the influences of a conjunction of planets in November 1484. This work appeared in Germany in around 1488 in two editions, with texts respectively in Latin and in German. Lichtenberger cites Birgitta as one of his sources alongside the Sibyl, Daniel, Joachim of Fiore, and others.⁶² Both the Latin text and a vernacular version proved very popular south of the Alps: copies survive of fourteen editions printed in northern Italy between about 1490–92 and 1532.⁶³ Birgitta is depicted in woodcuts in the printed editions, and she and the Sibyl are singled out for mention on some title pages, such as that of Venetian edition printed by Paolo Danza in 1511: *Pronosticatione overo iudicio vulgare, raro e più non udito, lo quale expone, et dichiara prima alcune prophetie de sancta Brigida*

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- 61 Rev. 1v:142.15, in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Denis Searby, ed. Bridget Morris, 4 vols (Oxford: 2006–2012), 2: 255. “Incipe renovare ecclesiam meam, quam ego acquisivi meo proprio sanguine, ut renovetur et spiritualiter reducatur ad pristinum statum suum sanctum, quia iam nunc magis veneratur lupanar quam sancta mea Ecclesia.”
- 62 Reeves, *The Influence*, 347–51; Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: 1990), 3; Jonathan Green, *Printing and Prophecy: Prognostication and Media Change 1450–1550* (Ann Arbor: 2012), 39–55; Giancarlo Petrella, *La “Pronosticatio” di Johannes Lichtenberger: un testo profetico nell’Italia del Rinascimento, con edizione anastatica di Johannes Lichtenberger, Pronosticatione in vulgare, Milano, Giovanni Antonio di Farre, 18 luglio 1500* (Udine: 2010), 26–27. Birgitta is included, along with Vincent Ferrer and others, in a list of prophets in the *Imminente flagello de Italia* (n. p., [between 1515 and 1520]): Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 93.
- 63 Domenico Fava, “La fortuna del pronostico di Giovanni Lichtenberger in Italia nel Quattrocento e nel Cinquecento,” *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* 1930, 126–48; Petrella, *La “Pronosticatio”*, 85–101; Giancarlo Petrella, *L’impresa tipografica di Battista Farfengo a Brescia* (Florence: 2018), 155–57. A version in London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, MS 425, put together in Ferrara in 1504, is discussed in Michela Del Savio, “Molte altre anchora profetie abiano veduto: alcuni testi profetici ‘intrusi’ nell’unica copia manoscritta conosciuta della *Pronosticazione* del Lichtenberger,” *Laboratoire italien* 21 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/laboratoireitalien/2007>.

e dela Sybilla, et de molti altri sancti homini, e de molti sapienti astrologhi. In a concluding note, a soldier called Sebastiano explains that he had bought a copy of the prognostication around eighteen years previously from a boy on the Rialto, and he was now financing this edition.⁶⁴ One of the prophecies attributed to Birgitta in Lichtenberger's *Pronosticatio* foresees the destruction of the Church by the Germans. The passage begins: "Whence Birgitta in the book of Revelations [says]: Under the great eagle who will foster fire in its breast, the church will be trodden down and laid waste."⁶⁵ A translation of "Sub aquila grandi" was included in the *Profetie cavate d'uno opuscolo stampato già trent'anni passati*, printed around the 1530s, which extracted sections from Lichtenberger's *Pronosticatio* without naming the author; in this context the imperial Eagle was evidently seen as responsible for the Sack of Rome in 1527.⁶⁶ A pro-Germanic "Birgittine" prophecy begins "Rex pudicus facie" ("The king of modest face"): here the "Rex impudicus facie" prophesied in Daniel 8. 23 is transformed so that, in the words of Marjorie Reeves, "the wicked tyrant becomes the godly chastiser" who will also reform the Church. Lichtenberger says this text is "sung" by Birgitta.⁶⁷ He attributes to "the revelation" of Birgitta a prophecy according to which the Lily (representing France) will come out of the West, unite with the great Eagle, and move against a Lion in the East.⁶⁸

Giovanni Battista Nazari of Brescia refers to the *Revelations* in his *Discorso della futura et sperata vittoria contra il Turcho, estratto da i sacri profeti et da altre profetie, prodigii, et pronostici, et di nuovo dato in luce*, printed in two editions of 1570 (Modena: Paolo Gadaldini and brothers, and Venice: Sigismondo Bordogna) – very good timing, because 1571 saw the Christians' success at the Battle of Lepanto. Nazari's detailed discussion of prophecies includes a section

64 Petrella, *La "Pronosticatio"*, 19–20, 65–67, 93–94.

65 "Inde B[r]igida libro Revelationum Sub aquila grandi que ignem fovebit in pectore conculcabitur ecclesia et vastabitur:" cited from Lichtenberger, *Prognosticatio* ([Heidelberg: Printer of the Vocabularius, after 1 April 1488]), fol. B2v. See Reeves, *The Influence*, 338–39; Petrella, *La "Pronosticatio"*, 124. Jean Lemaire de Belges referred to the *Pronosticatio* when he mentioned "Sub aquila grandi:" see his *Traicté de la différence des schismes et des conciles de l'Église*, ed. Jennifer Britnell (Geneva: 1997), 227, and Jennifer Britnell, "Jean Lemaire de Belges and Prophecy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 42 (1979): 144–66 (153–54).

66 Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 176–77.

67 Lichtenberger, *Prognosticatio*, fol. B4r; Petrella, *La "Pronosticatio"*, 128. See Reeves, *The Influence*, 339.

68 Lichtenberger, *Prognosticatio*, fol. C6v; Petrella, *La "Pronosticatio"*, 148. See Reeves, *The Influence*, 339–40. Birgitta is mentioned in the *Mirabilis liber*, a pro-French prophetic compilation, but I have excluded it from this survey because the "Rome" edition of 1524 was probably printed in Lyon. See Jennifer Britnell and Derek Stubbs, "The *Mirabilis liber*, its Compilation and Influence," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 49 (1986): 126–49 (143, 146).

“On the aforesaid victory, according to various prophecies of St. Birgitta and others” (“Della sudetta vittoria, secondo varie profetie di S. Brigida, et altri”), that makes frequent reference to prophets such as the Sibyls and Joachim of Fiore together with this reference to Birgitta:

Coming then to talking of the hoped-for victory, I say it is at hand since, when God speaks to his only-begotten son (as in the Revelations of St. Birgitta, 3:33), he says, in truth, because it is not right that you should be without a bride and that you should take only one who is very chaste, therefore I shall send my friends, that is, Christians with my Vicar, and they will take for you a new bride, fair in appearance, honourable in conduct, and desirable, and they will lead her into your bedroom (that is, the Church).⁶⁹

However, *Rev.* III.33, in which the Son of God shows the bride (Birgitta) “through the example of two men how he judges by the interior and not by the exterior,” does not correspond with Nazari’s summary.⁷⁰

Ottavia Niccoli has illustrated some of the ways in which pseudo-Birgittine prophecies were read in the early Cinquecento among persons of whom some might have been only moderately well educated. An entry made by Tommaso di Silvestro, a canon of the cathedral of Orvieto, in his diary in 1504 reminds us that, for the prophecies in verse, we must also take account of sung performance:

Jaco de Colavabbo, a man seventy-five years old, a witty man, died today, Monday 1 January 1504. He was at home after dinner by the fireside. He was singing to himself the prophecy of St. Birgitta with great festivity and cheerfulness. He was taken ill suddenly. He was struck by apoplexy and died as a result.⁷¹

69 “Venendo poi al dir della sperata vittoria dico quella esser propinqua, percioché parlando il Sig. Iddio a Christo suo unigenito figliuolo (come nelle Revel. di S. brigida lib. 3 cap. 33) dice, in verità, perché non sta bene che tu sia senza sposa, et non haver quella se non castissima, però io manderò gl’amici miei cioè Christiani col Vicario mio, i quali pigliaranno a te nova sposa venusta d’aspetto, de costumi honesta, et desiderabile, et la condurranno nella camera tua (cioè Chiesa)” (fol. Bir in the Modenese edition).

70 *The Revelations of St. Birgitta*, 1: 323–34.

71 “Jaco de Colavabbo, homo de septantacinque anni, homo facetio, mori ogie che fu lunedì, a dì primo de Jannaro et dell’anno 1504. Stava in casa de pò pranso ad canto al fuoco. Cantava da sè stesso la prophetia de Sancta Brigida con grande festa et allegrezza. Gle se fece male cussi in un subito. Gle caschè la jocciola et morì de facto.” *Ephemerides Urbevetanae dal Codice Vaticano Urbinatense 1745 (aa. 1482–1514)*, ed. Luigi Fumi, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, n.s., vol. 15, part 5, vol. 2 (Bologna: 1922), 241. See Niccoli, *Prophecy*

While Jaco enjoyed his singing, others scrutinized these prophecies anxiously in the context of current warfare. The chapter by Jessica Goethals and Anna Wainwright in this volume shows in detail how pseudo-Birgittine prophecies were read in the context of the warfare between Italian states and European powers. They note, for instance, that Marin Sanudo recorded in his diary on 14 June 1509, a month after the battle of Agnadello, that a man was arrested and tortured for selling prophecies of St. Birgitta around the city of Venice. Her predictions are mentioned just before those of Merlin in the *Hystorie nove: dove se contiene la venuta de lo imperatore per incoronarsi: et de le grande cose che hano ad essere: et come stava Milano con il campo di Spagna dentro et quello di Francia fuora cum la sua grande et infinita possanza* ([Turin: Giovanni Angelo and Bernardino Silva, 1524?]). This short poem in *terza rima* describes the conflict between the Imperial and French forces in Lombardy around 1524, and it glorifies Charles v: “This is that divine and sacred Charlemagne that Birgitta predicted in her writings, who would extinguish the Gallican fury.”⁷² On 19 May 1527, a few days after the Sack of Rome carried out by Imperial troops, Tommasino Lancellotti, a Modenese notary, recorded in his chronicle: “And on the said day, today, I, Tommasino, have seen a prophecy of St. Birgitta belonging to Antonio Rococciola that tells of the deaths in Rome, so that it is now said they were made by the pope who is to be persecuted as he now is by foreign troops.”⁷³

Perceptions of Birgitta in Other Works

References to Birgitta in other writings of the Italian Renaissance show that she evoked divergent views. For some, she was an austere widow of great holiness. She is cited as an example of moral rigour in one of the tales of Agnolo

and People, 18; Ottavia Niccoli, “Manoscritti, oralità, stampe popolari: viaggi dei testi profetici nell’Italia del Rinascimento,” *Italian Studies* 66 (2011): 177–92 (183).

72 “Questo hè quel divo e sacro Carlo Mano | Qual Brigida predisse in le sue carte | Che estinguerbe il furore galichano.” Bersano Begey and Dondi, *Le cinquecentine piemontesi*, II, no. 723.

73 “E a di ditto questo di ho visto mi Thomasin una prefetia de S.ta Brigida che ha M.ro Antonio Rocozolo che nara della mortalità de Roma, del modo che al presente se dice essere fate del Papa che ha a essere perseguitato como è al presente de zente estranee.” Tommasino de’ Bianchi detto de’ Lancellotti, *Cronaca modenese*, ed. Carlo Borghi and others, 12 vols (Parma: 1862–84), 2: 224. See Niccoli, “Profezie in piazza,” 500; Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 3–4, 173, 176; Niccoli, “Manoscritti, oralità, stampe popolari,” 190–91. On the years 1525–30, see also Juan Carlos D’Amico, “De Pavie à Bologne: la prophétie comme arme de la politique impériale pendant les guerres d’Italie,” in *La Prophétie comme arme de guerre des pouvoirs, xv^e–xvii^e siècles*, ed. Augustin Redondo (Paris: 2000), 51–61.

Firenzuola's *I ragionamenti*, completed by 1525, when the narrator describes the persona adopted by a devious widow:

There was at that very time in Florence a young widow, beautiful and fair and of a most pleasing manner who [...] freely gave her love to those youths who were not only handsome but wealthy; and so, when she had become a widow and before, she had plucked the wings of more than a couple of them, while however showing herself, to anyone who did not know her very closely, as a new St. Birgitta.⁷⁴

Giovan Giorgio Trissino recounts in his epic poem *La Italia liberata da Gotthi* how in the 6th century Elpidia, princess of Taranto, was allowed by Belisarius to become a hermit, changing her name to Rigida and then to Brigida, so that she prefigures the Swedish saint:

And then she did not leave the temple until she had been walled into that hole, where she lived afterwards for more than twenty years, and she changed her baptismal name and was called Rigida, on account of the hard and rigid life she chose. And this name, too, was partly changed, and she was then called Brigida the Holy.⁷⁵

However, the figure of Birgitta could also be viewed with wariness, even though she had been canonized, because of the prophecies that were falsely attributed to her and set her alongside mythical figures such as the Sibyl or Merlin.⁷⁶ Girolamo Savonarola felt that he needed to defend himself in

74 “[E] gli era a punto in quel tempo dentro da Firenze una vedova giovane, bella e vaga e di piacevolissima maniera la quale [...] facilmente donava l’amor suo a quei giovani i quali non solo erano begli della persona ma ricchi della borsa; e così, poi che era rimasa vedova e innanzi ne aveva tose l’ale a più d’un paio, mostrandosi però a chi non la conosceva molto per lo minuto una santa Brigida novella.” Agnolo Firenzuola, *I ragionamenti*, 2.6, in *Opere*, ed. Delmo Maestri (Turin: UTET, 1977), 202–03.

75 “Et ella alhor non se n’uscì del tempio, | fin che non fu murata entr’a quel buco, | ove visse dapoi più di vent’anni, | e cangiò il nome suo ch’ebbe al battesimo, | e fu nomata Rigida, per quella | vita sì dura, e rigida che elesse. | E questo nome ancor cangiossi in parte, | e fu poi detta Brigida la Santa.” Giovan Giorgio Trissino, *La Italia liberata da Gotthi* (Rome: Valerio and Luigi Dorico, 1547; Venice: Tolomeo Ianicolo, 1548), 23.71–78, fols. kkk6v–kkk7r, spelling modernized.

76 The authority of Birgitta's *Revelations* was also questioned by some in the 1430s at the Council of Basel: see Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden*, 221–23, and Anna Fredriksson, “Challenging and Championing St. Birgitta's *Revelations* at the Councils of Constance and Basel,” in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 103–31.

his *Compendium revelationum* against the accusation that he had used her *Revelations* as a source of prophecies:

The Tempter said: I have heard that you have the *Revelations* of St. Birgitta and of Abbot Joachim and of many others with which you foretell these future things. I answered: I promise you, father, that I take no pleasure in readings such as these, nor have I ever read the *Revelations* of St. Birgitta, and little of Abbot Joachim, and almost nothing, especially about prophecies and future matters.⁷⁷

When the Franciscan friar Giorgio Benigni Salviati was urged to make use of prophetic texts in a letter of 1502 from a follower of Savonarola, Ubertino Risaliti, he implied that he was not in the habit of reading texts such as prophecies attributed to Birgitta: "I am not very familiar with the prophecy of St. Birgitta that is commonly found, but I shall look at it for your sake."⁷⁸ In his *Sei giornate*, Pietro Aretino makes one of his characters tell of how she inveigled nuns with her knowledge of what was going on in public and private life and her ability even to interpret the prophecies of Birgitta and a fictitious friar:

In two days' time I had infatuated all the nuns with my talk. I told them all the world's most recent intrigues; and at times acting crazy, at times wise, blessed was the nun who could butter me up most. I told them what people thought of Milan, and who would become Duke; I told them which faction, the imperial or the French, the Pope supported; I preached the grandeur of the Venetians, and how rich and wise they are. Then I went into detail about this woman and that man, telling them about their lovers, and who was pregnant and who wasn't bearing children, and who the men were who treated their wives well or badly. I even explained to them the inner meaning of the prophecies of Saint Bridget and Fra Giacomone da Pietrapana.⁷⁹

77 "Dixe il Tentatore: Io ho inteso che tu hai le revelatione di sancta Brigida et dello Abbate Ioachino et di molti altri con le quale tu vai prenuntiando queste cose future. Risposi: Io vi promecto padre che di queste tale lectione io non mi dilecto: nè ho lecto mai le revelatione di Sancta Brigida, et poco dello Abbate Ioachino, et quasi nulla, maxime di prophetie et cose future." Girolamo Savonarola, *Compendium revelationum* (Florence: Francesco Bonaccorsi, 18 August 1495), fol. c3r.

78 "La prophetia de Sancta Brigida *que vulgariter reperitur* non ho troppo gram pratica, pure la vedrò per vostro amore." Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, MS 402, cited in Rusconi, *Profezia e profeti*, 179.

79 Pietro Aretino, *Aretino's Dialogues*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: 1972), 346–47, with a slight modification. "In due di imbertonai tutte le moniche de la mia ciancia: io

There was no complete dichotomy between the circulation in Italy of authentic works by Birgitta and that of spurious prayers and prophecies attributed to her. Some of her writings warned of possible divine punishment, and these aspects could be foregrounded by her followers, as in the extracts from the *Revelations* printed in 1485 and 1518. Suor Cleofe Lenzi copied part of the *Revelations* alongside prophecies that were falsely claimed as Birgitta's. However, the two traditions remained distinct for the most part, and above all they were different in nature. Access to the authentic works of Birgitta depended on manuscript more than on print, but it was evidently sufficient to foster admiration for her as a holy widow to whom God gave revelations. On the other hand, the texts of pseudo-Birgitta were transmitted widely among all social classes, and prophecies set in verse may well have reached the illiterate through performance in song. It seems likely that both the content of these spurious prophecies and the manner of their circulation influenced the unfavourable perceptions of Birgitta implied by figures as different as Savonarola and Aretino.

gli contava le più nuove trame del mondo; e facendo ora la matta e ora la savia, beata chi mi poteva più accarezzare. Io gli diceva quello che si pensava di Milano, e chi ne sarebbe duca; le certificava se il papa era imperiale o francioso; gli predicava la grandezza dei Veneziani, e come son savi e come son ricchi; poi gli entrava ne la tale e nel tale, contandogli i loro amici, e gli diceva chi era pregna e chi non faceva figliuoli, e qual fosse colui che trattava bene e male la moglie; e gli spianava fino a le profezie di santa Brigida e di fra Giacobone da Pietrapana." Pietro Aretino, *Sei giornate*, ed. Giovanni Aquilecchia (Bari: 1969), 318.

Making Birgitta Italian: The Time of Translation

Jane Tylus

“Come in una femmina sono fatte tante cose?” “How could so many things have been done by a female?”¹ This is the question that then-Cancelliere della Repubblica Fiorentina, Piero di Ser Mino da Montevarchi, was mulling over as he lay, dying, in 1410. Heir to the famous Coluccio Salutati, Piero was a person of consequence in early 15th-century Tuscany, and the question he was pondering was no doubt that of others as well. For the “femmina” was Birgitta of Sweden. Her writings had inspired a group of Piero’s fellow Tuscans, including a close friend of Salutati, to found the first monastery devoted to the Birgittine Order in Italy, the Monastero del Paradiso. Barely a mile southeast of Florence’s walls, the convent had already attracted two of Piero’s brothers. Yet when Piero “heard and read about all the great marvels God had accomplished through [Birgitta], and in her,”² he could not resist entertaining some doubts.

As Satan comes to take his soul, provoking Piero’s screams and others’ stupefaction, “a venerable lady appears: Saint Birgitta” (“una venerabile donna, la quale era Santa Brigida”). Given Piero’s skepticism moments earlier, her gaze is “full of disdain, as though she were reproaching him for his lack of faith and that bit of doubt he’d entertained regarding her deeds.” Nonetheless, he feels great comfort in her presence, and for good reason: when Satan sees her

1 *Orazioni di Santa Brigida principessa di Svezia*, ed. Francesco Grottanelli (Siena: 1867), 34, from the section “Come uno uomo famoso e notabile di Firenze, posto in estremo di morte per infermità apparvegli Santa Brigida, e scampollo, come quivi leggerai.” Translations from Italian are my own unless otherwise noted.

2 “Udendo e leggendo le grandi meraviglie le quali Dio per lei ed in lei aveva fatte.” *Orazioni di Santa Brigida*, 34. The line implies that Piero was already familiar with Birgitta’s works. He could certainly have accessed them in Latin even as the Italian translation made in Siena in 1399 on which this essay will focus may have been available in Florence by 1410. It’s of considerable interest that Piero di Ser Mino’s question about the “femmina” echoes the rhetorical question made by Birgitta’s confessor Magister Mathias in his prologue to Book 1 of the *Revelations*: “Quis enim, nisi eiusdem spiritus gracia preuentus, credere poterit, quod Christus, residens in celo, loquatur femine, in hac mortalitate adhuc degenti?” (Indeed, unless guided by the grace of the same spirit, who could believe that Christ, who resides in heaven, would speak to a woman [*femine*] still living in this mortal condition?). Prologus 18. English translations from *The Revelations of Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Denis Searby, with introductions and notes by Bridget Morris, 4 vols. (Oxford: 2006–2015), 1, 49.

standing beside Piero, he takes flight. And then a voice says to Piero, in Latin, “Hic est mulier que te liberavit, ne Sathan te opprimeret” (“This is that lady who freed you from Satan, so that he would not harm you”).³ She disappears, and Piero is immediately cured. He relinquishes his prestigious appointment as chancellor and dedicates all he has to Il Paradiso, where he goes to live with his brothers and spend the rest of his days.

Almost a century after this “miracolo,” we have the considerably less dramatic conversion of another humanist: Aldus Manutius, printer and businessman of early modern Venice who by the year 1500 had made his name publishing the great classics of ancient Greek and Latin. For his second work in the Italian vernacular – and his first (and as it would turn out, only) by a woman, with the exception of several lyrics of Sappho – he turned to the letters of Catherine of Siena. As he says in his dedicatory letter, over 350 of Catherine’s epistles, “suppressed for some 120 years,” and left “unknown and hidden,” have now been recovered by printers ready and able to do God’s will.⁴

Catherine’s letters, possessed of such force that they not only exhort their readers to do good works but compel them to do so (“constrengono”), appeared in the dark days of September 1500. Alexander VI, the Borgia pope praised by Machiavelli, is on the throne as “the infidels take up their swords and march their marvelous armies across land and sea with the intent of destroying the faith of Christ.”⁵ Given the urgency of Catherine’s voice, her letters seem to have been written to the popes, cardinals, and leaders “of today,” and Aldus considered it his job to make them heard and acted upon. Hence his dedication to a man he had never met and would never meet, Francesco Piccolomini, nephew of the humanist pope Pius II, and soon to become Pius III. It is a volume characterized most signally by its usefulness or “utilità” in these difficult times, and in fact, it was “non senza costituzione divina” that the letters are coming to light only in 1500. Thanks to the imminent threat of the Turk to the

3 *Orazioni di Santa Birigida*, 35. The Latin is translated by the author of the account as “Questa è quella donna che t’ha liberato da Satan, ché non t’abbia oppresso.”

4 “Soppresse già circa centovinti anni”; “incognite e ascose”. In *Epistole devotissime de S. Catharina da Siena* (Venice: 1500), f.iv.

5 “... l’infideli sono in arme con stupendo exercito et apparato per mare et per terra con animo de destrure la fede di Christo”; *Epistole*, f.iv. In his biography of Aldus, Martin Lowry calls attention to the “collective self-reproach” in which Venetians engaged after their loss of Modon and of the fortress at Lepanto to the Ottomans, blaming the defeat “on the just anger of the Almighty.” “An unsigned letter to the doge denounced public venality and private immorality, calling for repentance before the tide of Turkish success could be checked. It was read aloud in the council-chambers, and published by the vigilant Patriarch Donà. Venice was embarking on a moral, as well as a military crusade.” Martin Lowry, *The World of Aldus Manutius* (Ithaca: 1979), 124–25.

Venetian state and current pope, for whom Pius II may serve as a not-so-gentle reminder of better days gone by, Catherine becomes central to the moment in a fashion that is not without meaning for our humanist who had spent his career demonstrating the utility of works considered long-lost.⁶ Aldus's insistence on the disappearance of Catherine's words since her death (not entirely true, thanks to the long manuscript tradition and a recent publication of several dozen of her letters) gives new urgency to those words, as he infers that this woman's writings might prompt reform in the spheres where it is needed most.

On the surface these two accounts appear to have little in common. Piero di Ser Mino goes from wondering about Birgitta as a (mere) *femmina* to recognizing her powers as a *mulier* – a *donna*. While we have no such narrative for Aldus, he too seeks to create the presence of a forceful woman who can engage with the leaders of his own time as well as her own. Along with a full-page image of Catherine that will be discussed towards the end of this essay, the stature of the large folio volume suggests through its sheer heft that she is a woman worth reckoning with. Both hinge on recognizing these women's gifts in moments of crisis, personal or global as they may be, gifts long concealed: the truths contained in Catherine's letters, the powerful nature of Birgitta's sanctity. Birgitta reveals a perhaps exacerbated patience with Piero's mild if continued obstinacy, while Catherine could fancifully be said to have patiently awaited the invention of print to bring to the world her words – and God's.

This connection, moreover, is not a casual one. In some ways, Aldus's publication of Catherine's letters represents Birgitta's return to Venice, albeit in a new guise. Aldus's comments to Piccolomini make of Catherine nothing short of a prophet, the charismatic religious figure with which Birgitta was identified throughout her long career. Catherine and her hagiographers alike studiously avoided the term, as did Pius II in his bull of canonization. But as Aldus's Catherine takes on characteristics long associated with Birgitta, we see a Catherine emerge whose words are about to be heard by the right people. She thus belongs in the same category as a Birgitta whose voice was increasingly associated with instances of prophecy more broadly in the early modern period, as the essay by Jessica Goethals and Anna Wainwright in this volume compellingly lays out. The humanist concept of finding words long gone missing – or ignored – is thus neatly connected to the prophetic stance

6 Aldus would weigh in at other moments of his publishing career in regard to the ever-increasing Turkish threat, and nowhere more explicitly than in a letter to Pope Leo X, whom he urges in 1514 in the preface of Plato's complete works "to ensure for your Christians everywhere peace ... Now alas, they wage ferocious wars against each other and diminish with hostile armaments the powerful forces of Christianity. It would be better that the troublesome Turks perished by them" ("quo graves Turcae Melius perirent"). Aldus Manutius, *The Greek Classics*, ed. and tr. N.G. Wilson (Cambridge: 2016), 244–45.

defined by Birgitta herself in her *Revelations*. We will see that stance defended by Alfonso de Jaén, one of Birgitta's confessors responsible for compiling the final text of her *Revelations* – an editorial process not unlike that in which Aldus engaged – and arguing for Birgitta's sanctity prior to her canonization in 1391.⁷

But the connection between Birgitta and Aldus's Catherine is also geographical. Birgitta "began" her editorial life in Venice, where the Sienese Dominican Tommaso Caffarini spent three decades advocating for Catherine's sainthood. The scriptorium that Caffarini assembled in the church of San Domenico was a bustling hub for the production of manuscripts by and about Catherine, including Raymond of Capua's hagiographic masterpiece, the so-called *Legenda maior*.⁸ Caffarini wrote an abridged version of Raymond's hagiography, typically referred to as the *Legenda minor*, as well as a long treatise called the *Libellus de supplemento*, containing material "supplemental" to Raymond's work. And here is where Birgitta made one of her first Venetian appearances. Caffarini devoted a substantial section of his *Libellus* to describing the stigmata that Catherine received while in Pisa in 1375. In that context he references Birgitta, twice, by way of a detail from one of the early accounts of her life:⁹ "On Fridays she would pour burning drops from a wax candle onto her bare flesh, leaving wounds. If sometimes the wounds would heal before the next Friday, she would scratch them open with her fingernails.... This she did on account of the Passion of Jesus Christ." The reference is accompanied by an illustration in the manuscript of Caffarini's *Libellus de Supplemento*.¹⁰ But Birgitta was present in Venice in other ways. Significantly, the manuscript in

7 Birgitta's canonization of 1391 did not mean that such a defense was over. See Fausto Arici's discussion of the role of Juan de Torquemada in establishing a "safer" version of female prophecy that would make Birgitta more acceptable to her critics. Fausto Arici, "Juan de Torquemada e il paradigma di verificabilità della profezia femminile," in *Il velo, la penna e la parola*, ed. Gabriella Zari and Gianni Festa (Florence: 2009), 265–74. The literature on Birgitta's reputation as prophet is vast; see Unn Falkeid's chapter "The Prophetic Widow," in her book *The Avignon Papacy Contested. An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge, MA: 2017): 121–45; and Claire Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Suffolk: 2001).

8 On Caffarini's scriptorium, see the introduction to the vernacular edition of the *Supplementum* and Gaudenz Freuler, "Andrea di Bartolo, Tommaso Caffarini, and Sienese Dominicans in Venice," *Art Bulletin* 69 (1987), 570–86, especially 571–73.

9 "The Life of Blessed Birgitta" by Prior Peter and Master Peter in *Birgitta of Sweden, Life and Selected Revelations*, ed. Marguerite T. Harris (Mahwah: 1989), par. 83; 96: "It was her custom too, on Fridays, to pour on her bare flesh flaming drops from a burning candle so that they left wounds remaining"

10 For the text, see the modern edition of the *Libellus de supplemento: Legende prolixè virginis beate Catherine de Senis*, ed. Giulia Cavallini and Imelda Foralosso (Rome: 1974), 2.7.1; 124. On the marginal illustrations done by Cristoforo Cortese for Caffarini's personal

which the miracle of Piero di Ser Mino's deliverance from death is first found was crafted in Caffarini's scriptorium. In addition to containing a *vita* (abbreviated) of Birgitta, along with her miracles – capped off by that most recent one regarding Piero – it also contains a “Leggenda di Caterina,” along with a copy of Caffarini's *Legenda minor* and a sermon in praise of St. Catherine, both in Italian translation. Moreover, both “leggende” open with images of their respective saints by the same illuminator – most likely Cristoforo Cortese – and bearing striking similarities. The likenesses suggest the affinity that the copyists sought to produce between Birgitta and Italy's own holy woman, whose followers were aspiring in that very moment (most likely in or around 1411, shortly after Piero's dramatic account) to bring to sanctity.¹¹

Yet the real bond between the two women and one that will take us far from Venice for the next section of this essay is a Sieneese notary, Cristofano di Gano Guidini, a close follower of Catherine during her lifetime. By the time Caffarini visited him in Siena in 1398, eighteen years after Catherine's death, he had become an oblate in Siena's Spedale di Santa Maria following the deaths of his wife and children. During this visit, Caffarini received from Guidini several manuscripts of Catherine's letters. We cannot know what else the two men discussed during Caffarini's return to Siena. But the following year, the first full Italian translation of Birgitta's *Revelations* appeared in Siena, thanks to funding provided by Guidini and a friend, as is clear from the colophon of a two-volume manuscript now in Siena's Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati: “This book belongs to the compagnia of the Virgin Mary of Siena. Ser Cristofano di Gano, notary of the hospital, enabled it to be written (“El quale fece scrivere”) through his funding and that of Meio di Giacomo, who went to the sepulcher of Christ and did not return in 1399. Pray to God for them both.”¹² While this

manuscript of the treatise of the stigmata, see Freuler, “Andrea di Bartolo, Tommaso Caffarini, and Sieneese Dominicans in Venice,” 575–77.

- 11 See Diega Giunta, “La dimensione dottrinale della raffigurazione di S. Caterina da Siena,” in *Catharina: testi ed immagini di S. Caterina da Siena nelle raccolte casanatensi*, ed. Giuliana Cavallini and Angela Adriana Cavarra (Milan:1998), 365, which includes the illustrations of both miniatures (“Leggenda abbreviate di santa Caterina”; “Leggenda di santa Brigida di Svezia”, T.11.6). Also see the initial chapter of Giunta's book *L'iconografia di Santa Caterina* (Rome: 1988), entitled “Dal transito ai primi decenni del xv secolo.” The *terminus ultra quem* of 1411 would fit with Silvia Nocentini's hypothesis that the translator of Caffarini's *Legenda minor*, Stefano Maconi, returned to Italy – specifically Pavia – that same year, after having lived in Seitz (Slovenia) for a number of years as prior general of the Carthusians; see Nocentini, “The Transmission of Birgittine and Catherinian Works within the Mystical Tradition,” in *Sanctity and Female Authorship: Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (New York: 2020), 110, 146.
- 12 Cited in Domenico Pezzini, “The Italian Reception of Birgittine Writings,” *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into Medieval European Vernaculars*, ed. Bridget Morris and Veronica O'Mara (Turnhout: 2002), 188.

manuscript of the translated *Revelations* was destined for use by the Compagnia della Vergine Maria, a group of devotees and penitents connected to Siena's Spedale that dates back to the 13th century, it was hardly limited to circulation in the Spedale where the Compagnia met.¹³ As Brian Richardson notes in his essay in this volume, it quickly became the ur-text for many subsequent manuscript copies of Birgitta's work, in whole and mostly in part, that flooded convents and monasteries throughout Italy; there are no fewer than twenty extant codices, most of them from Tuscany.¹⁴ Particularly notable about the Sienese translation, aside from its completeness – the next such effort would not occur until the 17th century – is an introduction to Birgitta's opus by the Italian translator. Recently transcribed and published by Domenico Pezzini, this fascinating preface is crucial in determining the usefulness of Birgitta to Italy – and vice versa.¹⁵ And while we cannot know with certainty the identity of Birgitta's first translator into Italian, the notary Guidini's role in procuring the translation is unquestioned. So is his role in translating Catherine's *Dialogo della divina Provvidenza* into Latin several years earlier. Scholars such as Silvia Nocentini believe there is an excellent chance that Guidini himself undertook much of the translation of Birgitta into Italian and wrote the preface; and that he may have used a copy of the *Revelations* brought from Venice by Caffarini.¹⁶ Thus while questions remain, he will be referenced as the translator in the following pages.

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- 13 Although it was still listed in the Compagnia's records from 1492, in the *Capitoli della Compagnia dei Disciplinati di Siena*, ed. Luciano Banchi (Siena: 1866), 107: "Due libri in due volumi in vulgare dell'OPERA DI S. BRIGIDA, scritto a penna, bona lettera, in carta pecorina."
- 14 On the details of the translation's success, see Michele Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgarizzamenti e riscritture profetiche," *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia* 73.1 (2019), 69–84; 73–76; Pezzini, "The Italian Reception of Birgittine Writings," 188–89; and more recently, Pezzini, "Il primo volgarizzamento italiano delle Rivelazioni e degli altri scritti di S. Brigida," *Santa Brigida, Napoli, L'Italia*, ed. Olle Ferm Olle Ferm, Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese, and Marcello Rotili (Naples: 2009), 61–73. Nuns at Il Paradiso monastery in Florence would undertake several copies of this manuscript, as well as an apparently new, partial translation, according to Lodone, by one Suor Cleofe in the late 1400s.
- 15 Pezzini, "Il primo volgarizzamento italiano." For a more extensive commentary on vernacular translations of Birgitta's works in late medieval and early modern Europe, see the "Introduction" by Bridget Morris and Veronica O'Mara in *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Morris and O'Mara, 1–24.
- 16 My thanks to Professor Nocentini for her consultation with me about this possibility, along with her comments more generally on this essay. See her succinct introduction to Guidini with specific references to what she calls his "process of double translation," as he worked back and forth between Latin and Italian throughout his lifetime. Nocentini, "The Transmission of Birgittine and Catherinian Works," in *Sanctity and Felame Authorship*, ed. Oen and Falkeid, esp. 101–105.

These connections between Catherine's followers and Birgitta's works have long been noted. Yet as I'll indicate in the following remarks, there are uncanny echoes of Birgitta and her first Italian translator in Aldus's preface as well. These are echoes suggestive not of any direct influence but of a way of thinking about the textual transmission of two powerful women writers shared by – possibly – the notary Cristofano di Gano Guidini who would dedicate himself to the charitable work of Siena's Spedale after losing his wife and children to the plague, and the humanist whose publications prior to Catherine's letters had been, with one exception, Greek and Latin "classics." These parallels in turn speak to the potential for reform that is at the heart of this volume: reform that hinges on acts of translation, whether it be the translation or "turn" from Latin to Italian, Sweden to Rome, heaven – the source of revelations – to earth. And to return to Piero di Ser Mino, there is also the translation of the "femmina" into the *mulier* and *donna* whose authority is acknowledged by virtue of others engaging with and acting on her words.

The Sieneese translation of Birgitta's work, and the act of translation more generally, will be at the center of the remainder of this essay. And translation as a practice was moreover critical to both the spiritual practices of late medieval Italians, and the burgeoning secular practices of humanism. Indeed, they are arguably interconnected. If Piero di Ser Mino leaves the humanist's pursuit behind when he devotes himself to the life of a Brigittine monk, Aldus integrates the language of the *donna santa* into his humanistic project. The language of prophetic voice used by Birgitta and accentuated by our Sieneese translator provides us with an important analogy to the discourse of humanism practiced by Petrarch, Aldus, and others:¹⁷ words that have been waiting for the right time to be revealed. With respect to Birgitta, that "right time" could happen only in Italy – and only through a translation into Italian.

"The Slowness of Speech"

Walter Benjamin has been one of the most influential theorists of translation – and a theorist whose views of the process were in turn influenced by his deep engagement with the concept of messianic time. This concept is rooted in

17 See in particular Petrarch's reflections on his recovery of Cicero's letters and his comment on how he in turn responds to Cicero "as if he were a friend living in my time ... forgetting as it were the gap of time ("quasi temporum oblitus")," quoted in William Kennedy, *The Site of Petrarchism: Early Modern National Sentiment in Italy, France, and England* (Baltimore: 2003), 24.

Jewish mystical thought as reflected in the Pauline notion of salvation, as Giorgio Agamben has argued: “The messianic event has already happened, salvation has already been achieved ... but nevertheless, in order to be truly fulfilled, this implies an additional time.”¹⁸ Agamben quotes the Israeli philosopher Gershom Scholem, who characterizes Messianic time as “a life lived in deferment,” “a kind of border zone, or even ‘a transitional time between two periods.’”¹⁹ Translation acknowledges this deferral even as it becomes an illusory example of messianic presence, the delayed or deferred meaning finally able to realize itself in and through the time of a foreign language. Or as Benjamin puts it, through the act of translation, “the life of the original attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding” – as though translators were prophets, recognizing the “unfolding” still to be done, charged as they are with “the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.”²⁰ The Italian vernacular was going through its own “birth pangs” in the late 14th century. Might these considerations then have been relevant for our Sieneese translator of Birgitta’s oeuvre – full of prophetic revelations that need time and space to properly unfold and be understood, in a way that translation is in a unique position to enable?

Cristofano Guidini would have been a good bet for such a translation. As he records in his *Memoirs*, written sometime in the late 1390s, he learned his “gramatica” – his Latin – early on, thanks to the intervention of kindly relatives, and eventually becomes the official *Notaio* of various Capitani del Popolo and various offices in the Banchi de’Notari and the Biccherna. But he also had the good fortune to have come to Siena as a young man at the same time that “God drew forth into the world a new star... the venerable Catherine.”²¹ “I held her and hold her in the greatest devotion,” he writes, and decides after her death to translate her “Libro de la divina dottrina”, better known today as her *Dialogo della divina provvidenza*, which he had penned as a scribe while Catherine dictated her ecstatic conversations with God: “an amazing thing, since from the time of Moses we have not seen God the Father speaking with anyone, save

18 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: 2005), 69.

19 Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 69.

20 Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: 1969), 255–56.

21 “Memorie di Ser Cristofano di Galgano Guidini da Siena, scritte da lui medesimo nel secolo XIV,” *Archivio Storico Italiano* 4 (1843), 31.

for his son, the blessed Christ.”²² He goes on: “the aforesaid book [Catherine’s *Dialogo*] was and is in the vernacular (volgare), and he who knows Latin and has been educated doesn’t willingly read those things written in the vernacular, certainly not as much as they read things in [Latin] letters; thus for myself, and also for the good of others, I got to work and put it into Latin, faithfully and according to the text.”²³ No sooner is his work done – a work that he is anxious to have checked by other experts, modest as he is about his abilities in Latin – than “Misser lo vescovo,” most likely the Archbishop of Siena, begs Guidini to give the *Dialogo* to him so that he could share it in his own town, since “others would gain much more fruit from it if he carried it away with him, than if it remained with me.”²⁴ Only once taken away from Guidini (who in any case still had “lo exemplo” or the original draft) could his translation bear fruit in the world and help “el prossimo” or the neighbors of whom Catherine so frequently spoke.

This idea of something – or someone – needing to leave home in order to bear fruit also runs through the brief preface preceding the translation of Birgitta’s works, offering a strong reason for considering Guidini himself as its author. The opening sentences introduce us deftly to Birgitta’s life, as the author refers three times to the Rome where Birgitta spent much of that life: “This is the book of Madonna Saint Birgitta of the kingdom of Sweden. And she was a princess, she had a husband and children, and remained a widow, and came to Rome, and went to the holy sepulcher and then returned, and left this life in Rome in 1373 on the 23rd of July, then she was canonized in Rome by Pope Boniface IX on the 7th day of October in 1391. To whom God gave marvelous revelations on many occasions and in many places, and through whom he prophesied marvelous things.”²⁵ Thus does Guidini open his remarks by accentuating the

22 “Ebbi e ho in lei grandissima divozione ... cosa mirabile, che da Moisé in qua non si truova che Dio Padre parlasse con persona, ma sì el Figliuolo Cristo Benedetto,” “Memorie di Ser Cristofano di Galgano Guidini da Siena,” 33.

23 “Perché el dicto libro era ed è per volgare, e chi sa gramatica o ha scienza non legge tanto volontieri le cose che sono per volgare, quanto fa quelle per lettera; per me medesimo, e anco per utilità del prossimo, mossimi, e fecilo per lettera puramente secondo el testo...”, “Memorie di Ser Cristofano di Galgano Guidini da Siena,” 38.

24 “... e che molto più frutto n’arebbe el prossimo di là se l’ portava, che se rimanesse qua”, “Memorie di Ser Cristofano di Galgano Guidini da Siena,” 38.

25 “Questo è il libro di madonna sancta Brigida del regno di Svetia. E fue principessa, ebbe marito e figliuoli, e rimase vedova, e venne a Roma, e andò al sepolcro e poi tornò, e passò di questa vita in Roma nel m.ccc.lxxii adì xxiii di luglio, poi fu canonizzata in Roma per papa Bonifatio nono adì vii d’octobre el m.ccc.lxxxii. Alla quale Dio fece in piue tempi e in piue luoghi mirabili revelationi e profetizò mirabili cose.” Pezzini, “Il primo volgarizamento,” 67.

importance of Italy's and Catholicism's true center for Birgitta. She came to Rome, went to Jerusalem, and returned to the Holy City where she died – to then be canonized by Boniface IX. Boniface worked to restore autonomy both to Rome and to the papacy, fortifying the Castel Sant'Angelo and the bridges over the Tiber, and holding two jubilees during his pontificate, increasing the flow of pilgrims to the Holy City.

“Go to Rome.... you shall stay there until you see the supreme pontiff and the emperor there at the same time in Rome, and to them you shall announce my words.”²⁶ Thus did Jesus command the widowed Birgitta, after she had spent two years in a convent following her husband's death. This is what we learn in the *Life of Birgitta*, written by Prior and Master Peter Olafsson. But towards the end of their preface of four folio pages, Birgitta's Italian translator tells a rather different story as to why Birgitta first came to Rome. He explicitly links her departure from Sweden to one of the three qualities a true prophet should possess. In providing such a list, Guidini was following Birgitta's later confessor and editor, Alfonso, in his so-called *Epistola solitarii* or The Hermit's Letter to Kings, where he mentions eight such characteristics. Guidini's three echo Alfonso's, including the third one: humility and patience (“essere humile e patiente”).

Unlike Alfonso, however, Guidini takes a very different path when he describes what, exactly, constituted Birgitta's humility and patience. He speaks for several sentences of the many “reproaches and insults” (“ramorchi e dirisioni”) to which she was subjected: “one person told her, you'd do better spinning fine (sottili) threads than speaking of these insidious (sottile) things.”²⁷ And then it gets more serious. Birgitta was attacked as a princess and member of the royal class for having spoken the truth about the “captives” – the mistreatment of the “heathens” who converted during the Baltic crusades. Her criticisms led to her being persecuted, “and if they had seized her they would have done her much harm. And God commanded her to go to Rome.”²⁸ Guidini then arrives at his own generalization regarding this turn of events:

26 From “The Life of Blessed Birgitta by Prior Peter and Master Peter,” in *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations*, par. 65; 92.

27 “uno diceva: tu faresti meglio a filare sottile che parlare di queste cose sottili,” Pezzini, “Il primo volgarizzamento,” 70 – a charge that takes us back to Piero di Ser Mino accusing Birgitta of being a mere *femmina*. This is the only moment where Birgitta's gender is specifically mentioned in the preface.

28 “... fue perseguitata per modo se l'avessono ragionta harebbono fatto male. E Dio allora li comandò venisse a Roma,” Pezzini, 70. The revelation of the Crusaders' mistreatment of the Baltic captives is in *Rev.* 11:19, 99–100 “[The Crusaders] oppress them with hardships and deprive them of their liberties.”

“One must flee persecution and leave off when continuing one’s work is no longer useful.”²⁹ So does God urge his disciples to flee one city for another in the event of persecution: “Thus go somewhere more useful” (“Cioé andate in luogho più utile”) – a reference to Matthew 10:23: “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.” Jesus himself had to flee, as did St. Paul from Damascus. Several centuries later, St. Benedict fled from his monks when they poisoned his communion wine, an incident recounted by Gregory the Great, who tells us that Benedict miraculously recognized that the wine was poisoned, and swiftly departed from the community of ungrateful, stubborn monks to go to the desert. As Gregory says – and as Guidini translates – “For where someone no longer/ finds himself able to do useful things, they must flee from that place and from persecution, and go somewhere where they are able to be more fruitful.”³⁰

“Piue fructificare” (more fruitful): we hear something along the same lines in the letter that another notary intrigued by the recently-deceased Birgitta, the Florentine Ser Lapo Mazzei, wrote in the early 1390s. Ser Lapo was eager to find a copy of Birgitta’s *Revelations*, “her great book that she left the world,” having heard that through Birgitta, Christ “intends to create a new vineyard that will bear fruit, and he’ll plant it in good soil, with good vines and good workers.”³¹ While the implication is that the vineyard represents the “renovation of a Church that is unbearably broken,” as Michele Lodone writes,³² it is also a direct allusion to the opening words of Birgitta’s rule, “Christ will plant a new vineyard because the old ones have been laid waste” (Prologue, Chapter 2). Both Lapo Mazzei and Guidini – not to mention others such as Petrarch, who had fought vigorously several decades earlier for the pope’s return to Rome – believed that for Christianity and the Church to be “fruitful,” the vineyard had to be in Italy. Guidini makes this explicit at the end of his section on Birgitta’s life where he refers to a revelation from Book v, in which God explicitly says to a Birgitta still in Sweden that “This kingdom is mingled with great and long unpunished sin. This is why my words cannot yet shoot up and

29 “La persecutione si dè fuggire e cessare quando non si sa utile nel suo sostenere.” Pezzini, “Il primo volgarizzamento,” 70.

30 “Che dove la persona non vede di potere fare utilità, debba tale persecutione e luogho rifuggire e ire dove possa piue fructificare”; Pezzini, “Il primo volgarizzamento,” 70. The phrase and the story about Benedict are from Gregory’s *Dialogues* 11.3.10.

31 “[Cristo] intende fare una vigna nuova che renda frutto, e farla in buona terra, di buoni vitigni, con buoni lavoratori ...”; cited in Lodone, “Santa Birgitta in Toscana,” 70; from *Ser Lapo Mazzei. Lettere di un notaro a un mercante del secolo XIV*, ed. C. Guasti (Florence: 1880); I, 121–2. But the new vineyard may also turn out to be Birgitta’s monastic order, Il Paradiso, on Tuscan soil – Piero di Ser Mino’s final home.

32 Lodone, “Santa Birgitta in Toscana,” 70.

bear fruit here.... They shall shoot up and bear fruit first elsewhere, until the hardness of the earth in this kingdom is broken up and mercy uncovered.”³³ This “elsewhere,” Guidini maintains (“Io entendo”) is Rome: “it will begin to bear fruit in those places where the pope will start to live.”³⁴ Guidini goes on to deepen this story of fertility, following Gregory as he places it in the context of the persecuted Jesus, Paul, and Benedict, founder of the monastic rule that would become the basis for Birgitta’s own order. His Birgitta is *forced* to go elsewhere by hostile circumstances in her homeland: widowed, with disaster having struck the expedition for a “Crusade” in the Baltics, and when others lashed out against her for her criticism and her meddling. In this account, Christianity’s flourishing depends on exile, on departures from one’s home. Hence Guidini’s translation acknowledges Birgitta’s *new* home by bringing her words directly to her “fellow” citizens, words that can perhaps be fully realized only in 1399, with an Italian pope finally in Rome – in no small part because of the work Birgitta did.

But it is not just displacements of space that the patient prophet must suffer. There are displacements in time as well. After introducing the importance of humility, Guidini adds, “when they [prophesy] something that then doesn’t happen, and not knowing why, they must humbly wait, believing that God has decided to delay.”³⁵ “Debba aspettare”: the need to wait comes to define not only the prophet, but the human condition itself with respect to the divine. In the first section of the preface focused on Birgitta’s life, Guidini hones in repeatedly on the gap between the utterance of words and their fulfillment in works, citing sections of the *Revelations* such as *Rev. 11:17* that contains one of God’s most explicit statements to Birgitta about revelations and their role in the world: they take time to be believed – and often will not be believed until they are fulfilled.³⁶ Alluding to *Rev. 11:17*, Guidini observes, “first this writing must be announced, and then when the events take place it will certainly be believed, since all is made manifest by her friend.”³⁷ He quotes his own

33 *Rev. v: 12.*

34 “comincerà a fructare in quelli luoghi dove il papa comincerà ad essere”. Pezzini, “Il primo volgarizzamento,” 69.

35 “quando dicesse una cosa e non venisse, e non sapendo la causa debba humilmente aspettare e credere che Dio ha voluto prorogare.” Pezzini, “Il primo volgarizzamento,” 71.

36 Thus one example: Christ had to “grow and develop until a suitable time,” and from “then on” his words were heard (*Rev. 11:17, 51*) – words that nonetheless needed to be accompanied by deeds, as his miracles, death and resurrection made clear.

37 “prima questa scriptura si debba annuntiare, e poi venendo l’opere chiaramente lo serà creduto, perciò manifestansi per l’amico suo”. Pezzini, “Il primo volgarizzamento,” 68.

translation of *Rev.* 1:55: “Thus says God: if they don’t want to believe in these holy words, they will believe in the works once they occur.”³⁸

As Guidini conveys with his emphasis on patience, much of Birgitta’s writings focus on the need to wait, on the lack of immediacy in the outpouring of divine truth and the time it takes for those truths to be fulfilled through events.³⁹ This is as much an acknowledgment of the fallibility of humans as of their medium of communication – and testifies to the infinite compassion of a divine figure who at every step is conscious of the limitations of their vulnerable yet stubborn creation. Mary becomes paradigmatic of the exemplary human being, who as mother, widow, and mourner constantly exhibited patience: the patience of waiting for a son’s birth, the patience of waiting for her own death. Birgitta’s emphasis throughout her works on the centrality of the Assumption – and her insistence that Mary, like Christ, possessed her body in heaven – drew the wrath of many who campaigned against her canonization, possibly seeing it as an attempt to raise the humble female to the level of Christ himself. As though she were responding to Birgitta’s critics, Mary gives this account in *Revelations* 6 of her death and assumption, along with a rationale as to why her marvelous story is nowhere found in Scripture: “That my Assumption was not known to many persons was the will of God, my Son, in order that faith in His Ascension might first of all be firmly established in the hearts of men, for they were not prepared to believe in His Ascension, especially if my Assumption had been announced in the beginning” (*Revelations* VI:61:5–7; p. 124). As Mary pragmatically observes, those inclined to be skeptical of Jesus’s resurrection would be even less accepting of her assumption. Hence the news of her glorious arrival into heaven was strategically delayed – a deferral that points not so much to Mary’s secondary status as to an uncanny recognition of the slowness of human nature to embrace truth.

Prophecy itself is symptomatic of such limitations. Words take time not only to understand, but even to utter, involving what Guidini calls “prorogare” in his preface and Birgitta’s editor Alfonso “mora” or “delay” in his *Epistola solitarii* (“The Hermit’s Letter to Kings”). In a suggestive passage, Alfonso quotes Gregory the Great (*Moralia* 28:2) about a God who, not himself subject to temporalities, has a way of “intimating the things to be done and renders the

38 “ECHO, se dice Dio, se alle benigne parole non vogliono credere credaranno all’opere quando verranno”. Pezzini, “Il primo volgarizzamento,” 68.

39 Birgitta’s rule could be seen as the acknowledgment and practice of Birgitta’s – and Mary’s – patience. It becomes a way of acclimating oneself on a daily basis to the waiting that all humans perform must do.

ignorant human heart suddenly knowledgeable about mysteries without the noise and the slowness of speech (tarditate sermonis).” As in the case of the discerning Birgitta, “God’s locution to us is seen inwardly rather than heard. As he instills himself without the delay of speech (sine mora sermonis), he enlightens the shadows of our ignorance by his sudden light.”⁴⁰ “Tarditate sermonis”; “sine mora sermonis”: human forms of communication – hence speech itself – are characterized by their lack of instantaneity. God can bypass these human forms when choosing those to whom he imparts his own means of communication via “an incorporeal light that fills the interior and outwardly surrounds it once filled.” Yet even if Birgitta may have experienced the totality of a revelation through the infusion of light – as in the divine truths contained in Book 5 that emerged from a single, sustained vision – she is well aware of the human fallibilities that necessitate slowness and delay. The desire for instantaneity is in fact nothing more than a diabolical wish, as we learn from the impatience of the scholastic figure posing questions of God throughout Book 5, such as “Why did you not cause all your words to be heard in a single moment?”⁴¹ Humans are not made for the processing of too much, too soon, and their desire to know divine truths instantly is connected to the sin of pride.⁴²

And yet, as Alfonso writes at the end of his *Epistola solitarii*, “tempus enim prope est” (7:8; Morris 41): the time is at hand, a line from the beginning of the Book of the Apocalypse (1:3). This echoes the preface written three decades earlier for the *Revelations* by Birgitta’s Swedish confessor Master Mathias, who

40 “The Hermit’s Letter to Kings,” 5:45–46, in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Morris, vol. 4, 30. See the Latin text: “45 Spiritum enim Dei quasi quedam nobis verba dicere est occulta vi ea que agenda sunt intimare et cor hominis ignarum, non adhibito strepitu et tarditate sermonis, peritum repente de absconditis reddere. 46 Et postea subiungit dicens: Dei enim locucio ad nos intrinsecus facta videtur pocius quam auditur, quia dum semetipsam sine mora sermonis insinuat, repentina luce nostre ignorancie tenebras illustrat. Hec ille Gregorius.” <http://www.umilta.net/bk13.html>.

41 *Rev.* v:11, 2.

42 Much has been written on the temporal dynamics of Birgitta’s work. See most recently Thomas Luongo’s comments about the instantaneity of Birgitta’s vision versus the process of textual composition, “God’s Words, or Birgitta’s? Birgitta of Sweden as Author,” in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Maria H. Oen (Leiden: 2019), esp. 40–41. As for Birgitta’s own sense of impatience as a vice to be avoided, see *Rev.* vi:6 in which, to cite the summary, “Christ gently rebukes the bride for some impatience she displayed and instructs her not to give in to anger or make any answer to people who provoke her until she has settled down and sees that her words can come to good effect” (“et videret posse proficere aliquid in verbis eius”). Here too there is an emphasis on patience and the ability to wait for a time when “words can come to good effect.”

presented Birgitta “as the completion ... of God’s prior actions in history.”⁴³ How did Birgitta’s Italian translator fit his project into the framework of speaking and delay, of temporal and spatial displacements at a moment of apocalyptic hope, when the time is at hand and works are able to follow words, now that Rome is again at the center? It is worth reflecting on another moment from the *Revelations* that directly addresses the project of translation itself – and introducing it by way of the first publication of Birgitta’s *Revelations*, in Lübeck in 1492. Book VII ends with the account of Birgitta’s death in Rome along with the directive Christ gave her regarding her manuscript. Immediately following, and across from the opening page of Alfonso’s *Epistola solitarii*, is an illustration very different from the other folio-size woodcuts in the Lübeck edition (Figure 2.1). Those woodcuts generally feature Birgitta seated on a throne directly beneath Mary and Jesus, presenting to various audiences her words: kings, queens, nobles, cardinals, popes, and the populace at large. Here too, she presents her words in the form of an open book, but to a single figure, and only after raising herself up from her chair – Alfonso himself, who extends his open hands to receive the text. It is a moving gesture, Birgitta’s consigning of her manuscript to another in preparation for her imminent death. The engraver has taken care to make Birgitta an elderly woman, hunched over as she slowly moves toward the expectant Alfonso.

Above the two is a passage cited is from the well-known 49th revelation of the *Extravagant Revelations*, in which Christ compares himself to a carpenter – and then proceeds to say that after he has made a beautiful image (*fabricat ymagine pulcram*), he hands it over to friends, who will make it even more beautiful: “I am like a carpenter who cuts wood from the forest and carries it home, then carves a beautiful image and adorns it with colors and contours. His friends see that the image can be adorned with still more beautiful colors, and so they paint it with their own colors. I, God, cut words from the forest of my divinity and placed them in your heart. My friends edited and arranged them in books, coloring and adorning them according to the grace given them.”⁴⁴ Christ likens Birgitta’s revelations to his own words, which his friends fashioned into books that they decorated and illuminated. And like Christ’s words, Birgitta’s revelations will be translated into “many languages” (*pluribus linguis*) as soon as she gives them to Alfonso: “Now in order to adapt them to several languages, give all these books containing revelations of my words to

43 Anders Piltz, “Birgitta and the Bible,” in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 57.

44 *Rev. VIII*: 49, 1–3.



FIGURE 2.1 Bernardino Pinturicchio, *Pius II canonizes St. Catherine of Siena, June 29, 1461, c.1508*. The Piccolomini Linrary, south west wall, Santa Maria della Scala (Duomo), Siena

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my bishop hermit [Alfonso]).⁴⁵ These many languages include, of course, the Latin language in which Alfonso wrote and the Lübeck Birgitta “speaks.”⁴⁶

As Claire Sahlin has noted, this image of a Birgittine text that is modified, adorned, and ‘translated’ offsets the many instances in which God speaks directly to Birgitta: “[it] is one of only very few passages from the Birgittine corpus that clearly admits the editorial license of the confessors.”⁴⁷ She goes on to say that this late revelation (Cyprus, 1372) was not even placed by Alfonso himself in the text; it was found in his Breviary only after his death and included in later manuscripts as the 49th extravagant revelation. The Lübeck edition, however, makes it central rather than peripheral to the text’s generation. It accentuates the process not only of collaboration, but of the displacement that Birgitta experienced in her lifetime and would experience again with her writings: she parts, necessarily, with her writings, so they can be reformatted and translated into Latin.

Even if the Lübeck illustration is somewhat exceptional, it nonetheless creates the same layering effect as that found in some earlier manuscript versions of the Latin text, described by Maria Oen in a recent article. Oen tracks the manuscript images of Birgitta from the foundational copies of the *Revelations* from late 14th-century Naples, as well as some of the earliest translations, and makes an interesting find based on the comparison between Latin and vernacular versions. If the Latin *Revelations* fashions Birgitta’s authorship as highly mediated – her ecstatic vision is one link in a chain that goes from God and Mary to her confessors, translators, and scribes, and ultimately to multiple audiences – the vernacular manuscripts tend to depict her in a simpler and more straightforward relationship to God, beginning with that of Guidini.⁴⁸ To return to Guidini’s Italian translation, the tenth folio page completes the prefatory letter of Birgitta’s confessor Matthias, closing with the rubric “Finisce el prologo del libro delle celestiagli rivelationi di Dio.” Immediately below is an illumination that occupies roughly two-thirds of the page, showing us

45 *Rev.* VIII: 49, 4.

46 The (abridged) passage ends clarifying that “Alphonso heremite” will take over the work of “capturing the Catholic sense of my spirit” (“elucidet catholicum sensum spiritus mei teneat”), *Rev.* VIII: 48, 4.

47 Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, 32.

48 See Maria H. Oen, “Ambivalent Images of Authorship,” in which she suggests that the image creates a parallel between Birgitta and biblical *auctores*, in *Sanctity and Female Authorship*, ed. Oen and Falkeid, 122. Oen makes a more elaborate case for the Siense illustration in an earlier essay, “The Iconography of *Liber celestis revelacionum*,” in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 186–222, where she notes that “vernacular portraits tend to depict [Birgitta] writing” (207) and that the Siense illustration in particular emphasizes authorial agency (210).

Birgitta sitting at a desk with pen, ink, and manuscript while Jesus bursts the frame, as he speaks to her from above. Placed literally at the entryway into her own text, following the translator's preface and a much-abridged version of Matthias's life of Birgitta, this image presents the act of writing as a form of immediacy.⁴⁹ And it is an immediacy connected to the maternal tongue of Birgitta herself. Never comfortable in Latin, as we hear numerous times throughout the *Revelations* and learn from her confessors, Birgitta must be writing in Swedish – and Jesus is therefore speaking Swedish to her as well.⁵⁰ Even if the delay of speech is always perforce an issue, we are nonetheless enabled to see the process by which those without Latin can hear God directly, in their mother tongue. Visually, Guidini thus becomes one of the first to reject the iconography of the mediators who fashioned their own “more beautiful” image, in order to emphasize the direct link between the voice of divinity and Birgitta's receptive pen.⁵¹ Below the image is the opening of the *Revelations*, introduced with the rubric “Comincia el primo libro dele celestiagli revelationi di Dio.” We thus come to the “parole del nostro signore” through the imposing figure of Birgitta herself. The immediacy is now.

Such an image seems to confirm Guidini's translation as the product of spontaneity as it represents a return to a mother tongue and the instantaneity of God's word. Translation into Italian perhaps paradoxically enables revelation to come to fruition and to be even more fully and widely understood, as Christ's and Mary's words – and hence Birgitta's – arguably regain their spoken status as a “volgare.” It thus brings to an end the saga of Birgitta's displacement and exile that Guidini underlines in the final section of his prologue. But it is also dependent on the work performed as a result of that exile, as the project of Italian translation becomes one more step, and hopefully the final

49 Such images of Birgitta's transcription of her dialogues with Jesus and Mary are found in the Lübeck edition as well, but only in the small miniatures that open the first chapter of several books, such as that for the First Book of the *Revelations*. This smaller image is outsized by the folio page to the left, which shows Birgitta presenting her text to an audience of royalty and religious figures, as well as more humble readers.

50 See the passage from the canonization materials for Birgitta, *Acta et processus canonizationis b. Birgitte*, ed. Isak Collijn (Uppsala: 1924–31), 84. English translation from Bridget Morris, “General Introduction,” in *Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Morris, Vol. 1, 12: “The words that were given her from God she wrote down in her mother tongue with her hand when she was well and she had us, her father confessors, make a very faithful translation of them into Latin.”

51 Of relevance here may be Grace M. Jantzen's point about Hildegard of Bingen, who also transcribed (albeit in Latin) the words she received from God two centuries earlier: “In hearing God's voice, Hildegard is finding her own.” Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: 1995), 171.

step, toward realizing the new climate of a Rome-centered papacy – despite the schism – that allows Birgitta’s words along with those of her heavenly interlocutors to be heard and acted upon more completely than before. And finally, these words are anchored in the language through which the Sienese woman of recent memory, Caterina Benincasa, wrote and spoke, preached and prayed. The *volgare* was the means through which Catherine communicated with Guidini, Caffarini, and all those whose lives she touched and tried to reform, from popes to prostitutes. This is a Catherine “who had no concern as to whether she offended or pleased”, as Guidini wrote in his “Memorie”. Whether she was writing to Pope Urban VI, to Cardinals, or to Queen Giovanna, “she revealed the truth in full”.⁵² This openness to truth, this indifference to others’ reactions to her words, is the same reason that Birgitta encountered hostility in her native Sweden – and was forced to leave for Rome.⁵³ Such dangerous directness of speech is now arguably recovered, while the fruits of that speech are fully realized.

Such are the suggestive resonances between the books of Catherine and Birgitta in the career of the Sienese Guidini, a notary and follower of Catherine who went on to dedicate himself to the Spedale, the Compagnia della Vergine Maria, and his *prossimo* or neighbor. This back-and-forth between Latin and Italian as exemplified in his Latin translation of Catherine’s *Dialogo* and his oversight and possible Italian translation of Birgitta’s *Revelations* attests to Guidini’s efforts to ensure that the writings of both women occupied two worlds, making them eminently more fruitful in precisely the place and time they are most needed, the time for which they were, finally intended. But at the turn of the 15th century, the wait was over. Thanks to the immense project of the Italian translation, one can hear Birgitta’s words as they were meant to be heard: in the language of her hosts, in the language of Rome’s pope, in the language of Siena’s Catherine.

52 “non curava di dispiacere o di piacere”; “diceva la verità in palese,” “Memorie di Ser Cristofano di Galgano Guidini da Siena,” 36 and 37.

53 On women and the vernacular in the late medieval and early modern periods, see Katherine Gill’s seminal article “Women and the Production of Religious Literature in the Vernacular, 1300–1500,” in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, ed. E. Ann Matter (Philadelphia: 1994), 64–85; and Marie-Luise Ehrenscheidtner, “Puellae litteratae: The use of the vernacular in the Dominican Convents of Southern Germany,” in *Medieval Women in their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: 1997), 49–70.

Catherine's Epistles: Coming Home

Much had changed by the time Aldo Manuzio published the first complete edition of Catherine's letters, six years after the publication in Lübeck of Birgitta's complete works. By then Catherine too was canonized, after a delay no doubt informed by the very schism that the pope's return to Rome had precipitated. If Birgitta may have been behind Caffarini's attempts to make Catherine a saint, Catherine no longer needed Birgitta in the year 1500. By then Catherine too was canonized, capable of standing, as she stands in the flyleaf to Aldus's volume, quite by herself. By then, too, Aldus was well underway with his humanist project to publish Greek and Latin texts in their original languages. Just as he called attention to Catherine's letters as having been "hidden" by divine intent until the moment is right, he called on similar ideas a year earlier in his dedication of his first publication of a Latin text, Firmicus's *Astronomica* (October 1499). Here he suggests that these pages have "lain hidden (iacuerint) for so many centuries, mutilated and covered in filth," and brought back to life through his strenuous labors.⁵⁴ Several months after the publication of Catherine's letters, Aldus brought out the first volume of Latin Christian poets, including a Prudentius who "had lain hidden (delituisset) for eleven hundred years and more, so that this author may be of benefit to his fellow Christians."⁵⁵ Aldus's description of a humanist enterprise that makes us all better citizens and brings light to dark times – much as he brings Latin works out of darkness – hinges on the arrival of long-delayed, long-awaited words and putting them to use to advance humankind. Thus does Aldus fulfill the work of bringing his authors home – such as the astronomer Maternus, who returns from the land of the Getae, "complete and unimpaired," to "look again upon his kinsmen and his native land."⁵⁶

Catherine too, in a way, is coming home, and by way of a translation: the translation of her letters and, more broadly, of the vernacular itself into a humanist context. The full-page illustration of Catherine found on f.10 immediately before the "Epistole utile e devote de la Beata e Seraphica Vergine Sancta Catharina da Siena" presents Catherine no longer as the *Madonna del popolo* seen in 15th-century images of female sanctity, but standing tall like a humanist author (Figure 2.2). Moreover, in this image of an imposing and

54 Manutius, *The Greek Classics*, 3–5.

55 "cum iam mille et centum annis et plus eo delituisset," Manutius, *The Greek Classics*, 10–11.

56 Manutius, *The Greek Classics*, 4–5. Of course it is Aldus, effectively, who has brought the works of the astronomers "from the netherworld" into the light of day ("ab inferos ad superos," 2–3). His reference to Catherine is less focused on himself: she has come into the light because of God's intervention.

solitary Catherine, we have a fascinating balancing act between Latin and vernacular texts. Catherine holds a heart “signed” with the name “iesus”, while in her right hand she clasps an open book on which we have, in Italian, the way that she typically signed her own vernacular letters, in Jesus’s name: *gesu dolce, gesu amore*. As has long been observed, this is the first use of the italic font in the history of print – a humanist font Aldus would famously use in his *libri tascabili* of Virgil, Dante, and Petrarca. Less observed is that the handwriting on book and heart is the same: is it Catherine’s, or Christ’s? Moreover, there is obviously more Latin surrounding Catherine than just Jesus’s name. We have a line from Psalm 50 (“Cor mundum crea in me Deus”), as well as three lines of a poem written by Pius II himself, uncle of the volume’s dedicatee, for Catherine’s canonization. Catherine’s Italian, now available thanks to Aldus’s publication, is balanced against the Latinity of the papacy, the Vulgate, and Jesus himself as though it was being constructed as a language “comparable” to Latin in the sense that Paul Ricoeur discussed in his lectures on translation.⁵⁷ Might Aldus be intimating that this was a negotiation Catherine was capable of making herself, vindicating her mother tongue – its immediacy as well as its validity – as the *donna* and *mulier* are shown to be one and the same, as in the account of the “miracolo” of Piero di Ser Mino’s rescue from imminent death? Within two years Aldus would publish Dante and Petrarch’s vernacular works, thereby suggesting the capacity of Italian to be subject to the same philological rigor and to convey the same authority as Latin. Pietro Bembo, who collaborated with Aldus on the editions of Dante in 1502 and Petrarch in 1503, has been called “the founder of vernacular philology” (“il fondatore della filologia volgare”) precisely because of that collaboration.

But one might also argue that the path began with Catherine’s *Epistolario*.⁵⁸ Finally, there is the more immediate context to consider. As Marina Zancan notes, Aldus’s “decision [to publish] the letters is ... entwined within religious, moral, and political concerns”.⁵⁹ As mentioned earlier, Catherine’s work was published at a time of crisis, not only for the apocalyptic sensibilities inspired

57 See Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans Eileen Brennan (New York: 2006), particularly the third essay where he discusses “the construction of comparables” as a goal of translation, 36–8.

58 See Carlo Dionisotti, *Scritti sul Bembo*, ed. Claudio Vela (Turin: 2002), 81.

59 “La scelta delle lettere è ... tutta interna ad una preoccupazione religiosa, morale, politica.” See Marina Zancan, *Il doppio itinerario della scrittura* (Turin: 1998), 121. See Giulia Barone, “Society and Women’s Religiosity, 750–1450,” on the extent to which medieval women such as Catherine and Birgitta were seen as acting “in a deeply and completely ‘political’ way”, in *Women and Faith*, ed. Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri (Cambridge: 1999), 69. For a more sustained look at the political motivations of both women, see Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested*.



FIGURE 2.2 School of Lippo Vanni(?), *Miniature author portrait of Saint Birgitta*, after 1399.

Biblioteca comunale degli Intronati, I.V.25, fol. 11v

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by the arrival of a new century, but for the more immediate threats of ongoing civil unrest and the Turkish presence, all the more challenging for Venetians. In their essay in this volume, Jessica Goethals and Anna Wainwright call attention to the use of Birgitta's prophetic voice to bring Italians to their senses. As they note, only in 1484 were Birgitta's *Revelations* officially brought into the canon as Pope Sixtus IV overturned earlier prohibitions against their dissemination. The result "strengthened Birgitta's appeal as a mouthpiece for other

political prophecies,” leading to the publication of pamphlets that ventriloquized Birgitta’s voice in the call to bring order to the peninsula in the wake of the Italian wars. Birgitta thus spoke to Italian readers in their *lingua materna* through a range of “Profezie di S. Brigida” published in Florence in the 1470s and 80s, in Venice in 1493 and in Rome at the end of the century.⁶⁰

Our Sienese notary began to make this possible a century earlier with his translation. In effect, Guidini validates for Birgitta if not her own *lingua materna*, then the importance of the vernacular itself, via an Italian language closer than Birgitta’s Swedish to the Latin in which her works circulated throughout Europe. It is also a way of giving what Ricoeur calls “linguistic hospitality”⁶¹ to Birgitta in a way that matches the physical hospitality she received in Rome, Naples, and elsewhere during the period in which she was in exile. Indeed, stressing this exilic dimension underlines Italy’s openness to this persecuted *femmina* who becomes a *donna* in the death vision of Piero di Ser Mino and in others’ works as well – thanks to the opportunities Italy gave her to speak freely and to escape the belittling and criticism she experienced when living among the Swedish nobility. At the same time, Guidini recognized the importance of dignifying his *own* vernacular by incorporating Birgitta into the Italian – and Sienese – canon. As he makes her work available to his fellow *disciplinati* in the Compagnia della Vergine Maria, he also attests to what had long been Siena’s pride in its tongue as a discourse for civic matters in particular, as codified in its constitution of 1309, the first civic constitution in Europe in a vulgar tongue. This too sets the stage for what emerges as Aldus’s new project with respect to the vernacular after the publication of Catherine’s letters. Petrarch and Dante were both exiles – one more figuratively, to be sure, than the other – for whom Aldus found a home in the publications of his new-found industry. Catherine had been exiled in a different way, given the difficulties of accessing her letters. Now she too can emerge and be welcomed into the home Aldus has created for her – much as Guidini created such a home for Birgitta a century earlier.

60 In an atmosphere characterized by an attitude of seizing the moment – coming to grips with the immediacy of words written centuries ago, in the context of a new technology that made those words widely and quickly available – this *lingua materna* would take on increasing importance, as no one knew better than Martin Luther. Luther initially found Birgitta to be a stimulus to his reforms, but decided eventually that she was too retrograde in her attachment to the papacy. See André Vauchez on Birgitta’s failure to represent enough of a break with the old order to be of much value for the Reformation. André Vauchez, *Saints, Prophètes et Visionnaires: Le pouvoir surnaturel au Moyen Age* (Paris: 1999): “l’eschatologie d’Hildegarde reste traditionnelle sur bien des plans,” 117 and elsewhere.

61 Ricoeur, *On Translation*, esp. 23.

To return to where we began: if the Florentine chancellor Piero di Ser Mino saw Birgitta and humanism as incommensurable, Aldus sought to place the “new Birgitta” – a Catherine made prophetess and *mulier*, equivalent with the Latinate tradition – onto the same plane. The recognition of dignity, as Piero grasped as he lay dying, is a function of time – in his case, of that moment *in extremus*. Aldus too glimpsed in the apocalyptic year of 1500 the possibility of such extremes. In bringing Catherine fully into the present, he makes her the prophet and spokesperson for responding to Italian disunity so as to better counter the threat of Islam. This is a project in which the dedicatee of the letters, Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini, would have been fully complicit.

Such is readily apparent in the chapel that Piccolomini dedicated to his uncle, Pope Pius II, in Siena’s Duomo. While the chapel was completed by Pinturicchio only after Piccolomini’s death (a mere ten days after his coronation as Pius III), it was commissioned and planned for much earlier, as Piccolomini designed the library devoted to Pius II’s long and remarkable life, from humanist and ambassador to cardinal and pope. Pius II’s relatively short papacy (seven years) is celebrated in the closing two images, and they are telling ones: Catherine’s canonization in 1461, and Pius II’s arrival in Ancona, from which he had planned to depart for a Crusade against the Ottomans – only to be prevented by his untimely death. In the scene of the canonization, Catherine, head and body reunited,⁶² lies below the enthroned Pius II, her closed eyes turned in the direction of the final fresco, which features Pius’s arrival in Ancona and what was to have been his triumphant crusade toward the east. Her bodily alignment with Pius’s gathering of troops suggestively connects the project in which she was such a fervent believer to the urgency of which Aldus speaks in his letter to Piccolomini: the worth of her words could be recognized and acted on only at the beginning of the Cinquecento. So is the body of the *donna* recovered and restored to wholeness, whether through the imposing *mulier* who appears in Aldus’s volume, or the saintly figure directing our gaze towards Pius II’s Crusade in Siena’s Duomo. While Catherine may have spoken prophetically to the humanist pope who canonized her eighty years after her death, Aldus offers his readers another chance to hear her now.

62 Sieneſe viewers would have been well aware that Catherine’s head had been detached from her body ſeveral years after her death in Rome, and brought to Siena; it was placed in a chapel in the Church of San Domenico, barely a kilometer from the Duomo.

Prophetic Theology: The Santa Brigida da Paradiso in Florence

Isabella Gagliardi

Is there a connection between women, prophecy, and theology? We might approach this question by looking at one historical case: the choice of spiritual and devotional literature in the women's monastery of Santa Brigida al Paradiso in Florence.

Alberti and the Founding of Paradiso

On 26 January 1392 Pope Boniface IX granted Antonio di Niccolò Alberti the privilege of founding a male and female monastery dedicated to Saint Birgitta of Sweden, who had been canonised the year before, in 1391.¹ Antonio's father, Niccolò di Antonio Alberti, was an extremely influential man in Florence at that time. His family was part of the city's *élite*, managing a considerable estate and an impressive volume of business dealings. The Alberti were merchants of French and English cloth and had branches of their business scattered all over Italy, Europe, and the Mediterranean. In fact, they carried on commerce in Genoa, Bologna, Rome, Venice, Rhodes, Syria, Greece, Hungary, Valencia, Barcelona, Paris, Bruges, Avignon, Ghent, Brussels, London, and Cologne. Besides this, the Alberti were also bankers for the pope, and thanks to their prudent dealings were able to avoid investment failures; even when the Bardi bank, with whom they partnered, sank into insolvency in the mid-14th century, the Alberti family managed to avoid suffering the repercussions.² They owned a considerable number of properties both in the city and in the country, including a villa called "del Paradiso" near Florence. This was such a remarkable place, both from an architectural standpoint and due to the intellectual

1 Anna Benvenuti Papi, "Donne religiose nella Firenze del Due-Trecento; appunti per una ricerca in corso," in *Le mouvement confraternel au Moyen Âge. France, Italie, Suisse. Actes de la table ronde de Lausanne (9–11 mai 1985)*, (Rome: 1987), 41–82, 8.

2 Maria Elisa Soldani, *Uomini d'affari e mercanti toscani nella Barcellona del Quattrocento* (Barcelona: 2010), 329–69.

activities which took place there, that it inspired a contemporary literary work by Giovanni di Gherardo da Prato, entitled *Il Paradiso degli Alberti*.³

Niccolò's son Antonio transformed the villa into a vibrant cultural circle, where the humanist intellectuals of the day met together for debates as well as musical and poetic events. Antonio was himself a man of letters, composing poetry along the lines of Petrarch and Fazio degli Uberti, and his contacts were among the most eminent intellectuals of early 15th-century Florence.⁴ The cultural debates, refined amusements, and scholarly discussions which took place in the Alberti's home, with the musician Francesco Landini, the mathematician Biagio Pelacani, the humanist Coluccio Salutati and the philosopher Pietro dell'Antella nearly always in attendance,⁵ are recorded in the book *Il Paradiso degli Alberti* by Giovanni Gherardi da Prato.⁶ During the same period, Antonio degli Alberti was elected to office (in 1400) in the Florentine commune as a "Gonfaloniere di Compagnia", one of the most prominent positions of authority in the city. Following in his father's footsteps, as early as the 1390s, he showed great sensitivity to religious experiences of conversion.

Alberti set aside a plot of land and probably some buildings just outside the walls of Florence, in the Piano di Ripoli near the so-called "Paradise of the Alberti", devoting it to the construction of the new convent. Thus, the monastery of Santa Brigida al Paradiso was inaugurated – the first of the Birgittine order in Italy and second in the Catholic world, since the Florentine community came after the mother house, which was consecrated in Vadstena (Sweden) in 1384. "Paradiso" precedes both the Birgittine convent at Gdansk, dedicated to Birgitta and Mary Magdalene (1394), and Santa Maria di Scala Coeli, in Genoa (1403).

We do not know exactly what the reasons were that led Antonio degli Alberti to choose to found a convent of Birgitta's order – an order that was only confirmed by Pope Urban v with great difficulty.⁷ However, we do know that Birgitta was well known in Florence: her relations with some of the most influential family units in the city are documented, namely Lapo Acciaiuoli's family

3 Luigi Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze. Genealogia, storia e documenti* (Firenze: 1870); Alessandro Wesselofsky (ed.), *Il Paradiso degli Alberti. Ritrovi e ragionamenti del 1389. Romanzo di Giovanni da Prato dal codice autografo e anonimo della Riccardiana* (Bologna: 1867).

4 Cfr. Giovanni Borriero, "La tradizione delle Rime di Antonio degli Alberti (1)," *Medioevo letterario d'Italia* (2004), 141–70. Also see Gabriella Zarri, *Figure di donne in Età Moderna. Modelli e storie* (Roma: 2017), x, 21 and 45.

5 Arnaldo D'Addario, "Alberti Antonio," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, volume 1 (Roma: 1960), online version <[6 Wesselofsky \(ed.\), *Il Paradiso degli Alberti*.](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-alberti_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>.</p>
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7 His life and memoirs in Borriero, "La tradizione delle Rime di Antonio degli Alberti," 141–70.

and that of Niccolò Soderini and his wife Costanza.⁸ In fact, Florentine memoirs and other literary sources preserve the memory of her very deep spiritual friendship with Madonna Lapa Acciaiuoli, wife of Manente Buondelmonti and sister of Nicola Acciaiuoli, grand Siniscalco of the Kingdom of Naples. Nicola and Lapa Acciaiuoli may have introduced Birgitta to the Florentine upper class of the time, because as we know, Birgitta was very close to Joanna, Queen of Naples.⁹ In Florence, perhaps through the network of social contacts of the Acciaiuoli and Buondelmonti families, she was approached by Antonio degli Alberti.¹⁰ Antonio himself asked Pope Boniface IX to allow him to found a monastery according to Birgitta's rule and the pope gave his consent. The pope's letter to the bishop of Florence approving the construction of the monastery clearly mentions the request addressed by Antonio degli Alberti to the Roman Curia, adding that he had a special devotion to Birgitta.¹¹

It is impossible to comment further on this decision, because no sources have been found to explain why this cultured businessman developed such a strong inclination towards Birgitta that he was even persuaded to found a

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- 8 Giuseppina Bacarelli, "Storia del monastero di Santa Maria e Brigida al Paradiso: 1392–1776," in *Il 'Paradiso' in Pian di Ripoli. Studi e ricerche su un antico monastero*, ed. Mina Gregori, Giuseppe Rocchi (Florence: 1985), 18–29, 18, see also Sharon T. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: 2009), 131–40, about the economic activities of the monastery in general.
- 9 Bridget Morris, "Birgitta of Sweden and Giovanna of Naples: an unlikely friendship," in *Santa Brigida, Napoli, l'Italia: atti del convegno di studi italo-svedese, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 10–11 maggio 2006*, ed. Olle Ferm, Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese, Marcello Rotili (Naples: 2007), 23–24; see also Riccardo Francovich, "Buondelmonti Manente," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, volume 15 (Rome: 1972), online version <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/manente-buondelmonti_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/>](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/manente-buondelmonti_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>). The tomb of Lapa is in the Church of Certosa del Galluzzo, Cappella di Tobia. See also Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta of Sweden in Tuscan Art and Sermons," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and Her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Maria Husabø Oen (Leiden: 2019), 223–46, 224–25, 240–42.
- 10 Domenico Moreni, *Notizie istoriche dei contorni di Firenze, Parte Quinta. Dalla Porta a San Niccolò fino alla Pieve di S. Piero a Ripoli* (Florence: 1794), 128–29; see also the source in Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Diplomatico*, 1401, dicembre, 9.
- 11 "Exhibita siquidem nobis nuper pro parte dilecti filii nobilis viri Antonii de Albertis Militis Florentini petitio continebat, quod ipse de propria salute recogitans, et cupiens terrena in celestia, et transitoria in eterna felici commercia commutare, de bonis sibi a Deo collatis ad laudem Omnipotentis Dei et ob reverentiam B. Brigide de Suetia, ad quam gerit specialis devotionis affectum, in Comitatu Florentino, in loco ad id congruo, et honesto unum Monasterium Monialium sub vocabulo B. Brigide supradicte, que sub perpetua Clausura commorentur [...] fundari et construi facere et illud sufficienter dotare proponit", Moreni, *Notizie istoriche*, 130.

monastery, endowing it with his own property.¹² It is true that his family of origin was involved in charitable works and in the building of religious sites – his father had built a hospice for the poor in 1372,¹³ Iacopo and Giovanni Alberti had founded a church dedicated to Saint Catherine in the parish of Antella, and Iacopo di Carroccio had erected a church dedicated to Santa Maria sul Ponte in Rubaconte.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the choice made by Antonio is so unusual that, perhaps, invoking a generic family custom towards works of charity and devotion does not fully explain it. Yet in the absence of sources that can give an answer, we can only formulate questions and hypotheses.

As well as being a man of letters and a writer, Antonio was also known in the city as a talented astrologer. Or at least, his famous descendant Leon Battista Alberti presents him as such.¹⁵ Is it possible that it was Birgitta's prophetic power that convinced Antonio of the advisability of founding a convent with Birgitta's rule in Florence? We know for certain that, probably after meeting her,¹⁶ in 1392 he obtained from Boniface IX the privilege of establishing a Birgittine religious community within the Benedictine monastery, by then abandoned by the monks, which was located near his villa. Although there is no documentary evidence testifying to a meeting between Antonio degli Alberti and Birgitta of Sweden, many scholars believe they must have met since, as mentioned above, Birgitta was in his social circle, and having met her personally could explain Alberti's decision to found a monastery according to her rule. We do know for certain that only a year later, in 1393, he helped another group of religious women with particularly strict customs: the Jesuati followers of Giovanni Colombini.¹⁷

12 "È questo monastero della Vergine Maria e di Santa Brigida detto Paradiso per rispetto della bellezza et ornamento degl' ediftii, e giardini che ci erano, e de' diletti corporali quali i secolari ci pigliavano prima che ci fusse il monastero, et essendo poi trasferito ad uso religioso si è ritenuto il nome", Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Bonifazio, 10 gennaio 1395; Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivi dello Spedale di S. Maria Nuova, Monastero del Paradiso 1, fols. 190–101; Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivi dello Spedale di S. Maria Nuova, Monastero del Paradiso, 222, s.n., Florence, Archivio Innocenti, serie I, n. 10, fols. 4v.–11r.

13 See Isabelle Chabot, "Messer Niccolò degli Alberti, 'pater pauperum'. Lettura del testamento," in *L'ospedale dell'Orbatello. Carità e arte a Firenze*, ed. Cristina De Benedictis and Carla Milloschi (Florence: 2015), 73–81.

14 Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze*, 23–25.

15 Ruggero Romano and Alberto Tenenti (eds.), *Leon Battista Alberti i libri della famiglia* (1969; repr. Turin: 1994), 84.

16 Ottavio Gigli (ed.), *Prose di Feo Belcari edite ed inedite sopra autografi e testi a penna raccolte e pubblicate da Ottavio Gigli* (Rome: 1843), 9, footnote n. 1.

17 Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze*, 85, 26.

Alberti donated two houses to the Jesuati women, where they could conduct their *forma vitae* undisturbed, under the custody of the bishop and the Jesuati friars who had recently moved to Florence. In 1395, Brother Manno of Sweden received from Antonio the dowry necessary for the monastic institution under Birgitta's rule, and the Alberti family chapel, dedicated to St. Mary and St. Zenobius al Fabrero, was transformed into the monastic church. It was frescoed with an iconographic programme of enormous interest: entirely dedicated to the figure of Christ from the *Washing of the Feet* episode to the *Transfiguration*, it culminated in a very unusual *Last Judgement* in which Hell was completely missing.¹⁸ The monastery was already prepared to welcome the community of Birgittine nuns and monks when things became complicated: the Bishop of Fiesole was against the erection of a double monastery, as envisaged by Birgitta's rule, and Boniface IX went along with him.¹⁹ Antonio aligned himself with this decision and interrupted the process necessary for the constitution of the Birgittine community. The interruption was short, however, and by 1401 the monks had already returned to the Paradiso abbey.

The choice to help religious people such as the followers of Birgitta and Giovanni Colombini, who strove for the reform of the church, is consistent with the type of religiosity shown in the iconography of the monastic church. This, in turn, fits in well with what little we know of Alberti's religiosity and which we struggle to recover by reading his remaining writings. In Alberti's *Rime*, in fact, verses appear declaring his expectation of divine intervention to renew the church whose corruption was stigmatized.²⁰ Nor should we forget that, in those years, there was a strong sense of eschatological expectation: between 1399 and 1400, there were numerous processions of the Bianchi (the Whites), penitents who scourged themselves, walking great distances between one city

18 Francesca Goggioli, "Il Paradiso ritrovato. Novità sul ciclo pittorico del monastero di Santa Maria e Brigida a Pian di Ripoli," *Arte Cristiana* 111 (2014), 201–17.

19 The papal bull dated 31 October 1396: see Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze*, 204–205. The revocation of the bull, again signed by Boniface IX on 15 March 1402, *ibid.*, 216–18.

20 "O giustizia di Dio, quanto tu peni/a punir Simon mago e la sua setta,/ c'hanno a mal far la tua Chiesa costretta/allargando a le legge i primi freni/. La colpa è tua omai, se tu sostieni/ che la rinovazion, ch'l mondo aspetta,/ non venga già, com'è stata predetta;/ a rinfrescar gli antichi e santi beni./ Non tardar dunque a risanar la piaga,/ sì che'l disordinato tuo collegio/ non dia di sé fra noi più malo esempio./ L'avara Babilonia atterra e paga,/ sì ch'a l'opere tue non metta pregio,/ e gli suoi venditor caccia dal tempio", in *Poesia italiana del Trecento*, ed. Piero Cudini (Milan: 1978), 142; Borriero, "La tradizione delle Rime di Antonio degli Alberti (111)," *Medioevo letterario d'Italia* 5 (2008), 45–100; Emilio Pasquini, *Fra Due e Quattrocento. Cronotopi letterari in Italia* (Milan: 2012), 206 (see also note 109 for Antonio's date of birth); Antonio Lanza, "Il giardino tardogotico del *Paradiso degli Alberti*," *Italies, Revue d'études italiennes* 8 (2004), 135–50.

and another and asking God for peace and mercy. In 1399, a Dominican friar called Giovanni Dominici was expelled from Venice because he had authorised a procession of the Bianchi in the city. He did this despite the fact that the government of the Serenissima had forbidden the Whites from entering the city for fear of plague. Dominici, a Florentine by birth, returned to Florence after being expelled from Venice and there he formed a close spiritual friendship with Bartolomea degli Alberti, Antonio's wife. At the moment, research has only been able to yield an indirect contact between Giovanni Dominici and the community of Birgittines in Florence.

There is mention of a contact between Luca Jacobi and the friar Leonardo di Giovanni "che stae con frate Giovanni Domenichi", i.e., who was closest to Giovanni Dominici in Florence, from whom the monks bought a breviary in 1401.²¹ But in 1400, the fortunes of Antonio and Bartolomea took a turn for the worse: a conspiracy against Maso degli Albizzi and the major members of his faction was denounced by some exiles stationed in Bologna, which inspired the Albizzi to demand a reform of the government, then in the hands of the Ricci, Alberti, Medici and other *cives* connected to them. Sanminiato dei Ricci and Francesco Davizzi, who were closely linked to the Alberti, were condemned as traitors and executed, while the other Alberti were declared guilty and condemned to exile, with the exception of Antonio who seemed to be protected by the prestige of his father, by his reputation for integrity and mildness, and by the fact that he was in office as Gonfalonier of Justice and therefore enjoyed immunity.²²

Yet his fame could not save him: a Camaldolese monk who was among the conspirators confessed that Antonio was guilty of treason, so as soon as his government post was over, he too was banished from the city of Florence. For his part, Dominici preached fiery sermons, invoking universal judgement and denouncing the opacity and injustices that were daily committed in the government palace. The *reportatio* of these sermons does not directly mention the Florentine political turmoil of 1400–1401 that personally affected Antonio degli Alberti, but they seem to allude to it. Antonio was thus banished, then exiled, from Florence, where he left his wife Bartolomea and his four children:

21 Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivi dello Spedale di S. Maria Nuova, Monastero del Paradiso, 277, fol. 12v. In the monastery library, there was an abstract of Giovanni Dominici, *Regola del governo di cura familiare*, copied by Sister Raffaella. The text in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, E. v. 1882, fol. 92v.

22 On Niccolò Alberti: Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze*, 23–24; 74–79; 155–85; Chabot, "Messer Niccolò degli Alberti, 'pater pauperum', Lettura del testamento"; and Maddalena Modesti, "Il testamento del nobilis miles dominus Niccolò del fu Iacopo degli Alberti. Edizione critica," in *Lospedale dell'Orbatello. Carità e arte a Firenze*, 45–72.

Brigida, whose name underlined his devotion to the Swedish saint, Bionda, Francesco and Maria.²³

Meanwhile the new Birgittine convent had been inhabited since 1394, when at Alberti's request, a group of friars from the mother house of Vadstena arrived in Florence, led by the confessor general Magnus Petri, or Blessed Manno, as he was later to be called in Italy, and the Spaniard Lucas Jacobi.²⁴ The first nuns entered later than the friars, but were already in residence on 2 March 1395, when the first abbess of Paradiso was elected. Documents report that at this date there were fourteen nuns.²⁵ In 1396, the founder of Paradiso decided to abandon the undertaking, perhaps because of confrontations with the new superior of the convent, Lucas Jacobi, who had succeeded Blessed Manno in 1396. By 9 December 1401 the tensions between them had eased, after captains of the Guelph Party had been appointed defenders of the convent. From 1401 onwards, there was a progressive consolidation of the monastery for the rest of the century: numerous privileges were granted by popes; numerous donations and bequests were made by private devotees; numerous unions and incorporations with other monasteries increased its income.²⁶ Since it descended from

23 D'Addario, "Alberti Antonio", online <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-alberti_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/>](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-alberti_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>); see also Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Political Views in the Preaching of Giovanni Dominici in Renaissance Florence, 1400–1406," *Renaissance Quarterly* 55 (2002), 19–48; On the relationship between Bartolomea and Giovanni Dominici, see Isabella Gagliardi, "Giovanni Dominici e Bartolomea degli Alberti: divergenti convergenze tra un frate domenicano e un'aristocratica a Firenze nel primo Quattrocento," *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà* 29 (2019), 241–68, and also Isabella Gagliardi, "Il 'Libro d'amor di carità' di Giovanni Dominici: alcune tracce per una lettura," in *Verso Savonarola. Misticismo, profezia, empiti riformistici fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini, Giuseppe Picone (Florence: 1999), 47–48.

24 Pietro Dazzi (ed.), *Vita del Beato Manno di Svezia primo padre del Monastero di Santa Brigida presso a Firenze, scritta da una monaca fiorentina nel secolo xv, né mai stampata* (Florence: 1864), 162; Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Carte Stroziane, III, 233, fol. 9r.

25 Moreni, *Notizie storiche dei contorni di Firenze*, 132; Florence, Archivio Innocenti, serie I, n. 10, fol. 5r.

26 Bacarelli, "Storia del monastero di Santa Maria e Brigida al Paradiso," 18–29; when Alberti was condemned to exile for thirty years, all his properties were confiscated by the municipal authorities, including the donations he had made to the Paradiso: Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Capitani di Parte, Numeri Rossi, 50, fol. 146v. The properties of Paradiso were returned to the monks in a deed dated 9 December 1401, in which the Captains of the Guelph Party were appointed defenders of the convent: Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivi dello Spedale di S. Maria Nuova, Monastero del Paradiso, 145, fols. 27v–28r; 277, fols. 3r, 5v. Frate Luca conducted negotiations with the Florentine government to acquire the property again, Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Diplomatico, Bonifazio, 9 dicembre 1401.

their splendid 14th-century villa, the Alberti's Paradiso village belonged to the parish of St. Peter's, which was under the pastoral care of the Vallombrosans from the abbey of St. Bartholomew in Ripoli.²⁷

Even in absence of a really probative document in this regard, in my opinion the historical evidence highlighted above leads us to believe that the very choice of founding a Birgittine monastery on the part of Antonio degli Alberti should not be separated from a sort of climate of expectation, with regard to reform and renewal in the church and society, which in those years animated radical religious experiences, such as those of the Jesuati or the Whites. Last but not least, the political *coté* of Birgitta's message could well meet the interests of a large section of the Florentine aristocracy and, in particular, of Antonio degli Alberti.²⁸ So, the foundation of the Paradiso convent may also have been under the sign of prophecy, so to speak.²⁹

Paradiso's Role in Florence

After investigating the events that led to the foundation of the monastery, it is useful to try to understand how the monastic community was able to manage and conduct its relations with civic society, as well as how it organised itself internally.

Sister Marta dei Casali was elected abbess on 2 March 1395; she had previously been mother superior at the Clarian monastery of Saint Mary in Targia, outside the walls of Cortona. The preaching friar Giovanni Dominici, spiritual father to Antonio degli Alberti's wife Bartolomea, wrote his *Regola del governo familiare* right at Birgitta's: the book was dedicated to Bartolomea to help her manage her family after Antonio was banished from Florence by the powerful Albizzi faction.³⁰ Perhaps it is significant that the notary Ser Lapo

27 Carlo Celso Calzolari, "Linee generali di storia ecclesiastica del territorio," in *Chiese, monasteri, ospedali del piano e delle colline di Ripoli* (Florence: 1983), 1–21, 8. On the history of the monastery and its (tortuous) fortunes, Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta of Sweden in Tuscan art and Sermons," 223–46.

28 See Unn Falkeid, "The Political Discourse of Birgitta of Sweden," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 80–101; Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested: An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2017), 121–45.

29 See also the conclusions formed in Michele Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgare e riscritture profetiche," *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* LXXIII (2019), 69–84.

30 Gagliardi, "Giovanni Dominici e Bartolomea degli Alberti."

Mazzei of Florence called the Dominican friar a disciple of St. Francis, or even St. "Brisida".³¹

In 1408, Ser Pietro di ser Mino da Montevarchi, Chancellor of the Florentine Republic from 1406 to 1410, and two of his brothers, Paolo and Giovanni, entered the male section of the monastery. Thanks to Ser Pietro, the Signoria took the convent under its protection in 1408, first exempting it from the payment of taxes, then from the payment of the *gabelle* at the gates of the city. The cultural life inside the monastery was quite lively. Renato Piattoli has shown that the friars of the convent had altar panels made for a number of Franciscan churches in Corsica, thus assuming the role of intermediary between the actual patrons and the artists. They also arranged to have numerous codices copied and illuminated for Franciscan convents in Tuscany and other regions, as well as for illustrious men such as Bernardino of Siena.³² In the 15th and 16th centuries, young women from important Florentine families all took the veil: girls from the Belcari, Peruzzi, Corbinelli, Ginori, Ridolfi, Acciaioli, and Gambacorta families.³³ The aristocratic background of the girls is historically significant. First, it reveals that these girls probably had families in a position to pay for their studies, so the cultural level of these girls was by no means low. Second, we can assume it was relatively easier for these girls than others to have contact with people of a medium to high cultural level even after entering the monastery. They would in fact have been able to use relationships and ties of family origin to the advantage of the monastic community as well. Their social networks, therefore, constituted the first level of monastic sociability, a level that was also very useful in terms of the economic and cultural activities that took place in the convent.

The Paradiso monastery played a very interesting role in the production of manuscript books in Florence, especially but not solely as an intermediary between clients and copyists.³⁴ From the second quarter of the 15th century the activity of copying intensified, in part to increase the number of volumes in the internal library. In the beginning, this work was only taken up by monks, but from the end of the 15th century onwards it was mainly the work of the nuns. The growing diffusion of printed books, more to the point, did not affect the work of copying itself, which nevertheless continued to be carried out regularly. The fact that the nuns continued copying books even after the printing

31 Undated letter, but after 1399. Cesare Guasti (ed.), *Ser Lapo Mazzei, Lettere di un notaio a un mercante del secolo XIV* (Florence: 1880), 228.

32 Renato Piattoli, "Il monastero del Paradiso presso Firenze nella storia dell'arte del primo Quattrocento," *Studi Francescani* 18 (1936), 1–21, especially 19–20.

33 Roberta Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze* (Florence: 2007), 12.

34 Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze*, 10–11.

press was well established is not an insignificant detail. Part of the reason for this was that the act of manually copying a text was considered a “pious” activity because it was done with sacrifice and effort, and was therefore an instrument of penance and a means to praise God.³⁵

In 1492 Giovanni Tritemio, the author of *De laude scriptorum*, extolled the art of the copyist inasmuch as it was noble and refined, and because his effort had great spiritual value. It was a “holy” endeavour, which could sanctify the copyist.³⁶ According to the writer, the following episode was no chance occurrence: the corpse of a copyist, exhumed many years after his death, had three fingers still intact, and they were the very ones that had been dedicated to writing.³⁷ The nuns also copied for economic reasons: they could acquire books for their library while only paying for the paper and ink, while the time and art of copying were their freewill offering to God and to the community. Thus, a considerable library could be built up at a very low cost. This shows that Paradiso had a *scriptorium* of women who supplied the library with the books necessary for communal reading, as well as presumably for individual and meditative purposes.

The Paradiso monastery thus created a library of manuscripts copied mainly by nuns. Their *scriptorium* was comparable to other important female monastic *scriptoria*, particularly to that of the Clarisse in Monteluce and the *Corpus Domini* monastery in Bologna, where the famous St. Caterina Vigri lived and

35 “Mater mea omne tempus suum tribus distinscit temporibus: uno quo laudavit Deum ore suo, aliud pro manibus suis ei serviebat, tertium quo corporis infirmitati compatiens necessaria tribuit ei iuxta modum. Sic sorores omni tempore quo divinis non intersunt vel lectioni et tale tempus fuerit, etiam manibus suis laborent, ut sicut mi serviunt ore sic servient et reliquis membris. Et iste labor non sit ad aliquam mundi vanitatem, non ad aliquid proprium lucrum, sed sicut labor mee pro onore Dei et Ecclesiarum, vel pro pauperum utilitate [...] Illos autem libros habeant quotquot voluerint in quibus addiscendum est vel studendum,” *Regula*, Capit. xxx, in Renato Piattoli, “Capitolo di storia dell’arte libraria. Rapporti tra il Monastero fiorentino del Paradiso e l’Ordine francescano,” *Studi Francescani* 29 (1932), 1–21, especially 16; Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze*, 17. See also Isabella Gagliardi, “Circolazione di scritti edificanti nei monasteri e nei circoli devoti femminili in Toscana nel Basso Medioevo,” *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome – Moyen Âge* 131–2 (2019), 311–23; <<http://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/6227>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/mefrm.6227>>.

36 Gianna Pomata and Gabriella Zarri (eds.), *I monasteri femminili come centri di cultura fra Rinascimento e Barocco. Atti del convegno storico internazionale (Bologna 8–10 dicembre 2000)* (Rome: 2005).

37 Attilio Bartoli Langelì, Massimiliano Bassetti, “I tres digiti, quasi una canonizzazione,” in *All’incrocio dei saperi: la mano. Atti del convegno di studi (Padova, 29–30 settembre 2000)*, ed. Achille Olivieri (Padua: 2004), 49–57, in particular 54–55.

worked.^{38,39} Thanks to Rosanna Miriello's thorough study of Paradiso's book production, one hundred codices of the old monastic library were identified and catalogued. Most of them are compilations of passages from other devotional works useful for the nuns' meditation. One miscellaneous codex in paper that exemplifies the situation was compiled in 1479 and contains copies of numerous sermons by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, passages from works of other church scholars and philosophers together with sayings of saints: it was handwritten by an anonymous nun at Paradiso. After the ownership note – "*questo libro è delle monache del Paradiso*" – it reads "*scripto per mano di una di quelle nel MCCCCLXX9*" (sic)⁴⁰ The choice of texts is significant because it represents a conscious decision.

Those texts contained wisdom which was most likely useful for the nuns' "apostolate" at the grate, for stimulating conversation with laymen and laywomen who would come to the monastery.⁴¹ The ways in which these exchanges took place are not easy to discover, but details of a few cases are known because they involved figures who later became famous, leaving traces of these contacts in archive documents. One such case is Domenica al Paradiso or Domenica Narducci, who became a famous Florentine mystic and prophetess (1474–1554) connected to the memory of Girolamo Savonarola, and founder of a large urban monastery called "della Crocetta".⁴²

In what follows, I will elaborate on the relationship between Domenica and the nuns of Paradiso as a significant example. In fact, in the absence of

³⁸ Mario Sensi, "I monasteri e bizzocaggi dell'Osservanza francescana nel secolo xv a Foligno," in *All'ombra della chiara luce*, ed. Aleksander Horowski (Rome: 2005), 87–115; Pietro Messa, Angela Emmanuela Scandella, Mario Sensi (eds.), *Il richiamo delle origini. Le clarisse dell'osservanza e le fonti clariane* (Assisi: 2009); Patrizia Bertini Malgarini and Ugo Vignuzzi, "Ancora sul volgarizzamento umbro del Liber specialis gratiae," *Contributi di Filologia dell'Italia Mediana*, 19 (2005), 1–23; Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze*.

³⁹ Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso di Firenze*, 17.

⁴⁰ This book belongs to the nuns of Paradiso, handwritten by one of them in 1479, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conv. Soppr., D. 1. 1326, fol. 121r see Claudia Borgia, "Non per passatempo ma solo per consolazione ...: la scrittura delle religiose nei fondi della Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze," in *Carte di donne. Per un censimento regionale della scrittura delle donne dal XVI al XX secolo, Vol. II, Atti della giornata di studio, Firenze, Archivio di Stato, 3 febbraio 2005*, Alessandra Contini e Anna Scattigno ed. (Roma: 2007), 161–90; 437–43, online version <https://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/memoriadonne/cartedidonne/cdd_14_borgia.pdf>, 26.

⁴¹ Rendered "apostolate of the window" in Simon Tugwell, *Early Dominicans. Selected writings* (Mahwah: 1982), 429.

⁴² For further information about Domenica Narducci, see Clara Stella's chapter in this volume.

other sources about the cultural impact of the nuns over lay women, by reconstructing this relationship we can form an idea of how the nuns of Paradise fulfilled their cultural role as wise teachers even for people outside the monastic community. When Domenica Narducci was a child, she lived quite near Paradiso, which also explains the toponym “da Paradiso” that follows her name. Her earliest spiritual instruction came from contact with the nuns and their confessor. The information which can be recovered today, thanks to documentation regarding Domenica’s canonisation, allows a peek at how “divine” knowledge was spread by the Paradiso nuns.⁴³

Domenica Narducci came from a lowly family and her father had died; she was self-taught from a religious point of view, thanks to support from the Paradiso monastery. For a time, she lived as a recluse in her mother’s home in a tiny enclosure made near the latrine. Here she prayed and did penance, leaving her cell only to help the nearby sick and poor and to visit the St. Birgitta monastery church. The historical significance of the relationship between Domenica and the nuns is difficult to grasp, but sworn testimonies given during her canonisation process (1623–1624) yield precious elements of interest. Sister Maria Maddalena de Bonsi and Sister Maria di Bartolomeo Fortini, professed nuns in Saint Birgitta’s monastery, together with their abbess were called upon to answer questions posed by the archbishop’s delegate. Even though 80 years had gone by since the death of Sister Domenica (1554), and even though the monastery was no longer under the pastoral care of the Birgittine male clergy but now followed the Augustinian rule, the nuns testified that Sister Domenica was well remembered by the older members of their community as a true example of Christian virtue. Many old nuns bore witness to the holiness of Domenica: Raffaella Federighi, Ippolita Benvoglianti, Costanza Canigiani, Dorotea Cacciaponti, Filippa Bonsi and Cornelia Puccini. These women held onto Domenica’s memory, having heard about her from superiors and spiritual fathers who had known her personally.⁴⁴ Their stories had painted a clear picture, and the abbess of Paradiso, Sister Porzia Fabbroni, a well-educated woman, expressed her regret at never having found time to write the life story of Domenica based on those accounts. In particular, she testified that Domenica used to come to the monastery grate and talk with the

43 See the reconstruction of this part of Domenica’s biography in Isabella Gagliardi, *Sola con Dio. La missione di Domenica da Paradiso nella Firenze del primo Cinquecento* (Florence: 2007), 3–22.

44 Also preserved in Sister Domenica’s *Epistolario* are numerous letters sent to the prioress and nuns of the Paradiso monastery. Some of these are published in Gerardo Antignani (ed.), *Scritti spirituali della Ven. Suor Domenica dal Paradiso, prima edizione I*, (Poggibonsi: 1985), 183–87.

nuns about the “things of God”, and how she eagerly listened to the life story of Saint Birgitta and the rule of the monastery.⁴⁵ Furthermore, she recounted that when Domenica had a prophetic vision about Florence, she ran to talk about it with a monk of Paradiso, Bartolomeo da Selvioli, who was the nuns’ confessor. He accepted her prophesy as reliable, and after examining it, he encouraged her to share it publicly.⁴⁶

These episodes are very significant for two reasons: first, because they show how the Birgittine nuns and their confessor were willing to impart spiritual teaching to a humble and devout girl like Domenica; second, because the latter episode shows how the gift of prophesy was received at the end of the 15th century in this monastic context. It was not rejected, but rather weighed, and if it was judged to be a product of divine inspiration, it was welcomed and legitimated. Furthermore, once Domenica da Paradiso had founded her own monastery, she wrote several letters of edification in response to requests from the abbess and community at Paradiso: their disciple had ultimately become their instructor.⁴⁷

To learn more about the network of relationships and contacts that the monastic community at Paradiso was able to utilise, we can explore its link to the Jesuati friars. Since the Jesuati congregation is not very well-known, it is useful to present it briefly, summarising the salient points of its formation and historical identity while stressing the contact points with the Birgittine community.

The Jesuati

The Jesuati, who are referred to in the above-mentioned memoirs relating to the Paradiso monastery, took up residence in their Florence convents around the

45 Florence, Archivio Arcivescovile di Firenze, 1624. *Processus super vita et miraculis serve Dei Venerabilis sororis Dominice Monasterii Sancte Crucis in Civitate Florentie fundatricis*, Archive not inventoried, Volume 1, fols. 185r–185v; Isabella Gagliardi, “Domenica da Paradiso: fama di santità e processi di canonizzazione,” *Hagiographica*, 13 (2006), 217–90.

46 Positio 67 in the remissorial *Processus* of 1630. Florence, Archivio Arcivescovile di Firenze, Florentia, Sacra Rituum Congregatione Canonizationis Beate Serve Dei Sororis Dominice Paradisiae Monialium Sancte Crucis fundatricis *Processus remissorialis* [30 October 1630] Archive not inventoried; Gagliardi, “Domenica da Paradiso: fama di santità e processi di canonizzazione,” 220–75.

47 Isabella Gagliardi, “Quare sermones faceret, cum mulieribus predicare non liceret: suor Domenica da Paradiso una ‘predicatrice’ nella Firenze del XVI secolo,” in *Caterina da Siena e la vita religiosa femminile. Un percorso domenicano*, ed. Pierantonio Piatti (Rome: 2020) 315–48.

same time as the monastery was founded. These monks and nuns were followers of Giovanni Colombini and Francesco di Mino Vincenti of Siena, a Siennese merchant and an aristocrat, who had forsaken the world to follow Christ in the mid-14th century. After their sudden conversion, Colombini and Vincenti gathered a group of followers resolved on sharing their lifestyle. They did penance, visibly humbled themselves in places in the city where they had formerly been honoured and publicly praised the name of Jesus with brief litanies in the streets and squares of Siena (and thus were called “Jesuati”).

Due to their popularity with those belonging to the political faction expelled from the city government in 1355, these men were banished from Siena around 1363. But before their exile, Giovanni’s cousin followed his example and founded a circle of devout women, who became known as female Jesuati.⁴⁸ These groups flowed into one movement, which was orally recognised in Viterbo by Pope Urban V in 1367 – the year Colombini died – and which underwent a long and complicated institutionalisation procedure, first becoming a congregation and finally an actual order.⁴⁹

The Jesuati practised a very distinctive form of piety, based on Augustinian ideas but open to influences from the Order of Preachers and the Order of Friars Minor: it was intimist, and exceedingly strict and austere. For humility’s sake, they refused priesthood until the end of the 16th century, after which time they underwent a series of changes, becoming a mendicant order following the Augustinian rule. At this point they accepted priesthood, but their order was later suppressed by the pope in 1668. Meanwhile the Jesuati had spread throughout the centre-north area of Italy and in Toulouse, mainly in cities, but they also oversaw notable shrines, such as the Sanctuary of Montenero in the hills of Livorno. The Jesuati women’s movement took the same avenues, but during the 16th century left the pastoral care of their male counterparts, instead coming under direct jurisdiction of the bishop. Their order lasted until the second half of the 20th century, when the last Jesuati women merged into the Camillian Ministers of the Infirm.

48 Paolo Nardi, “Caterina Colombini e le origini della congregazione delle gesuate,” in *Le Vestigia dei Gesuati. L’eredità culturale di Colombini e dei suoi seguaci*, ed. Isabella Gagliardi (Florence: 2020), 41–56, <<https://fupress.com/capitoli/caterina-colombini-e-le-origini-della-congregazione-delle-gesuate/7209>>.

49 The extremely convoluted story is illustrated in Isabella Gagliardi, *1 “Pauperes Yesuati” tra esperienze religiose e conflitti istituzionali* (Rome: 2004); see also Georg Dufner, *Geschichte der Jesuaten* (Rome: 1975), 58–79; partially rediscussed in Isabella Gagliardi, “Le vestigia dei gesuati,” *Le Vestigia dei Gesuati. L’eredità culturale di Colombini e dei suoi seguaci*, 13–38, <<https://media.fupress.com/files/pdf/24/4349/19357>>.

Tracing the movement's beginnings, it was actually the Jesuati women who arrived first in Florence: in 1382, the founder of the women's group, Caterina di Tommaso Colombini, together with her companions Niccolosa di Nastagio Neri of Florence and Agnolina del fu Torello of Prato, were granted a charitable donation to found the first Florentine house. By 1395, they were living in two houses in the Renaio area and were commonly known as the "Poverine" (the poor ones). Indeed, Antonio degli Alberti personally came to the aid of the Jesuati women. In Venice, in 1383, the Florentine Bartolomeo Ridolfi was already a Jesuat and made a will leaving his fellow friars about 600 ducats to found a convent in the city or county of Florence. Thus, it can be seen that the male Jesuati did not yet have their own base in Florence, while the women already did. However, the legacy donation did not settle the matter. It was not until after 1384 that they finally took up residence in Florence, in the San Giuliano hospital outside the San Frediano gate. Only in 1409 did the friars finally find a place within the city walls, when they purchased the Santa Trinità monastery, referred to as "Trinità vecchia", which belonged to the parish of San Lorenzo. They remained there until 1438, when they moved to the San Giusto convent near the city walls.⁵⁰

The activities that busied the men's division of the congregation are more pertinent to Paradiso and the Birgittines: from the days of their earliest mentor Giovanni Colombini, the Jesuati men were involved in translating classical texts into the vernacular. In Colombini's *Epistolario*, compiled after his death, there is an interesting exchange of letters with a notary called Domenico da Monticchiello, who may have been part of the group which put together this *Epistolario*. Domenico had become part of a group known as the "Brigata de' povari" – this is how the men of Colombini and Vincenti's group defined themselves – and the matters referred to in the letters likely date back to 1361–63.⁵¹ Colombini had asked Domenico to vernacularise the significant and complex text *De Theologia Mystica* by Hugh of Balma. His association with

50 Giovan Battista Uccelli, *il Convento di S. Giusto alle mura e i Gesuati. Aggiungonsi i capitoli della loro regola. Testo di lingua* (Florence: 1865), 60–61, 67; Gagliardi, 1 "Pauperes Yesuati", 134. The Trinità vecchia convent actually consisted of a few houses located in the present Via Guelfa.

51 Giuseppe Pardi, "Sulla vita e sugli scritti di Domenico da Monticchiello," *Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria*, 3 (1896), 22–42, the dating of the letters is according to Pardi's estimate. On Domenico da Monticchiello, see the paper by Ezio Levi, "Un rimatore senese alla corte dei Visconti, messer Domenico da Monticchiello," *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, 9 (1908), 5–33 on the latter period of the notary's life, and which has the merit of distinguishing him from a jurist by the same name, cfr. Liana Cellerino, "Domenico da Montecchiello," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, volume 40 (Rome: 1991), for the digital version <

both male and female followers of Saint Birgitta, together with the fact that this text ideally connects with a whole constellation of other writings, makes it worthwhile to take a deeper look at his approach to this translation.

Colombini was likely introduced to *De Theologia Mystica* by his own spiritual father, the Carthusian Pietro (or Petrone) de' Petroni.⁵² Domenico undertook the translation of Hugh of Balma's text, but when he encountered difficulty in understanding, he wrote to his spiritual guide Giovanni Colombini, reaching out for help. He reveals that the translation had become an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of many teachings that had been imparted to him orally when the two used to keep company together, but that were too difficult for him at the time.⁵³ He called upon Giovanni for help, convinced that his advisor had direct experience with what Domenico was only reading about, and he asked Giovanni for explanations regarding a commentary on one of St. Paul's letters to Timothy, quoted by Hugh of Balma. Domenico was working on a literal translation of *De Theologia Mystica*, and in his letter, he wrote his translation instead of the Latin text, which Colombini would not have understood. He was not competent enough in Latin to be able to express an opinion on the original text, as his knowledge probably did not go much beyond liturgical Latin. Just the same, since he had experienced the presence of God in day-to-day living, he could help the translator in his arduous task. It is interesting to follow the exchange of ideas between the two correspondents, which was necessary to grasp the true spirit of the original text and ensure an accurate translation. Just as interesting is the mention of numerous other texts used by Domenico to produce a good vernacular version, from the *Vite dei Padri* to the *Horologium Sapientie* by Suso.

The Jesuati were authors of many vernacular translations, most of which were very old, but they also translated contemporary texts, such as *De disciplina et perfectionis vitae monasticae* by Lawrence Justinian. The most significant translations produced by the Jesuati were *Collazioni* by John Cassian, *De consolatione philosophiae* by Boethius, the ascetic treatises authored by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (or at least ascribed to him), Henry Suso's *Horologium*

52 See Gagliardi, *I Pauperes Yesuati*, 107, 187, 501.

53 Adolfo Bartoli (ed.), *Le lettere del B. Giovanni Colombini da Siena pubblicate per cura di Adolfo Bartoli* (Lucca: 1856), 40. Ildefonso Tassi states as follows: "un'opera uscita dalla Certosa da segnalare per il grande influsso da essa esercitato nello sviluppo della metodizzazione della preghiera e della vita spirituale, è la *Mistica Theologia* [...] di Ugo da Balma. Questi fu uno dei primi scrittori metodici sulle vie spirituali; e la sua distinzione divenne l'usuale del linguaggio ascetico: via purgativa, via illuminativa, e via unitiva. Contemporaneo a S. Bonaventura, egli si incontrò nella trattazione delle stesse dottrine col grande dottore mistico," Ildefonso Tassi, *Ludovico Barbo (1381-1443)* (Rome: 1952), 108.

Sapientiae, I trenta gradi della scala celestiale and exposition of the *Pater Noster* by St. Jerome, Gregory the Great's *Moralia* (or *Moralium libri*), *Regula pastoralis* also by St. Gregory, the seven penitential psalms, *Esposizioni del Vangelo* by Simon of Cascia, Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermoni*, *Prato spirituale* by John Moschus, St. Augustine's *Monte dell'orazione* and *Sermoni*, John Chrysostom's *Sermoni*, the *Epistole* and *Vita* of St. Jerome, St. Isaac the Syrian's *Vita*, together with numerous other hagiographies.⁵⁴ These writings, both old and contemporary, shared an austere view of what authentic Christianity truly was. Some of these texts later found their place in the Paradiso library.

The presence of these same books in the monastery library is not accidental. First, we must consider their cultural content: these were books that extolled the ancient, austere, and rigorous model of life, a type of spiritual manifesto of the monastic community. Secondly, those books reveal the social connections of the monastic community and thus the relationship with the Jesuats, translators, and "friends" of the monastery. It was a library carefully built by the community and its composition reveals other valuable information: above all, that concerning the copyist nuns.

Presentation of the Library

Ultimately, the monastery of Santa Brigida al Paradiso in Florence would come to have a library which comprised manuscripts copied mainly by nuns. Was this extremely unusual for the era? Sadly, we do not have enough research material to be able to make a realistic comparison. However, it is perhaps helpful to remember that in his *Book of Good Practice*, Paolo di Messer Pace of Certaldo (ca. 1320–1370) stated that the girl destined for monastic life had to be educated in such a way as to know how to read and possess the rudiments of writing technique.⁵⁵ The women at Paradiso had exceeded Paolo's rather modest expectation of women by a large margin.

54 Vernacular versions are addressed in detail in Isabell Gagliardi, "I Gesuati e i volgarizzamenti (seconda metà XIV–Prima metà XV secolo)," in *Toscana bilingue (1260 ca.–1430 ca.)*. *Per una storia sociale del tradurre medievale*, ed. Sara Bischetti, Michele Lodone, Cristiano Lorenzi and Antonio Montefusco (Berlin-Boston: 2021), 415–34. <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110702231-020>>.

55 Laura De Angelis, "Paolo di messer Pace da Certaldo," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, volume 81 (Rome: 2014), online version <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/paolo-di-messer-pace-da-certaldo_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/>; Salomone Morpurgo (ed.), *Il libro di buoni costumi di Paolo di messer Pace da Certaldo: documento di vita trecentesca fiorentina* (Florence: 1921), 22, 127; Irene Graziani, "Saper leggere e saper scrivere", *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Moyen Âge*, 131–2 (2019), 385–401.

We have a good idea of the size of the library's holdings. Paradiso's library at one point exceeded one hundred manuscript books: when assets were transferred to the Conservatory of the Boniface Hospital in 1734, the inventory listed 105 codices.⁵⁶ Since the nuns used most of these in their devotional life, the text choices are very important and revealing.

In addition to texts relating to St. Birgitta herself and her order, the holdings included the legends of saints, miracle lists, and prayers. In addition, there were vernacular translations and *florilegia* of the Bible, patristic texts of the Christian fathers, and more recent works on the rules of spiritual life, teaching the degrees of perfection, and the path to salvation. The richness and diversity of the monastic library are certainly not an exception to the rule within the lively context of late medieval and early modern Florence. The city's literacy rate was extremely high compared to other Italian and European cities at the time; it also boasted numerous women's monasteries with nuns who could write and copy texts, as well as create and organise an archive.⁵⁷

The cultural level of the monastery's nuns in the period under examination is very difficult to establish, but an educated guess would put it at a medium-high level according to indirect evidence: the nuns' scribal work seems to suggest this, and we find further confirmation in an interesting letter from the mid-15th century. The letter is addressed to the Birgittine nun Orsola by her father, Feo Belcari. He was a prominent intellectual of Medici Florence and a Jesuat, author of numerous *Laudi* and liturgical dramas, as well as the 15th-century hagiography of Giovanni Colombini.⁵⁸ In 1455, Feo Belcari wrote his daughter Orsola a letter entirely devoted to the virtue of humility, in which he explicitly refers to passages from the 7th-century theologian John Climacus's book *Scala Paradisi*. Unfortunately, we do not have Orsola's answer to her father and cannot know whether Feo was writing about a text known to Orsola, but it is nevertheless interesting to note that the monastery library contained two copies of the *Scala Paradisi*, one complete, the other broken off after the

56 In the 1734 inventory, on occasion of the asset transfer to the Conservatorio dell'Ospedale di Bonifazio, 105 codices are listed: Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Bonifazio, 542, fol. 63v. For the reconstruction of the monastic library, an essential text is Miriello, *I manoscritti del monastero del Paradiso*.

57 Gagliardi, "Circolazione di scritti edificanti nei monasteri e nei circoli devoti femminili in Toscana nel Basso Medioevo."

58 Domenico Moreni (ed.), *Lettere di Feo Belcari* (Florence: 1835), 1–9; 9–16; see also Cesare Guasti (ed.), *Lettera di Suor Costanza Ciaperelli a Feo Belcari* (Prato: 1861), 5. The date of Orsola's death is unknown at present, though it was certainly after 1454, when Feo Belcari wrote her a letter.

first folio and two abstracts.⁵⁹ The second authority cited by Belcari, again in his letter to Orsola, is St. Bernard of Clairvaux. In the monastic library we find two versions of Bernard's *Sermones* in the vernacular, one by the Jesuat Giovanni Tavelli da Tossignano, as well as numerous other works by Bernard or attributed to him,⁶⁰ such as Feo Belcari's translation of *De quatuor gradibus charitatis* by Richard of Saint Victor.⁶¹ The references to humility made by Feo Belcari in his letter to Orsola quoting Bernard are quite vague, but could come from the *Gradi dell'umiltà e della superbia*.⁶² Belcari's letter to Orsola and that of Sister Costanza Ciaperelli to Belcari upon the death of Orsola were later copied by the abbess of the monastery, Sister Cecilia da Diacceto, into a codex incorporating other letters of Belcari, Richard of Saint Victor's *De quatuor gradibus charitatis* and a text attributed to Bernard, *Della inimicizia della carne*.⁶³

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- 59 Vernacularised by Gentile da Foligno, see Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, *Conventi Soppressi* G.II.1491, fols. 6r–93v; 5r/v; abstract in Padova, Biblioteca Civica, C.M. 30, fol. 78v and in Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Palatino 23, fol. 181.
- 60 Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Conv. Soppr. 466, *Sermoni del tempo e dei diversi*, vernacularised by Giovanni Tavelli da Tossignano, *Conventi Soppressi* 4666, fols. 1r–120v; fols. 120v–177v; Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Conv. Soppr. 469, *Sermone sul Cantico dei cantici*, vernacularised by Giovanni da San Miniato, fols. 1r–196v, as well as *Libro della coscienza*, and *Meditazioni*, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, II.IV.65, fols. 1r–41v; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, *Conventi Soppressi* D. I. 1326, fols. 2r–120v (Lodi della Vergine Maria, Pianto della Vergine, *Sermoni del tempo, dei santi e dei diversi*, vernacularised by Giovanni Tavelli da Tossignano, *Gradi dell'umiltà e della superbia*, *Parabola* II. La lotta dei due re, *Della miseria umana*, *Lamento della perdita solitudine*, *Sermone su Matteo 19: 27*, attributed to Bernard).
- 61 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, II.IV.65, fols. 42r–54b; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, *Conventi Soppressi* D.I 1631, fols. 174r–176v (*Meditazione*), fols. 183v.193v (*Gradi dell'umiltà e della superbia*, *Sermone del venerdì santo*).
- 62 “Ti dico insieme con San Bernardo; se tu vuoi impetrare perdonanza de' peccati, sia umile; se tu vuoi vincere le tentazioni, sia umile; se tu vuoi oppressare i tuoi nemici, sia umile; se tu vuoi custodire, e guardare le virtù, sia umile; se tu vuoi avere le rivelazioni dei misteri, sia umile; se tu vuoi profondamente intendere la sacra Scrittura, sia umile; se tu vuoi meritare l'altitudine della gloria, sia umile; se tu vuoi esser grata a ognuno, sia umile; se vuoi servire in te la pace, sia umile,” in *Lettere di Feo Belcari*, ed. Moreni, 8–9.
- 63 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ricc. 2627: Feo Belcari, *Epistola a suor Ursula*, fols. 1r–5r; Costanza Ciaperelli, *Epistola a Feo Belcari in morte di suor Ursula* fols. 5r–8r; Feo Belcari, *Epistola a un suo amico* fols. 8r–14r; Feo Belcari, *Epistola a Piero di Pippo* fols. 14r–23v; Iacopone da Todi, *Trattato su come l'uomo può pervenire alla cognizione della verità*, vernacularised by Feo Belcari, fols. 23v–30r; *Deti di Iacopone da Todi* cc. 30v–37v; *Meditazione sulla perfezione morale* cc. 37v–49r; Ugo Panziera, *Dolori della mente di Cristo* fols. 49v–57r; Giordano da Pisa, *Predica del 21 agosto 1306*, fols. 57r–66r; *Terzine anonime* fol. 66v; Riccardo da San Vittore, *I quattro gradi della carità* fols. 67r–101v (attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux and vernacularised by Belcari; ps. Bernardo, *Della inimicizia della carne* fol. 102r/v; *Vite dei santi Padri* (Libro II), vernacularised by Domenico

The surviving monastic codices demonstrate the significant link between the community of Saint Birgitta and the Florentine Jesuati community which, as we have seen, was a community to which Belcari was deeply connected. In fact, among the codices of the Paradiso abbey itself, there are also works spread by the Jesuat congregation: among these are the vernacular translation of *De quatuor gradibus charitatis*, the *Laudi* and epistolary of Feo Belcari, the translations of Bernard of Clairvaux's texts, the *Morali* and the *Regola Pastorale* of Pope Gregory by the Jesuat Giovanni Tavelli of Tossignano,⁶⁴ *Prato Spirituale* by John Moschus and the *Dialoghi* of Pope Gregory, again translated by Feo Belcari,⁶⁵ a *Lauda* by Giovanni Colombini,⁶⁶ a *Lauda* by the Jesuat Bianco da Siena.⁶⁷

But let us now try to reflect on those books present in the library that constitute a cohesive group in terms of cultural meanings, that is, that constitute that kind of spiritual manifesto I mention above. It seems to me that at the centre of the group of these texts is a very particular book, the *Theologia Mystica*. In fact, the monastic library contained the oldest vernacular copy of Hugh of Balma's *De Theologia Mystica*.⁶⁸ Did this book occupy a central place among the literary choices made by the Birgittine nuns? It is certainly a significant text: meditation on the Passion is offered to the reader as the only element necessary to the believer for taking up the unitive way (the other two which precede it being the purgative and illuminative ways), in order to reach the highest degree of the soul's conformation to Christ. *De Theologia Mystica* consisted in "l'occulta sapienza dell'amore divino" (the hidden wisdom of God's

Cavalca, excerpts fols. 103r–106v; Trattato del modo per ottenere la perfezione spirituale, fols. 107r–158r.

64 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi soppressi D. I. 1326, fols. 26v–51r; 63v–121r; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, II.IV, 85, fols. 1r/v; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi E. I. 1324, fols. 2r–185r; fol. 190r/v.

65 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, II. 1719, fols. 81r–140v; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, B. IV. 1503, fols. 1r–117r; fols. 130r–132v.

66 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ricc. 1413, fol. 356r/v.

67 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ricc. 1413, fols. 252r–256r. See also Silvia Serventi, "I laudari gesuati: la raccolta poetica del Bianco da Siena," in *Le vestigia dei gesuati*, 95–116, <[https://fupress.com/capitoli/i-laudari-gesuati-la-raccolta-poetica-del-bianco-da-siena/7212](https://fupress.com/capitoli/i-laudari-gesuati-la-raccolta-poetica-del-bianco-da-siena/)>; see also Gagliardi, *I Pauperes Yesuati*, 99–172.

68 On this text: *Hugh of Balma on Mystical Theology: A Translation and an Overview of His "De theologia mystica"*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: 2002); Marc Vial, "Le Viae Sion Lugent de Hugues de Balma et l'évolution de la comprehension gersonienne de la Théologie Mystique," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 89 (2009), 347–65; Barbara Faes de Mottoni, *Figure e motivi della contemplazione nelle teologie medievali*, (Florence: 2007), 150–178.

love), and offered the reader *the* Christian doctrine par excellence, because it flowed directly from God (as it explained in the prologue). The book exerted a strong influence in developing a method for prayer and spiritual life, and its author introduced a tripartite distinction which became recurrent in ascetic language: the purgative way, the illuminative way and the unitive way.⁶⁹ This position is voluntarist and anti-intellectualist, and its development owes much to exegesis of the New Testament and the letters of St. Paul in particular. The text was written within the context of the Carthusian monks, but its popularity spread beyond the order, even giving rise to a vernacular translation. The monastery's copy of *De Theologia Mystica* by Hugh of Balma was actually a vernacular version, translated by the Jesuat Domenico da Monticchiello probably between 1360 and 1367.⁷⁰

Besides being influenced by Bonaventure, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and Thomas Gallus, Hugh was also influenced by Augustine and, perhaps, as Jasper Hopkins suggests, by Eriugena and Plotinus.⁷¹ Hugh's book was, of course, also informed by Scripture, and being a Carthusian monk, the author was strongly influenced by Carthusian spirituality. Other scholars were in turn affected by Hugh's ideas: Benoit du Moustier lists, among others, Henry of Herp, Bernardino of Loredo and David Augustine Baker. Harald Walach adds to this list the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the Spaniard Francisco de Osuna, and still others.⁷² In contrast to the philosophical path to God, which proceeds from first making inferences about God in relation to the empirical knowledge of the world, the *via mystica* approaches God primarily through the "feelings" or "passions".⁷³ In its beginning stages, devout meditation, heartfelt reflection, and enhanced mental enlightenment accompany and intensify the feelings of love, or *affectiones amoris*, which are directed, as they are, toward God. The soul, then, ascends mystically to God not by way of erudite learning but by way of divinely potentiated longings for

69 Tassi, *Ludovico Barbo (1381-1443)*, 108.

70 Cellierino, "Domenico da Montecchiello," <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/domenico-da-montecchiello_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/>](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/domenico-da-montecchiello_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>); Simone Albonico, "Un testo pavese in prosa del primo Quattrocento," in *Valorosa vipera gentile. Poesia e letteratura in volgare attorno ai Visconti fra Trecento e primo Quattrocento*, ed. Simone Albonico, Marco Limongelli, Barbara Pagliari, (Rome: 2014), 147-67, 160-61; Mark Chinca, *Meditating Death in Medieval and Early Modern Devotional Writing. From Bonaventure to Luther* (Oxford: 2020), 154-204.

71 Hopkins, *Hugh of Balma on Mystical Theology*.

72 Harald Walach, *Notitia experimentalis Dei. Erfahrungserkenntnis Gottes: Studien zu Hugo de Balmas Text "Viae Sion lugent" und deutsche Übersetzung* (Salzburg:1994), 241-42.

73 Hopkins, *Hugh of Balma on Mystical Theology*; see also Boyd Taylor Coolman, "The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008), 615-32; *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Chichester: 2009).

God's presence: by way of an intensified desire that God be nearer to one than one is to himself, so to speak. Of the three stages (purgative, illuminative, and unitive), the *via purgativa* is the pathway of "preparatory cleansing" for the soul's union with God. The elevation endures as God affords illumination in conjunction with the soul's reflecting upon, and meditating anagogically upon the Word of God, as contained in the Scriptures. Finally, the soul reaches a point of elevated nearness to God, where God ecstatically heightens its fervent longing for union with Him and infuses mystical wisdom into that soul. This wisdom is called "mystical" because it exceeds any knowledge or insight the human soul could ever attain by use of its own powers, unaided by special grace. Mystical wisdom exceeds "incomparably", Hugh writes, every form of "creaturely" knowledge. At the highest stage, he continues, the mind becomes like a mirror so that, having been cleansed, it receives and reflects the bright rays of Eternal Wisdom. Once again, illumination comes to the mind through contemplating the anagogical meanings of Scripture.

The unitive stage is the ultimate stage. On this third pathway, Hugh declared, the soul proceeds toward union with God, toward being transformed *into* God. He maintains that mystical wisdom is an immediately-infused knowledge of God otherwise not available except by way of unitive apprehension, which occurs not by means of the eye of the intellect, but by means of the eye of the emotions. This takes place, further, where all reflection, all contemplation, and all conceptualising have been left behind, and where the soul takes its leave even of all consciousness of itself as a self. In other words, Hugh was writing about the soul's "deification", and of its being transformed into God.

The *Amor Dei*

The texts thus far mentioned were copied in the vernacular. This should be no surprise: the great season of vernacular translations was well advanced by this time, and Tuscany (and Florence in particular) were leaders in an intensive, fertile, and systematic vernacularising operation carried out on numerous texts. Not only religious texts were translated, but also legal and regulatory texts, such as city *Statuti*, for example. Studies have been conducted on this phenomenon since the second half of the 20th century, and it still bears further investigation because it sheds light upon the means, paths and strategies used for disseminating high culture.⁷⁴ It is important to note that these texts

74 One example of a recent study is *Toscana bilingue (1260 ca–1430 ca.)*. *Per una storia sociale del tradurre medievale*.

all centred round the love of God, charity, and (for humans) the real possibility of becoming one with God through unitive love.

In short, the human comes to God through love.⁷⁵ With the systemization of the concept of “mystical theology”, an important step was taken in recognizing the true value of an emotional bond between creature and Creator. *De Theologia Mystica* does not claim authorship of the idea, and for a long time the book was believed to have been written by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, and to have circulated under his influence. It simply took the idea that a union between human beings and God was truly possible thanks to the virtue of love (divine charity), and let this idea play out to its extreme consequences. It therefore confirmed it was possible for the believer to experience God, to come into absolute, experimental knowledge of God.

That is not all. In the library at the Paradiso abbey, there were other texts related to Hugh's *De Theologia Mystica*. The first, in chronological order, was Richard of Saint Victor's *De quatuor gradibus charitatis*, translated from Latin to Florentine vernacular by Feo Belcari. Richard of Saint Victor described the relationship between the soul “in love” and God using ardent language and the appropriate biblical quotations, above all from the Song of Songs. In the theologian's version, Eros was fully rehabilitated, sublimated by the intervention of *charitas*, and “sentimental passion” becomes a vehicle for man's transformation in Christ.⁷⁶ According to Richard, passionate love for God increased human knowledge, and this in turn increased love, drawing a virtuous circle that, in the end, carried the human being beyond the limits of his or her nature. The text portrays the absolute oblatinal abandonment to God but does so with a peculiar and, in my opinion, “revolutionary” acceptance that such an attitude could be attained by anyone – precisely because of the fact that the ability to love is the only reason necessary and sufficient to pass, whole and intact, from humanity to divinity. Richard, though, was not the only one to magnify the qualities of this perfect love.

It was the subject of love which thematically linked these kinds of books in Paradiso's library. There were other books related to mystical theology: important amongst them was the aforementioned *Horologium Sapientiae* by Henry Suso.⁷⁷ The tie between these two books is clearly pointed out by the Jesuat who

75 See also Walach, *Notitia Experimentalis Dei*, 226–34.

76 Ineke Van't Spijker, “Exegesis and emotions. Richard of St. Victor's *De Quatuor Gradibus Violentiae Caritatis*,” *Sacris Erudiri. A Journal of Late Antique and Medieval Christianity* 36 (1996), 147–60.

77 About the author and the text: Kurt Ruh, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik, Band 3: Die Mystik des deutschen Predigerordens und ihre Grundlegung durch die Hochscholastik* (Munich: 1996), 415–75; José van Aelst, “Visualizing the spiritual: images in the life and

vernacularised *De Theologia Mystica*, Domenico da Monticchiello. Domenico relates that, in order to understand what Hugo of Balma had written in his book, he had to refer to another text, *Horologium Sapientiae* by Henry Suso. Suso, a member of the *Gottesfreunde*, or Friends of God, had coined the term *philosophia spiritualis* to indicate the supernatural wisdom descending from God. It was, furthermore, a formula by which he enclosed the intimate sense of his message: the total and declared anti-rationalism of religious thought to privilege the immediate and ecstatic contact between the soul and the Creator by virtue of love,⁷⁸ that is, the virtue of charity understood in the Pauline sense.

In addition to these books, there were others that were strongly connected to Hugh's *De Theologia Mystica*, such as Richard of Saint Victor's book on the four degrees of charity, and Giovanni da Salerno's vernacularisation of *De Gestis Domini Salvatoris* by the Augustinian friar Simon of Cascia. The Jesuati had both read and glossed the latter. In addition, vernacular versions of John Moschus's books (translated by Feo Belcari) were also connected to Hugh's *De Theologia Mystica* because they report the stories of saints who lived by those very terms: totally immersed in the "heroic" mysticism of divine love. Finally, there was the vernacularisation of the work of John Climacus, whose *Scala Paradisi* was repeatedly mentioned in the letter which Feo Belcari wrote to his daughter Orsola, to teach her the path of humility that leads to God.⁷⁹

In short, the Paradiso monastery library contains an interesting collection of books on divine love – *Amor Dei*. It is also noteworthy that the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, whose ideal centre was this concept of mystical theology, had a place in that collection. It also included works of authors such as William of Saint-Thierry, Ivo of Saint Victor and Aelred of Rievaulx. It would later include the works of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, David of Augusta, Meister

teachings of Henry Suso (c. 1295–1366)," in *Speaking to the Eye: Sight and Insight through Text and Image (1150–1650)*, ed. Thérèse de Hemptinne, Veerle Fraeters and Maria Eugenia Gòngora (Turnhout: 2013), 129–51.

78 *Heinrich Seuses Philosophia spiritualis. Quellen, Konzept, Formen und Rezeption*, ed. Rüdiger Blumrich and Philipp Kaiser (Wiesbaden, 1994); Markus Enders, "Heinrich Seuses Konzept einer geistlichen Philosophie," in *Heinrich Seuse, Diener der Ewigen Wahrheit*, ed. Jakobus Kaffanke (Berlin: 2013), 139–77. In the library of the Florentine monastery: excerpts in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, G. II. 1441, fol. 206r/v; copied by Sister Cleofe: Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi, D. I. 1630, fols. 11–113v; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conventi Soppressi D. I. 1631, fols. 11–106r (excerpts).

79 The letter dates back to 19 October 1454. On the Jesuati, see my *I Pauperes Yesuati tra esperienze religiose e conflitti istituzionali*, especially chapter 11, 99–171; on texts vernacularised by the Jesuati, Gagliardi, *I Gesuati e i volgarizzamenti (seconda metà XIV–prima metà XV secolo)*.

Eckhart, the *Theologia Mystica* of Pseudo-Dionysius, which was experiencing something of a period of intense diffusion in the 13th century – the *Sermones* of Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, and the works of Henry Suso. The experiential counterpart to these writings can be found in the biographies and works of some “acclaimed” female mystics: Hildegarde of Bingen, Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn, Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Siena, whose *Vita* and *Opera* the nuns had in their possession, and of course, Birgitta of Sweden. These women’s daily life was graced by an experiential knowledge of God, which they had been ushered into through love, and which was described by the authors mentioned.

Ultimately, considering the range of choice that the nuns of the Paradiso monastery had at their disposal, it seems that the presence of Hugh’s *De Theologia Mystica* and what we might call other “satellite” texts is significant. In fact, these books teach *indiamento* (the Neoplatonic term for the state of being in union with God): the affective way to God which, for women, was also the only possibility and their only non-theological way to Him. Furthermore, the human being’s union with God produces a complete transformation within, that is, the Christification of the human soul, as affirmed by both Simon of Cascia and Catherine of Siena in *De divina doctrina* (a book which also, significantly, was among the books in the monastery library), and this leads to prophecy. In this union with God, the human being is so completely melded with God that he/she can become a channel for the divine voice and see with divine eyes when God enables it. For women, prophesying is not precluded: they are barred from scholastic theology, which became more and more official, but not from prophecy. According to canon law, a woman may not speak of God as a theologian does, but she is not excluded from being the medium through which God speaks. Indeed, God chooses who to use and can use whomever he wishes; as authors writing the *Vitae* of sainted women are oft to point out, if God put words into the mouth of Balaam’s donkey, he truly can do any sort of wonder.

Ultimately, theology is the discourse *on* God, while prophecy is the discourse *of* God. Thus, the commitment of these women, and (above all) that of Saint Birgitta herself, to the road leading to the Lord received the highest form of legitimation and legitimacy.

Conclusions

All in all, what legacy did Birgitta of Sweden pass on to Florentine society? Certainly, the Paradiso monastery itself, even though it would later be converted into a women’s-only monastery, losing its men’s division in the modern

era. Perhaps the most important legacy is in the circulation of Saint Birgitta's works, from her *Regola* to her prophecies – often codicologically associated within the same manuscript – to her *Sermo Angelicus* dedicated to the excellency of the Virgin Mary. One item of quantitative data, significant though partial, points in this direction. A *recensio* conducted on feminine monastic and conventual sources by Claudia Borgia at the National Central Library in Florence – concentrating on the Conventi Soppressi and Conventi Soppressi da Ordinare archives⁸⁰ – revealed a few women in particular: they were either the authors of widely acclaimed works, or were particularly appreciated within the monastic context, or were particularly prolific. Birgitta of Sweden stands out among the names of female authors of whose works the library had several copies and/or several editions. Her name appears together with Catherine of Siena, as well as other sainted women-writers such as Maria Jesus Coronel (Maria de Algredda) and Catherine of Bologna, though their contributions to the library collection are not as numerous as those of Birgitta.⁸¹

Although this data is only partial, if it is considered within the greater context of the wide circulation of Birgitta's works (especially the *Revelationes* in Latin and vernacular), it confirms the success of her writings and the extent of their readership even in Florence and Tuscany.⁸² The considerable wealth of that cultural legacy was decisive. The notary Lapo Mazzei, on the night of 13 November 1395, wrote a letter to his respected friend Francesco Datini, an affluent merchant from Prato, in which he exhorts him wholeheartedly to focus his attention on the ways and things of God, setting aside worldly interests. Lapo maintained that it was time for a great universal renewal, beginning with a renewal of the Church, and cited Birgitta's experience and her *Revelations* as the source of his conviction. He described her as the bearer of an even brighter light than that of Francis of Assisi.⁸³ For that matter, her *Revelations* could be used to rebut the poverty-embracing dissent of the Fraticelli.

The position of Birgitta's *Revelations* within the Church's recognised structures was picked up on astutely between 1379 and 1381 by the Florentine

80 Research was also carried out on several of the Manoscritti Galileiani and the Doni dei Nuovi Acquisti Archive, Borgia, "Non per passatempo ma solo per consolatione," <https://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/memoriadonne/cartedidonne/cdd_14_borgia.pdf>.

81 *Ibid.*, 4–7.

82 Around twenty vernacular codices have been found to date, and they are nearly all Tuscan origin; important results are expected from the census currently underway within the context of the international research project *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden: Women, Politics and Reform in Renaissance Italy* (2018–2022), accessible at the following URL <<https://birgitta.hf.uio.no/>>.

83 Guasti (ed.), *Ser Lapo Mazzei*, 118–23.

Vallombrosan monk Giovanni dalle Celle, and used in a letter he wrote against the Fraticelli of Florence. In this text, Birgitta's arguments are used to point out these friars' error.⁸⁴ So, Mazzei and Giovanni dalle Celle independently came to the same conclusion, and the main theme of the matter lies herein: Birgitta's texts repositioned eschatological expectations within the horizon of a non-dissenting viewpoint, giving every assurance of change and reform without radical transformation. In this way, her important prophetic heritage was able to reach a large audience, since it was intrinsically orthodox, thus bringing hope of renewal and reform. What happened after that is another matter: those hopes could subsequently take the route of nonconformity and dissent, and did in fact in Florence, as testified by the strong eschatological and messianic tensions felt between the 14th and 16th centuries, which led to borderline or completely dissenting experiences and experiments.⁸⁵

It might then be useful to reflect on the important role played by the Paradiso monastery in the propagation of a "Birgittine" style of devotion and spirituality. We can reasonably conclude that reading and studying texts in which God's love and mercy were extolled, in which the building of a personal relationship with God by the individual human being was extolled, in which it was shown that God can speak directly to his faithful, was a very conscious choice. Not only that: the choice was made to read and study these texts translated into the vernacular, into the mother tongue, that is, into the language that the nuns knew much better than Latin. This was a choice that allowed for the full expression of spiritual potential, especially of the female monastic community: in fact, nuns could not aspire to play a magisterial role from a theological point of view because women were denied the magisterium. However, they could aspire to build a personal and loving relationship with God such that they could become the channel through which God's voice could pass: making them modern "prophetesses" who, while they lived in Renaissance Florence, lived according to an ancient and austere lifestyle. As "prophetesses" they were also allowed to speak about God: prophetic theology was not forbidden to them, on the contrary. This is, perhaps, why at the centre of the monastery library and at the heart of the spiritual manifesto of the Santa Brigida al Paradiso we find Hugh of Balma's *Mystica Theologia*. A truly unitive way of life at the Florentine Paradiso.

84 Francesco Giambonini (ed.), *Giovanni dalle Celle, Luigi Marsili, Lettere* (Florence: 1991), 453–55; see also Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana," 71–72.

85 Ottavia Niccoli, *Profeti e popolo nell'Italia del Rinascimento* (1987; repr. Rome: 2007).

A Lineage of Apocalyptic Queens: The Portrayal of Birgitta of Sweden in Domenica Narducci's Sermon to Caterina Cibo (1533)

Clara Stella

Introduction

In the history of religion, the fear of the end of time – the end of the world and one's self with it – is perhaps the most “pervasive” and persistent “emotion in human experience”.¹ By “last things”, theologians mean the events that happen at the end of the present age (death, judgement, heaven, hell), after a period of destruction and transition including wars, plague, famine, and other natural disasters. In this essay, I focus on the central role that Birgitta of Sweden's *Revelations* played in the dissemination by women mystics of political advice. In this framework, I argue that women's contributions to exegetical reading practices of the Scriptures introduced new paradigms of a “shared” knowledge and language based upon a gendered reading of the Apocalypse for educational, evangelical or prophetic purposes, with implicit political references to their historical context.² To restrict my enquiry, I will focus on the case study of Florentine nun, preacher, and visionary Domenica Narducci

1 Jessica A. Boon and Erick Knibbs, “Introduction,” in *The End of the World in Medieval Thought and Spirituality*, ed. Eric Knibbs, Jessica A. Boon and Erica Gelser (Cham: 2019), 1–14 (2).

2 In the Introduction of *The End of the World*, the editors point out that “no edited collection to our knowledge brings gender as a lens to bear on the texts and contents of the apocalyptic” or “take a female author as their primary topic” (see Boon and Knibbs, “Introduction,” 4). The only essay that has approached the topic so far, from a theoretical point of view that distinguishes eschatological and apocalyptic visions by women from those by men, is Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, “Profetismo femminile ed escatologia,” in *Attese escatologiche dei secoli XII–XIV dall'età dello Spirito al “Pasto Angelicus”*. *Atti del convegno L'Aquila 11–12 settembre 2003*, ed. Edith Pásztor (Deputazione Abruzzese di Storia Patria: 2003), 127–62. The topic has only recently begun to be addressed by scholars, as exemplified by the essays in the chapter “Part 1: Gendering the Apocalypse,” in *The End of the World*, 17–69 to which the reader is referred for an up-to-date bibliography. It is striking that there is not one woman author mentioned as having contributed to apocalyptic literature in the core text by Bernard McGinn, *Visions of The End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: 1998 [2nd ed.]).

(1477–1553), one of those referred to as “Savonarola’s women”, from the Paradiso convent in Florence.³

First, I will briefly introduce Narducci and place her into dialogue with the broader context of the Italian political and millennialist discourse on “the last things” that accompanied the progress of the Reformation movement(s) in Italy. Her sermons against the state of corruption in the cities of Rome and Florence are characterized by a blend of apocalyptic images and her Mariology is deeply influenced by the teaching of Birgitta. Second, I will focus on one of the sermons she addressed to Caterina Cibo (1501–1557), Duchess of Camerino, who was involved in the Italian reform movement of the *spirituali* with Protestant reformer Bernardino Ochino (1487–1564) and Vittoria Colonna (1492–1547). As we will see, in 1533, the year in which the sermon was composed, the Duchess was struggling to keep external forces at bay in her realm and preoccupied with her daughter’s future. Finally, I will highlight how the use of Mary constructed a specific idea of womanhood that is at the center of God’s redemptive plan. The traits of the victorious Mary from the Apocalypse, which is the same Queen Mary who spoke to Birgitta many times in her *Revelations*, are in fact combined by Narducci on many occasions to depict female characters in her sermons. Those traits, like re-arrangeable mosaic tiles, are also used to reinterpret and colour elements of specific parables, such as the female figures from the parable of the Ten Virgins from the Gospel of Matthew (25:1–13). Narducci’s application of Apocalyptic Marian traits to female figures, among them Birgitta herself who figures as a character in the sermon she addresses to Cibo, not only reinforces her message from a rhetorical point of view, but also gives consistency to a sense of communal mission to which her spiritual daughters are asked to commit themselves. Here, the legacy of Birgitta’s figure, her sophisticated reading of the Virgin Mary as a vector to address political matters emerges as a paradigm that unites her supporters.

Context: The Legacy of Birgitta and Catherine at the Beginning of the Cinquecento

According to theologians, historical eschatology appears in one of three distinct forms, which are Messianism, Millennialism, or Apocalypticism.⁴ In

3 The expression is from Tamar Herzig, *Savonarola’s Women: Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: 2008).

4 Richard Landes, “Eschatology,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, January 22 (2016), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/eschatology>.

contrast to mythical eschatology, historical eschatology is directed toward a single redemptive figure who, it is believed, will lead the people of God, now suffering and oppressed, to a better future. Within Christian thought, eschatology is profoundly linked to a sense of imminence and proximity, these being the peculiar traits of the narrative tone of the Apocalypse. After the Avignon period, the mid-Quattrocento and early Cinquecento were marked by fundamental historical turning points, including the Black Death of 1346–53, the Sack of Rome of 1527, and the Italian Wars from 1494 to 1559. The latter events are also framed by the spread of the Reformation movements in Central Europe, France, and Scandinavia.

As McGinn argues, “apocalypticism is a mirror held up to the age, an attempt by each era to understand itself” and to catalyse concerns over civic, political, and social matters.⁵ In the later fourteenth century and the fifteenth century, the biblical “woman clothed with the sun” of Rev. 12 in John’s Apocalypse soon became a topic that preachers, such as Vincent Ferrer, born in 1350, and Girolamo Savonarola, born in 1452 and burned at the stake in 1498, were using to awaken and impress their listeners.⁶ In parallel with the beginning of the Reformation, the causes of the political and religious crises confronted by the Italian realms both before and after the 1527 Sack of Rome were filtered and interpreted through apocalyptic themes. As we will see, in Narducci’s writings too, imminent worldly catastrophe may be averted and humanity saved by the renewal of devotion to the mother of Jesus, by adherence to her divine directives revealed to humanity by prophets and prophetesses, and by the enactment of the specific practices she prescribes in her appearances.

Narducci’s religious path is deeply connected to the legacy of Savonarola’s thought, but even more so to that of the most important and famous saints of the fourteenth century: Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena.⁷ As the essays in the ground-breaking collection *Sanctity and Female Authorship* have shown, the life, works, and experiences of Birgitta and Catherine provided not only a model of sainthood, but a wide range of exempla of female apostolate, divine authority and didacticism, as well as a sophisticated form of political

5 McGinn, “Preface,” in *Visions of The End*, xiv.

6 Jessica A. Boon, “The Marian Apocalyptic of a Visionary Preacher: The Conorte of Juana de la Cruz, 1481–1534,” in *The End of the World*, 41–68 (60–61).

7 On Domenica Narducci’s life, see Gerardo Antignani, *Vicende e tempi di suor Domenica da Paradiso* (Siena: 1983); Adriana Valerio, *Domenica da Paradiso. Profezia e politica in una mistica del Rinascimento* (Spoleto: 1992); Isabella Gagliardi, *Sola con Dio: La missione di Domenica da Paradiso nella Firenze del Primo Cinquecento* (Florence: 2007). See also Meghan Callahan, “Suor Domenica da Paradiso as ‘alter Christus’: Portraits of a Renaissance Mystic,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* XLIII/2 (2012), 323–50.

prophecy for the women and men involved, centuries later, in continuing the reform of the Church.⁸ The two saints were linked to each other from the very beginning of the circulation of their works by their respective clerical circles and textual communities: in 1374, one year after the death of Birgitta, Catherine is suggested by Alfonso of Jaén, Birgitta's editor and confessor, for the role of a "second Birgitta" in the campaigns for the return of the pope from Avignon and the necessity of a new crusade.⁹ On a textual level, Catherine's perception of herself as an author was inspired by the legacy of Birgitta as a writer when she herself embarked on the writing of the *Libro della divina dottrina* in 1377.¹⁰ Their canonization processes were also fostered by the same clerical communities that "inextricably" linked the "saintly images" of Birgitta and Catherine "to their literary works".¹¹ What is striking about their legacy is that it did not end with a mere worship of their relics, but continued to live in the voices of future prophetesses and visionaries. In the words of the Carmelite nun and visionary Maria Maddalena de Pazzi, who lived in the second half of the Cinquecento, those reformers were seen as links in the same "catena", a sort of spiritual chain, and joined with one another in spiritual leadership.¹² Among other things, what distinguished the saintly profiles of those two figures was that they were regarded as political visionaries whose mysticism was concretely linked to politics. More importantly, their stances were built upon "the two most powerful female figures in Christian history – namely the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene".¹³ According to Unn Falkeid, Catherine and Birgitta used these earlier figures as "shields" that enabled them to undertake

8 *Sanctity and Female Authorship: Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (New York, London: 2020). See also Gabriella Zarri, *Le sante vive. Cultura e religiosità femminile nella prima età moderna* (Turin: 1990), 104; Peter Dinzelbacher, "L'azione politica delle mistiche nella chiesa e nello stato: Ildegarda, Brigida e Caterina," in *Movimento religioso e mistica femminile nel Medioevo*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher and Dietger R. Bauer (Milan: 1993), 269–337; Adriana Valerio, "Donne nel Medioevo," in *Le donne e la riforma della Chiesa*, ed. Cettina Militello and Serena Noceti (Bologna: 2017), 97–107; Anna Scattigno, "Caterina da Siena nella vocazione religiosa femminile tra Quattro e Cinquecento," *Segni e Comprensione* 94 (2018), 90–107.

9 Thomas F. Luongo, *The Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (London, Ithaca: 2006), 58.

10 Jane Tylus, "Mystical Literacy: Writing and Religious Women in Late Medieval Italy," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Leiden: 2012), 178–79.

11 Maria H. Owen, Unn Falkeid, "Introduction," in *Sanctity and Female Authorship*, 7; Thomas F. Luongo, "Birgitta and Catherine and Their Textual Communities," in *Sanctity and Female Authorship*, 14–34.

12 Cit. in Scattigno, "Caterina da Siena nella storia," 106.

13 Unn Falkeid, "Constructing Female Authority. Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and the Two Marys," in *Sanctity and Female Authorship*, 53–73 (55–57).

their harsh criticism of the Avignon papacy, as well as the corruption of political and ecclesiastical leaders.¹⁴

The paradigm of sainthood represented by Birgitta and Catherine combined, therefore, the need to live according to the Gospel with a civic sense that places Christianity at the center of their *realpolitik*. More than a century later, in 1533, Narducci would craft for the Duchess of Camerino, Caterina Cibo, a sermon in which she magisterially combined those elements together. She – Narducci – is now the *magistra*, reporting Birgitta's words and teaching the Duchess as, in a prior century, both Birgitta and Catherine did with Queen Johanna of Naples. During those turbulent years, women like Narducci and, in parallel with her, Angela Merici in northern Italy, were gathering around their charismatic *personae* a web of communities into which, via a strong Mariology, they infused their voices with political undertones. One might ask, however, what were the characteristics of those turbulent years of the beginning of the Cinquecento that made those reformers look back to the legacy of Catherine and Birgitta above all the other saints?

At the beginning of the Cinquecento, for the second time since the Avignon captivity, the role of the Church as guide, temple, bride, and incarnated body underwent profound criticism as a result of two complementary trends that spread in parallel and influenced one another. On the one hand, we have the debate about the centrality of the Scriptures, initiated by Erasmus, that became part of the *contenzioso* between Catholics and Reformists. The so-called *devotio moderna* was directly linked to the development of a vision of faith that was experienced in private terms, without the mediation of external actors, through an intense meditation practice based on a private reading and understanding of the Gospels.¹⁵ On the other hand, this personal but textual approach to the sacred word, fostered by the realisation of the first vernacular translations of the Bible whose spread was facilitated by the printing press, was accompanied by the rediscovery of prophecy and mysticism in Central Europe. Those elements went hand in hand during a moment of political and religious transformation that was felt by many to be a millennial turning point and, by some, a sign of the actualisation of God's anger toward humanity. Here, let us briefly develop the synergetic output of those two trends that characterised

14 Falkeid, "Constructing Female Authority," 57.

15 *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Meneghin Alessia, Marco Faini, and Corry Maya (Leiden: 2018). See also Adriana Valerio, "Premessa. Donne e riforme nella Chiesa al tempo di Lutero," in *Bibbia, donne, profezia. A partire dalla Riforma*, ed. Letizia Tommasone and Adriana Valerio (Florence: 2018), 5–17 (7).

the religious perceptions of the century in which Narducci, one of the many spiritual daughters of Girolamo Savonarola, lived and preached.

Coinciding with the beginning of the Reformation, during which the Church's authority faced, again, a radical wave of criticism, enhanced by nationalistic forces in Central Europe and driven forward in unprecedented ways by the new possibilities offered by the printing press, the Italian peninsula saw the revival of a strain of apocalyptic and prophetic narratives in print.¹⁶ The women and the men of the early Cinquecento, from the highest classes to the lowest, felt in need of a channel to voice their anger and fears. As Ottavia Niccoli has clearly shown, prophecy in fact circulated not only in the darkness, but openly in the streets and shops, helping to shape ordinary people's devotion. Nonetheless, Manuzio's preface to the Cinquecento copy of Catherine of Siena's *Letters* pointed out to the world that his era needed to read and meditate on Catherine's admonitions more than ever. Her letters, as the editor stresses, seemed to address perfectly the clerics of his own time as well as those of hers.¹⁷

Considering just the city of Florence, it provided fertile ground for female mysticism, alive with the phenomenon of the *sante vive*, as magisterially reconstructed by Gabriella Zarri, in addition to the revival of the prophetic tradition through Girolamo Savonarola's calls for Christian renewal between 1452 and his death in 1498. Girolamo Savonarola and, subsequently, Juan de Valdes and Bernardino Ochino from Siena, were the key figures whom historians have traditionally considered the bridge between prior Medieval agitations for reform and the 16th-century Italian spiritual renewal.¹⁸ Their soteriology had Dominican and Franciscan roots, but the return to the Gospel, for Savonarola and Ochino especially, was also coloured by dark depictions in apocalyptic terms of a forthcoming *ira Dei*. This can be linked, respectively for the two men, to the legacy of Birgitta of Sweden and, probably, the circulation of Margaret Porete's *Specchio delle anime semplice* (1311) among the first Capuchins.¹⁹ God's

16 Bernard McGinn, "Savonarola and Late Medieval Italian Apocalypticism," in *Visions of the End*, 277–83 (277).

17 See Carlo Dionisotti, *Aldo Manuzio umanista e editore* (Milan: 1995), xxxviii–xxxix. Henri D. Saffrey, "Les *images* populaires des saints Dominicains à Venise au xv^e siècle et l'édition par Alde Manuce des 'Epistole' de sainte Catherine de Sienne," *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 25 (1982), 241–312.

18 Michael A. Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation* (London and New York: 1999), 100–105.

19 Adriana Valerio, "Verso Savonarola: Profezia e Politica in Brigida di Svezia," in *Verso Savonarola. Misticismo, profezia, empiti riformistici fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini and Giuseppe Picone (Florence: 1999), 25–34. Michele Camaioni, *Il Vangelo e l'Anticristo. Bernardino Ochino tra francescanesimo ed eresia (1487–1547)* (Turin: 2019), 48.

anger is a force that shapes Narducci's visions of the coming end of times and her prediction, for instance, of the Sack of Rome: in doing this, she was picking up imagery that was Birgittine in its roots, traceable to her training at the *Paradiso* convent in Florence.

Before focusing on Narducci's Birgittine education, however, we should return to the problematic legacy of Birgitta as a political prophetess in the 16th century. Not only were her writings regarded with suspicion by the Catholic Church, to the extent that Savonarola denied having known of her prophecies at his trial, refusing to situate his thought within a Birgittine legacy, but Martin Luther also described the Swedish saint as crazy ("die tolle Brigit") and accused her *Revelations* of being inspired by the Devil in one of his lectures on Genesis 30:9–11.²⁰ It is remarkable that the wooden statues of Birgitta, and other female saints, that decorated the Vadstena abbey are devoid of hands, along with the books they were holding. This was done by Lutherans, both to reflect disdain for the Catholic past of the nation and, more generally, as a symbol that women were to be silent in the new established order.²¹

Both Birgitta's and Catherine of Siena's writings were circulating and being read in aristocratic contexts and religious houses. However, unlike the foremother of the reformed Dominican order, whose cult was fostered by Savonarola and his Piagnoni during their campaigns, Birgitta's name was always indissolubly linked to the political and apocalyptic tone of the paradigm of prophecy that she incarnated. Specifically, themes such as the imminent necessity of conversion, the approach of the end of the world and the advent of the Antichrist. There is a further issue for the perceptions of Birgitta's orthodoxy. Early in the 16th century the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517), called by Pope Julius II, formally condemned much of the use by preachers of political and apocalyptic prophetic content, including references to the Antichrist and the end of the world.²² The council, however, never denied the possibility of receiving true revelations from God and imposed, therefore, a set of procedures through which the content of prophetic discourses should be tested before they were announced to the public. Spiritual preachers were among Narducci's

20 On Savonarola, see Herzig, *Savonarola's Women*, 22. On Luther see Barbara Obrist, "The Swedish Visionary: Saint Bridget," in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens, Georgia: 1984), 227–51 (236).

21 Birgitta Fritz, "The History and Spiritual Life of Vadstena Abbey," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, 132–58.

22 Adriano Prosperi, "Dalle 'divine madri' ai 'padri spirituali,'" in *Women and Men in Spiritual Culture, XIV–XVII centuries. A meeting of South and North*, ed. Elisja Schulte van Kessel (The Hague: 1986), 71–90; Bartolomei Romagnoli, "Profetismo femminile ed escatologia," 149.

followers, and her revelations were the objects of continued and scrupulous control by churchmen, before and after her break with the Piagnoni of the house of San Marco. She distanced herself from that latter group in 1509 to act independently and pursue her “personal” interpretation of Savonarola’s teaching and the Bible. This caused great turmoil among the Piagnoni to the extent that, in 1519, Narducci was accused of heresy on the basis of an erroneous interpretation of the Bible by the Dominican fra Tommaso Caiani.²³

Nonetheless, precisely because of that apocalyptic tone, balanced with lively and “incarnated” descriptions of Christ’s nativity and His sufferings on the Cross, Birgitta’s name and writings were particularly popular among 16th-century men and women of letters as well as painters, such as Tintoretto and Sebastiano del Piombo.²⁴ Among the *litterati*, one should include leading figures of their times such as Pietro Aretino, Lodovico Domenichi, Vittoria Colonna, Chiara Matraini and, subsequently, Tommaso Campanella. Birgitta was therefore one of those ambivalent authors, such as Augustine proved to be, that could be used in quite different ways in Catholic and Reformist circles respectively, depending on the aspects of her message that were emphasised.

The fortune of her apocryphal prophecies and visions, that circulated separated from the rest of her corpus, confirms the extent of the network and the variety of people interested in her message. However, her message circulated not only in the streets, but also inside the walls of aristocratic private houses: the Cibo, the Colonna, and the Acciaiuoli are only a few of the aristocratic families, often connected to the *spirituali* movement of the early Cinquecento, who helped to cultivate and disseminate a Birgittine cult during the years of the Reformation.²⁵ Olaus Magnus, Archbishop-in-exile of Uppsala, for example, in his effort to confront Lutheranism in Sweden, crafted a biography of the saint to remind his people of the Catholic roots of the nation. That biography was then translated into the vernacular by the editor Lodovico Domenichi at the request of the Florentine noblewoman Margherita de’ Borgherini, from the Acciaiuoli family.

Acting against such a complex background, Narducci stands as an important factor in the keeping alive of the memory of Birgitta among the nuns of

23 Gagliardi, *Sola con Dio*, 192.

24 Thomas H. Bestul, *Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: 1996), 197.

25 Birgitta met Niccolò Acciaiuoli, who was chief minister of the Kingdom of Naples, thanks to the mediation of lady Lapa Buondelmonti (*A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, 225). Along with the Acciaiuoli family in Naples, Birgitta’s cult was also popular among the Florentine leading families of the Medici, the Alberti, the Buondelmonti, and the Soderini. On this, see Anthony Butkovich, *Revelations: Saint Birgitta of Sweden* (Los Angeles: 1972), 86.

her community but also among aristocratic women as well, using Birgitta as *auctoritas* for her right to preach and to lead, and as a subtext in her warnings against the corruption of the Church.

Domenica Narducci's Early Birgittine Education

Domenica Narducci da Paradiso was born on 8 September 1473, in a Florentine suburb called Paradiso. Even though Narducci refused solemn vows until just before her death, her religious life grew following the exempla of Catherine of Siena and that of Saint Birgitta.²⁶ At only nine years old, in 1481, Birgitta and Catherine, together with Saint Augustine, invited her to continue in her prayers for the clergy. Specifically, their prediction to the little girl focused on God's will to renew His Church at the cost of immense suffering and plagues ("predicendole che Dio voleva rinnovare la Chiesa con molti flagelli").²⁷ After a couple of years spent with the Augustinian nuns of the Florentine monastery of Candeli, and one year at home as a *bizzoca*, she regularly visited the Birgittine Convent of Santa Maria del Paradiso in the Pian di Ripoli (Florence) between 1495 and 1497. She remained thereafter a devotee of the Swedish saint, wearing the "abito bigio" but without formally committing herself to the order.

The Santa Maria convent, in which Narducci lived for some years, was the major vector for the diffusion of Birgittine writing and thought in Italy. It was established in 1395, with funding from Antonio degli Alberti, and then expanded in 1404–1408 under the protection of the Florentine Republic and the Guelf party.²⁸ It was also the first Birgittine house in Tuscany, and the third to be established after Birgitta's death. There, the nuns could have experienced Birgitta with all their senses: from the simple architecture of the monastery and the frescoes of her life to the practice of reading, copying and meditating on her works. The saint was the subject of the altarpiece of the convent, of which there remains only a part of the saint's face and the shape of her dark

26 *I sermoni di Domenica da Paradiso. Studi e testo critico*, ed. Rita Librandi and Adriana Valerio (Florence: 1999) xxxvii, lxxxvi–xciii. Gagliardi, *Sola con Dio*, 155.

27 *I sermoni di Domenica da Paradiso*, xxxv.

28 Antonio di Niccolò di Jacopo degli Alberti obtained papal permission in 1392, one year after the canonization of the saint, to found and endow the extensive monastery dedicated to Birgitta in the Pian di Ripoli, known as "del Paradiso" after the nearby family villa of that name. The monastery is intimately linked to the political events that shaped the Alberti family: the first group of nuns had to abandon the premises, and the property was confiscated, after Niccolò's exile in 1401. See also Luigi Passerini, *Gli Alberti di Firenze. Genealogia, storia e documenti*, 2 vols. (Florence: 1869), 2: 199–218; Patricia Lee Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-century Florence* (New Haven and London: 2007), 19.

dress. Among the better-preserved remains of the original artistic decoration of the convent are events from Calvary culminating in the way to Paradise, the *Salita al Paradiso*, with impressive rows of saints that would have served as a balance to the *Last Judgment*, also frescoed, with a very probable reference to her *Revelations*.²⁹

As anticipated, her encounter with the saint began in the convent of Il Paradiso in 1495, the moment when, wrapped in a grey mantel, she entered the Church and was enraptured “in ispirito”. In that moment, Christ addresses her as his bride (“sposa mia”), and tells her that the mantel she is wearing is that of Saint Birgitta who has been His “Cavalleressa” and apostle and the ambassador of His word on earth (“mandata nunzia, et ambasciatrice”).³⁰ The military metaphors and connotations then continue as Narducci is told she should learn from the Saint and imitate her life in order to become a good soldier herself (“Impara da lei ad esser buona guerriera, et apparecchiati con l’imitarla al mio ossequio”).

Even though women were formally prohibited from preaching, Narducci soon began to do so, while only a *bizzoca*, fascinated by the promising sound of Savonarola’s reforms aimed at women. She continued to be a supporter of Savonarola after his death at the stake in Piazza Signoria and reported visions that corroborated the truths preached by the master, confirming his saintly status in heaven. The friar’s teaching played a major role in her early religious views, until at last she dissociated herself from the Piagnoni and the *Ordo Fratrum Praedicatorum* to pursue her personal reform and deeply Marian interpretation of Savonarola’s message. As Adriana Valerio points out, her programme of reform for the individual and the Church was universal and involved three main areas: religion, ethics, and politics. The return to Scripture was, in fact, linked to the Savonarolian ideal of the *bene beateque vivendum*. That is, the aim of reaching a condition of individual and social peace by serving God with humility and charitable deeds.³¹ Salvation, for Narducci, involves

29 Daniele Rapino, *Il Paradiso degli Alberti. Storia e recupero del monastero della Vergine e di Santa Brigida* (Florence: 2014). For the manuscript culture that characterises the monastery, see Rosanna Miriello, *I manoscritti del Monastero del Paradiso di Firenze* (Florence: 2007) and for the circulation of apocryphal works by Bridget, see Brian Richardson’s chapter in this volume.

30 The episode is reported and described in Ignazio Del Nente, *Vita e costumi ed intelligenze spirituali della venerabil madre suor Domenica del Paradiso [...]*, 2 vols (Venice: 1662), 1: 88–89.

31 Adriana Valerio, “Le lettere di Domenica da Paradiso tra Bibbia e Profezia,” *Hagiographica* 6 (1999), 235–56 (237). In particular, see Epistle CXXVI. The epistles are available in a critical edition edited by Gerardo Antignani, *Domenica da Paradiso. Scritti spirituali*, 2 vols (Poggibonsi: 1984–1985), 1: 91–254.

participation, and is not granted *per sola fide* as Lutherans were claiming – a view to which she was firmly opposed.³²

Narducci ensured her independence from the Dominican hierarchy of San Marco by placing herself directly under the authority of the Bishop of Florence and finding a sort of *via media* in the conflicts between the Piagnoni and the Arrabbiati movements. In 1511, with her community of 15 spiritual daughters that would eventually grow to 50, she started building up the foundation of the monastery of the Holy Cross (Santa Crocetta), often simply called la Crocetta, under the jurisdiction of archbishop Giulio de Medici near the church of SS. Annunziata. The monastery received approval from the Pope in 1515, and from then on, Narducci would be known as “mother cicada” (“madre cicala”), establishing herself as an authoritative and charismatic voice, extending her influence far beyond her own devotees. Even though she preached only inside the monastery, her understanding of politics and religious zeal attracted visits from some well-known Florentine families, seeking advice or doctrinal clarification, and provided her with the financial capital to renovate and keep the monastery running. Many of Narducci’s extant writings, recovered by Adriana Valerio and Rita Librandi, are found in the *Archivio del Monastero della Crocetta* in Florence, which also houses archival documents related to the history of the Convent. The existing corpus includes Narducci’s *Epistolary*, with 130 letters written between 1506 and 1548, approximately 20 *Sermons*, delivered between 1507 and 1545, a spiritual *Dialogue* (1503), many *Revelations and visions*, recorded between 1507 and 1545, and several spiritual treatises.³³

The Virgin Mary and the *Renovatio Ecclesia*

Scholars of Narducci, particularly the historian Adriana Valerio and philologist Rita Librandi, have stressed the strong search for independence that set her apart from the mass of Savonarola’s women. This is visible in her effort to establish her own community reflecting a strong Mariology and the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which she built up in her sermons as well as in

32 Valerio, “Le lettere,” 246.

33 For the single editions of Narducci’s works see *I sermoni di Domenica da Paradiso*, ed. Librandi and Valerio; and Rosa Piro, *Le ‘substantiae’ dei sermoni e delle visioni di Domenica Narducci da Paradiso* (Florence: 2004). Her *Dialogue* is edited by Rita Librandi and Adriana Valerio, “Il Dialogo di Domenica da Paradiso,” *Archivio per la storia delle donne*, 1 (2004), 55–144. For a detailed list of Narducci’s published and still unpublished texts, with reference to the corresponding manuscript tradition, see Rosa Piro, “I testi inediti e le metafore di Domenica da Paradiso,” *Chroniques italiennes* 27.1 (2014), 17–48 (21–27).

her visions, such as that of the *Tabernacolo* that I will discuss below. Her independence was very consciously rooted and linked to Catherine of Siena and Birgitta's revolutionary figures, and she was not afraid to reveal the Birgittine root of Savonarola's thought in her sermons and letters. In the following paragraphs, I will briefly mention some of the fundamental aspects that characterise Birgitta's and Savonarola's Mariology with the aim of highlighting the dialogue that Narducci established with Savonarola's conception of the Virgin Mary.

Birgitta's Mariology is developed to its highest level in her *Sermo Angelicus*, the Angel's Sermon, that contains a set of lections concerning Mary, originally conceived for the Birgittine nuns of her order to sing.³⁴ Her interpretation has no precedent in medieval tradition, and, as Unn Falkeid points out, the Mary of the *Sermo Angelicus* assumes many faces and important theological meanings. She is the first witness of the Resurrection, the most refined preacher and, specifically, the *magistra apostolorum*, as well as the apocalyptic queen of salvation. Most importantly, she is "the mother of wisdom", the paradigm of prophecy, as she already knew of the resurrection of her child, and is the co-redeemer of salvation. It is known that, for Birgitta, due to her childhood and background training in legal matters and Christian discourses, religion and politics became deeply related to each other.³⁵ The merit of Birgitta is to have anchored her message in the profound wisdom of the Virgin, and to have placed women at the core of this reform in the physical world too. Birgitta's *Regula Salvatoris*, in fact, tried to replicate this heavenly order, with Mary as the "true stepping stone between transitory and eternal life", by giving administrative power to a woman, the *badessa* of the new order that she aimed to establish, an order that was originally conceived as double, meaning men and women living together, was to be a woman.³⁶

Savonarola, too, was devoted to the Virgin, and venerated her as protectress and founder of the Dominican order.³⁷ In the description of his journey through the celestial realms – the *Compendium* visions – Savonarola ends his pilgrimage with a dialogue with the Virgin as "the highest goal of his journey through the celestial city", seated in all her majesty and immaculacy: "on a throne, clothed with the sun and covered with jewels".³⁸ He certainly granted

34 Falkeid, "Constructing Female Authority," 59–62.

35 On Birgitta's political discourse and the characteristics of the ideal Christian king see particularly, along with its bibliography, Unn Falkeid, "The Political Discourse of Birgitta of Sweden," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, 80–102.

36 Cit. Falkeid, "Constructing Female Authority," 60.

37 Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: the Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven and London: 2011), 152.

38 Boon, "The Marian Apocalyptic," 60.

to Mary the gift of prophecy in sermon XXIII on the book of Ezekiel, which was known to the nuns of La Crocetta as it was part of their library.³⁹ Yet, his devotion to Mary had little space in his sermon and, without doubt, the mother of God did not have the same role in salvation as Birgitta envisioned for her. The only reason he advocated for the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin was to distance himself from the view of another Dominican theologian, Vincenzo Bandelli, who attributed to Mary the *macula originalis* like all humans.⁴⁰ In contrast to the Swedish saint, he managed to decentralise Mary's active role in disseminating Christ's words – and, in doing this, women's voices too – by asserting that she was perfect because she stayed quiet even though she was given the gift of prophecy (“stette cheta benchè havessi il done, & la gratia della profetia”). She never preached in public, being aware that preaching and debating in public were tasks designed for the men to undertake (“dirle in pubblico appartiene alli huomini”).⁴¹

Contrary to Savonarola, Mary dominates and guides the different stages of Narducci's life, taking on the role of the teacher Narducci never had. Reading passages from her *Vita*, the Virgin actively helped Narducci in her mystic formation and journey by giving her “consigli” (suggestions) and guidance on how to find the way through her visions (“si doveva guidar nelle visioni”).⁴² Narducci stresses how she has been “ammaestrata” by Mary in her apostolate and, early in the years of her preaching in the so-called *Vision of the Tabernacle* of 1508, she reveals that Mary will be the *magistra* of the Angelic Pope in the reform of the Church and Christianity.

The *Vision of the Tabernacle* concerns primarily the question of the Immaculate Conception, the Incarnation, and the role of the Virgin in the history of salvation.⁴³ Christ shows Narducci a beautifully adorned tabernacle in which – he tells her – he was conceived. The description is highly detailed as each part of the tabernacle refers to the physical body of Mary, and to her specific virtues.

39 According to the reconstruction of the monastery's library, there were some works by Savonarola, among which were the *Compendio di Rivelazione*, the *Prediche sopra Ezechiele*, the treatise *De Simplicitate Christianae Vitae* and the *Triumphus Crucis*. Valerio, *Domenica da Paradiso*, 5–10.

40 Weinstein, *Savonarola: the Rise and Fall*, 153.

41 Savonarola then concludes that “sta bene alla donna stare cheta: & non stare sempre a cicalare” (“it is good for the woman to be quiet: & not always to chat”). Herzog, *Savonarola's Women*, 351. The fact that Narducci, on the contrary, was called “madre cicala” could be seen as another open challenge to Savonarola's remark.

42 Del Nente, *Vita e costumi e intelligenze spirituali*, 1:16–17.

43 The *Vision of the Tabernacle* is transcribed in Antignani, *Scritti Spirituali*, 2: 199–252 from which the quotations are taken. On this particular vision see Librandi, *I Sermoni*, cxxvi–cxxviii; Gagliardi, *Sola con Dio*, 104–20; Piro, *Testi inediti e metafore*, 28–30.

Most importantly, Christ explains to Narducci that in Mary's intellect, represented by a globe, are rooted the branches of the Trinity ("Significa che la mia gloriosa madre sempre dico aveva nel intelletto suo la sanctissima Trinita"). In the second part of the sermon, Mary assumes the role of a *regina in trono* with the traits of the woman of the Apocalypse. In this case, Narducci seems to further develop and elaborate the pattern already given by Birgitta in the *Sermo Angelicus* and *Rev.* 1:31.

In the second part of the sermon, Narducci offers a complete and detailed exegesis of the allegorical meaning of Mary's apocalyptic symbolism and interlaces Mary's apocalyptic traits with God's plan for the *renovatio ecclesiae*. Her vestment then becomes the cloak for the new Church ("mantello della nuova Chiesa tutto [...] stellato") and the stars in the mantle symbolise the people of the newly renewed community, that remain stable in their contemplative state, like stars in the sky. Most importantly, the Virgin will be, as anticipated, the teacher and guardian of the new pope: in this way, the new Church which Narducci envisioned is built upon the central action of Mary and her ethical perfection.⁴⁴ Narducci eventually receives intellectual and spiritual knowledge, represented by the drop of milk that Christ gives her from the tabernacle at the end of the vision along with a drop of his blood. The milk symbolises nourishment – the wisdom of things divine – that Narducci needs to be able to fulfil her apostolate and to pass on to her community, like a *magistra* herself.⁴⁵

The influence of the *Sermo Angelicus* and *Revelations* seems prominent here with regard to the theological role that Mary fulfils in Narducci's eyes. While the *Revelations* informed a new discourse on the Nativity and Incarnation, Birgitta's *Sermo Angelicus* dealt with Mary's active role in salvation and stresses the profound wisdom of her mind. In contrast to Savonarola, Mary is mother of wisdom, *magistra apostolarum* (*Sermo*, feria 11, lectio 1–11), and the Queen of Heaven seated next to God (*Rev.* 1:29, 31).

44 "La mia gloriosa Madre *inseguerà* Lei a questo nuovo pastore et di continuo ne averà diligente cura et lo *difenderà* con il manto della mia grazia et di lui sempre averà custodia, perché questa santa renovatione sarà tutta opera sua" ("My glorious Mother will teach this new shepherd and will continually take care of him and will defend him with the mantle of my grace and will always have custody of him, because this holy renovation will be all his work"). Antignani, *Scritti Spirituali*, 2: 236. Translation and emphasis are mine.

45 On this episode see Gagliardi, *Sola con Dio*, 105. On the symbolism around milk and blood related to the Virgin, see Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq, "Le Lait et le Sang de la Vierge," in *Le Sang au Moyen Âge: Actes du Quatrième International de Montpellier Université Paul-Valéry (27–29 novembre 1997)*, ed. Marcel Faure (Montpellier: 1999), 145–62. See also Elisabetta Lurgo, *La beata Caterina Racconigi fra santità e stregoneria. Carisma profetico e autorità istituzionale nella prima età moderna* (Florence: 2013), 232–33, 252–53.

Birgitta in Narducci's Letters

Although Birgitta is not mentioned in Narducci's *Dialogo*, she is quoted in a few passages of her correspondence, which includes 130 letters, written between 1505 and 1548.⁴⁶ She also features in the closing of a vision that Narducci had in 1533, described in one of her lengthiest sermons addressed to Duchess Caterina Cibo Varano, that will be analysed in detail below. Let us briefly consider the passages from epistles LXXIV and LXXVII in which Birgitta appears, and that are addressed respectively to a woman, whose name is unknown, and the nuns of the monastery of "Sancta Brigida", that is, the Paradiso convent at which Narducci received her first religious instruction.

In epistle LXXIV, Narducci gives a short hagiography of the saint, inviting the addressee whom she calls "Madonna" to look at Saint Birgitta as an exemplum of widowhood.⁴⁷ After God decided to take away her "sposo terreno", Birgitta reached a perfect balance between living an active life and living a contemplative life:

She lived and pursued an active and contemplative life, and [God] sent her to many places [lit. 'castles'] to remind all people of His name. She was persecuted and mocked by many, but she did not care about it, as she was a truly obedient bride [...]. Therefore my Mother, think of her and observe the rules of the order that she has left you.⁴⁸

She then offers an exegesis of Birgitta's destiny, thus comforting her reader whose condition grouped her with many women who decided to change their lives after the death of their husbands in the early Cinquecento. Narducci explains the intentions of God and the function of suffering. Through suffering, he wanted to demonstrate how things of the world are untrue and fallacious, and that everything is governed by his will. In the letter, Narducci then compares Birgitta's experience with that of the reader, who had been "sotto-posta" (subordinated to) her husband before taking Christ for her heavenly spouse. In epistle LXXVII, Narducci returns to the concept of what it means to live a life that is contemplative and active at the same time, and how the nuns

46 Valerio, *Le lettere di Domenica*, 238.

47 Antignani, *Scritti spirituali*, 2: 180–82 (181).

48 "Rimase nella vita attiva e nella contemplativa ed ella attendeva all'una e all'altra, mandavala per li castelli a ricordare il nome suo ed ella da molte persone era perseguitata, schermita e beffata di nulla non si curava, era veramente sposa obbediente [...]. Però Madre mia considerate un poco a lei e osservate l'ordine che ella vi ha lasciato" (translation and emphasis are mine).

can replicate Birgitta's experience in the present.⁴⁹ Narducci invites them to turn their heads toward the "bottle" of Christ and taste the wine of his blood. If they do this – she writes – they will be able to abandon their previous identities and forget, in Catherine of Siena's terms, themselves in Christ ("che voi abbandoniate e dimentichiate voi medesime").

In both cases, it is remarkable that Birgitta is used in order to demonstrate two concepts that were also linked to the authority of Narducci's own voice.⁵⁰ As we have seen, in letter LXXIV, Narducci uses the exemplum of Birgitta to affirm that in God a woman can reach full authority over herself. The addressee of the letter is said to have been tied ("legata") to her earthly husband and she, because of this dependence, was not in charge of herself. In Narducci's words, the reader can fully be "signora di voi" ("owner of herself") only when widowed, and thus she can discover her true self in the essence of God like Birgitta did ("come fece la gloriosa Santa Brigida"). Secondly, in letter LXXVII, Birgitta is to be remembered as a supreme example because she was the first who tasted Christ's blood from his cask, could forget herself and honour the Lord with her deeds and not only her words ("in fatti non in parole"). Nonetheless, in contrast to their spiritual mother who was chosen by God and experienced a different level of freedom of movement in her life, the nuns are asked to praise God within the convent walls with prayers and orations. They are to "run" towards her with their minds and hearts: "Noi siamo quelle che siamo in parole, perchè noi non facciamo l'opere; però madri mie correte dietro a lei" ("We are what we are in words, because we do not undertake works; but, my mothers, run toward her").⁵¹

Narducci's Sermon IX (25 August 1533)

According to the documents that tell of the relationship between Narducci and Cibo, Birgitta appears at least twice in her epistolary conversation with

49 Antignani, *Scritti spirituali*, 2: 183–87 (184).

50 In 1507, Narducci defended women's right to preach in Italy with a close and contextual reading of Paul's words to the Corinthians ("Mulieres in ecclesia taceant", 1 Cor: 14:34). See Adriana Valerio, "Et io espongo le Scritture": Domenica da Paradiso e l'interpretazione biblica. Un documento inedito nella crisi del rinascimento fiorentino," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 26 (1994), 499–534.

51 The way that she illustrates her point uses the terminology of Catherine of Siena and her philosophy of the self. The willing surrender of self that follows the taste of Christ's blood, the true nourishment, is in fact a central theme in Catherine of Siena. Catherine's philosophy is, however, applied here to read the figure of Birgitta, thus creating a blend of images, exempla, and philosophical traditions.

the Duchess, which continued from 1533 until 1542.⁵² In both cases, represented by a sermon Narducci wrote in 1533 and a letter from 1535, Birgitta is an example of widowhood, Christian virtue, and management.

The Duchess' political concerns regarding the succession in her duchy, and her rivalry with the Church, paralleled her interest in the renewal needs of the Church and eventually led to her being accused of Protestantism by the Inquisition. Caterina Cibo's husband, Giovanni Maria Duke of Camerino, died of the plague in August 1527, and thereafter Cibo proved to be a match for the several claimants to the ducal estate between 1527 and 1534. She repeatedly fought off the armed attacks on Camerino by neighbouring lords, and delayed her daughter's marriage so she would not lose her inheritance rights.⁵³ Giulia eventually married Guidobaldo della Rovere, the future Duke of Urbino, in 1534. Pope Paul III, who was against the union and an alliance that could have been dangerous for his temporal power, excommunicated Cibo, and Caterina was expelled from Camerino by a Papal decree of April 25 in 1534.⁵⁴ The actual rule of Camerino itself was *interdetto* by the Pope on the 28th of March of 1535, and many of Narducci's letters to the Pope, written on behalf of Caterina, were aimed at fostering reconciliation between the two.

Cibo's relationship with the Franciscan friar Bernardino Ochino and the radical movement of the Capuchin Friars Minor, the autonomous branch of the first Franciscan Order, is an important factor in her life.⁵⁵ Joining forces

52 The relationship between Domenica Narducci and Caterina Cibo is documented in seven letters and two sermons that Narducci addressed to the Duchess. See Adriana Valerio, "Caterina Cibo e la spiritualità Savonaroliana attraverso il magistero profetico di Domenica da Paradiso," in *Munera Parva. Studi in onore di Boris Ulianich*, ed. Gennaro Luongo (Naples: 1999) 141–54, see in particular 147 (n. 14).

53 On Caterina Cibo see Franca Petrucci, "Cibo, Caterina," in *DBI*, vol. 25 (1981), 238–40; Pierluigi Moriconi (ed.), *Caterina Cybo, duchessa di Camerino (1501–1557): Atti del convegno, Camerino, Auditorium di S. Caterina, 28–30 ottobre 2004* (Camerino: 2005); Diana Robin, *Publishing Women: Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago and London: 2007), 162–68.

54 Maria Teresa Guerra Medici, *Famiglia e potere in una signoria dell'Italia centrale: I Varano di Camerino* (Camerino: 2002), 63.

55 This certainly continues the religious interest in moral reformation that characterized her family lineage. She was the sister-in-law of writer, mystic and reformer Camilla Battista da Varano, a Poor Clare nun and author of two autobiographical treatises, religious manuals and the mystical treatise *I Dolori mentali* of 1488. The mystic, who died in 1513, combined the profile of a writer with that of being a leading guide of the monastery of Santa Maria Nuova in Camerino. On the relationship between the two, see Gabriella Zari, "Caterina Cibo duchessa di Camerino," in *Donne di potere nel Rinascimento*, ed. Letizia Arcangeli and Susanna Peyronel Rambaldi (Rome: 2008), 575–93 (579–80). On Camilla Battista Varano see the recent edited volume by Pietro Messa and Massimo Reschiglian, *Un desiderio senza misura. La santa Camilla Battista da Varano e i suoi scritti* (Assisi: 2010).

with Vittoria Colonna, she intervened with Pope Clement VII in favour of the Capuchin Reform in 1525. Colonna's and Cibo's protection rescued the Capuchins from being expelled from the Church and, ultimately, provided the order with a new location, the Monastery of Renacavata, three miles from Camerino. After the difficulties in her relationship with the Pope, once settled in Florence, the Duchess developed an intense relationship with Narducci and the Sienese preacher and, from 1534, General of the Capuchins, Ochino. Although Narducci and Ochino shared a common interest in the *renovatio ecclesiae*, their views on justification by faith and the role of human deeds in God's plan for salvation were completely different, to the extent that Narducci warned the Duchess of the danger of her acquaintance with Ochino. After Cibo helped Ochino to escape to Geneva in 1542, Narducci sent one last letter to both, asking the Duchess and the friar to redeem themselves from Protestantism in the eyes of God.

Many years before the Duchess's appearance in Ochino's *Seven Dialogues*,⁵⁶ she asked Narducci for a sermon, which was delivered on the 25th of August 1533. The introduction to the sermon provides its setting: it was delivered in the presence of the Duchess, along with Narducci's sisters and confessors. The interests and needs of Caterina were well understood by Narducci, who appositely crafted the piece to look like a short political treatise on the education of a loyal and Christian ruler, strongly built upon a female genealogy of allegorical figures. Narducci embraces the role of *magistra*, just as Birgitta had for queens, knights, and sovereigns during her own life.⁵⁷

As Narducci tells us, the vision that inspired the sermon was given to her by Mary, who sent a procession of ten queens to visit her during the night.⁵⁸ This triumph or parade of "regine" is opened by three beautiful crowned women, followed by another five and finally by two others. Narducci says the final two stayed behind to give her "the sermon" and "the doctrine" Mary wished her to deliver ("venute a darmi il sermone e la dottrina ch'io volevo dire"). Having described the procession, Narducci unfolds the allegorical meaning of the vision and its characters. The ten queens are modelled on Mary of the Apocalypse, although they are also identified by specific attributes that make

56 The Dialogues contain conversations that Ochino had with Caterina Cibo in 1538 and were completed in 1542, although circulating in manuscript form long before their appearance in print. Janet Levarie Smarr, *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women* (Ann Arbor: 2005), 44–51 (45).

57 Birgitta was *maestra* at the court of Magnus II in 1335 and, thereafter, at that of Giovanna of Aragona in Naples between 1365 and 1367.

58 The sermon can be read in Librandi and Valerio, *I sermoni di Domenica da Paradiso*, 127–41. English translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

them recognisable. They are crowned with stars and gemstones, wearing beautiful vestments and shining with the Light of God. The first three present themselves to Narducci as Faith, Hope, and Charity, the three theological virtues. The next five queens are allegories of the five senses that, according to Christian psychology, needed to be tamed and spiritualised to serve God. The last two queens are historical characters: Saint Birgitta and her daughter Catherine of Sweden. Birgitta is described as an exemplary and virtuous lady, beautiful, aged about fifty or sixty years (“mirabile matrona, di statura bella e d’anni circa cinquanta o sexanta”) with a crucifix in her hands. Her vestment is made of golden flames (“fiamme d’oro”) and precious stones (“piena di pietre preziose”) with a dark cloak over it, embroidered with stars and glittering stones (“manto nero, pieno di stelle e pietre preziose”). Birgitta and Catherine are also said to be “soggolate”, meaning wearing the *soggola*, a veil to mark widowhood.

In the vision, Birgitta is the figure that interacts the most with Narducci and she gives a summary of her life to her, from having been a married and rich woman to taking Christ for her spouse.⁵⁹ After lifting the crucifix, she stresses the contrast between past and present times: “Ero di stirpe nobile, ma le mia [sic] nobiltà terrene l’abandonai: le donai a chi me l’haveva date, dispensandole a’ poveri” (“I was of noble lineage, but I abandoned my earthly nobility: I gave it to those who had given it to me, dispensing it to the poor”). Although she was once a wealthy noblewoman, she chose Christ as her spouse, giving up her titles and luxuries to follow a Christian path. She took the souls of the world as her new family and educated her daughter Catherine, who would become Saint Catherine of Sweden, to be a bride, humble servant, and apostle of Christ.

After the vision the exegesis follows, and Narducci lectures on the queens she has encountered. The queens go hand-in-hand, in each group, because virtues and senses need one another to protect the fortress of the spirit. Birgitta is used as a point of comparison for exemplarity, and she is in glory because she has embraced those queens inside her (“aveva adornato queste regine in lei”). By doing this, her senses and will are perfectly aligned with God, in the same way that the Virgin accepted the divine call in the Annunciation. The vestment is also adorned by God’s “inspirations” (“ispirationi che Dio le aveva mandato”) and her black cloak, which shines because of its embroidered stars, alludes

59 “Sappia ch’io son santa Brigida, la quale rimasi vedova de lo sposo material e terreno. Innanzi ch’io rimanessi vedova, io ero maritata, che havevo tolto lo sposo celeste et havevolo sempre meco” (“Know that I am Saint Birgitta, who was widowed of her material and earthly bridegroom. Before I was left a widow, I was married, I excluded the celestial spouse but always had Him with me”). *I sermoni*, 129.

to her condition of widowhood which is sanctified by her following the star of God (“aveva santificato l’amanto vedovile”). The explicit references to the figurative attributes of Mary in the Apocalypse are set in front of a background blended with military allusions. After the death of her husband, Birgitta is said to have faced battles and persecution from both men and demons, but came through triumphant (“vittoriosa”). The military allusions seem to coalesce with the story by marking its different aspects and passages. In one of those, Narducci establishes a comparison between the different functions that captains, soldiers, and horses have in battle, and the simile is placed just before the vision of the five queens. She then exhorts her spiritual daughters to follow their leaders, and to learn from Birgitta who has followed her queens.⁶⁰

In the concluding part of the sermon, Narducci finally explains the ultimate meaning of the figures of Birgitta and her daughter: Birgitta represents “reason” (“ragione”) that in Christian terms coincides with spiritual understanding, whereas her daughter Catherine represents the virtue of “constancy” (“perseveranza”). The sermon ends with a list of suggestions addressed to the Duchess to help her in life, including that she should live with reason and constancy both to avoid sensuality and temptations and also to be able to govern well and be a good mother. She has to act independently and follow her inner queens towards Christ. Like Birgitta, she needs to embrace fortitude (“stare forte”) and fight in the name of Jesus (“combattere per l’amor di Iesu Cristo”) who, like a captain, fortifies and gives new munitions to the spirit (“rinfresca e fortifica le regine”).

Overall, Narducci presented Birgitta to the Duchess as an exemplum of widowhood and motherhood, and a role model in spiritual, civic, and intellectual terms. Birgitta is depicted with recourse to the apocalyptic traits of Mary and, in Narducci’s vision, she is almost a *contrafigura* of Mary herself in spirit, behaviour, and fortitude. She has listened to God’s call, and she has been persecuted and won battles to finally reach eternal life. Birgitta is also a symbol of the renewed Church, as her mantle of stars shows, in the same way Mary’s cloak did in the *Vision of the Tabernacle* decades earlier. Being the last in the parade also has, from a theological and rhetorical point of view, an important meaning. Narducci explicitly gives to the *regina Governatrice*, the last of the queens, who represents the allegory of “reason” that closes the procession of the other spiritualised virtues in order to lead from behind. In light of Joachim of Flore’s conception of nearness, by appearing at the end of the procession,

60 In another passage, the soul is described as a fortified city, and by referring to the image of the city (the “strettoio” and the “torchio”) Narducci freely blends apocalyptic images from different semantic contexts.

Birgitta with her daughter becomes the living proof of the third age of the Spirit as being “the last” means to give *substantia* and knowledge of what has happened before. In a word, she is reason: *logos*.⁶¹

By applying Marian apocalyptic elements to historical figures, Narducci represents the saint as the supreme tabernacle of military and intellectual virtues or, in other words, her *ideological leader*. This is an example that continues the assimilation of insights by Birgitta more than a century before on the relationships among reason, justice, and Christian faith: these are aspects and concerns that cannot be separated from one another in Birgitta’s development and thought. Her Mariology was conceived with strongly political aspects, and this scheme continues in the lesson from Narducci: they were both political visionaries sanctioned as such by their superiors. In this way, Cibo and her daughter are invited to take part in this parade, or lineage, of allegorical and historical queens and link their personal dimension to the universality of history.

Conclusion

The relationship between Mariology and politics has a long history that still needs to be fully understood in relation to female writing, particularly that taking the thought of Birgitta of Sweden as its point of departure. In recent decades, scholars have contributed, in different ways, to reconstructing the contribution of women to theology, whose exegeses “appear to be pursued with a different focus from men authors”.⁶² The apocalyptic culture of the late Quattrocento developed during a time particularly favourable to women, who were the central players, at least until the first half of the 16th century, in a reformation *in capite* and *in membris* of the Church, involving the entire hierarchy, from the Vicar of Christ to His last son and daughter. Having recovered these texts, it appears that they share similar lines of enquiry and focus on the recurrent symbol of the figure of Mary, whether stressing her Immaculate Conception or her Apocalyptic courage, to catalyse their support for a reform that takes into account the role of women in society. As we have seen with Narducci, the gendering of the prophetic word through the use of elements from Marian apocalypticism to characterise historical or allegorical figures

61 In the Middle Ages, apocalyptic thought had been shaped by Joachim of Fiore’s (1135–1202) eschatological reading of history, according to which it develops over three ages of increasing spirituality, as shown both in the figures of the Old and New Testament and the structure of the Bible.

62 Boon and Knibbs, “Introduction,” in *The End of the World*, 4.

allows women to take center stage. In the same way, we can look at the modalities of eschatology in other women authors of religious literary texts highlighting their legacy and influence on each other, and their use of gender to convey eschatological meaning. This is significant for the history of knowledge at a time when women were constructing new paradigms of knowledge for themselves through a deep consideration, and reconstruction, of a female lineage of intellectual leadership.

The Fifteen Prayers Attributed to Birgitta and Their Circulation in Early Modern Italy: Private Devotion, Heterodoxy, and Censorship

Marco Faini

Introduction

In his 1536 *Dialogo*, Pietro Aretino has his main character, the bawd Comare, tell the story of how she persuaded a nun to accept a lover's courtship. The Comare gets hold of a beautifully illuminated book of hours of our Lady and goes to the convent where the nun lives, pretending that she wants to sell the book. The young nuns gather around her and begin to contemplate the vivid illuminations, excitedly commenting on them. It is a masterful passage suffused with soft eroticism and sexual undertones as the nuns look at the “traitorous fig” (*fico traditore*), the “thieving snake” (*serpe ladro*), voicing the desire to live naked in the earthly Paradise.¹ As the abbess suddenly arrives, the nuns rush to show her the manuscript. The sudden burst of confusion gives Comare the chance to remain briefly alone with the young woman she had come for, to present her with some gifts sent from her lover, and to talk to her. Comare leaves the book with the nuns and returns in the following days with the excuse of finding an agreement on its price; in fact, this gives her the opportunity to make the necessary arrangements for the nun to meet her lover. In order not to arouse suspicions among the other nuns, Comare distracts them by talking about the current political situation, as well as telling stories she has heard about their relatives and acquaintances. In the conclusion of her tale, she states that she went as far as explaining to them “the meaning of the prophecies of Saint Bridget and Fra Giacomone da Pietrapana.”²

1 Pietro Aretino, *Aretino's Dialogues*, transl. Raymond Rosenthal, Preface by Alberto Moravia, Introduction by Margaret Rosenthal (Toronto: 2005), 337.

2 Aretino, *Aretino's Dialogues*, 339. The reference to “Giacopone da Pietrapana” seems to merge in one fictional character Iacopone da Todi, to whom several apocryphal prophecies were attributed, and one Francesco da Pietrapana, a hermit and the author of a prophecy now kept in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl. XXVIII.12, fols. 20r–28r. I wish to thank Michele Lodone for this suggestion and for pointing out Francesco da Pietrapana's text to

Aretino's text, making fun of the arcane content of Birgitta's revelations, is certainly not the only work in the Italian and European Renaissance in which Birgittine works appear as the target of satire and bitter criticism.³ Martin Luther, in his *Table talks*, had condemned "so many Bridget prayers," in his view one of the embodiments of superstitious Papistic devotion.⁴ In the early 1540s, the Italian reformer and exile *religionis causa* Celio Secondo Curione (1503–1569) wrote in his *Pasquino in estasi*, a dialogue between the speaking statues of Pasquino and Marforio:

Marforio: O wretched and unhappy men, or, rather, beasts, who, while they could be true servants of Christ prefer to subject themselves to such utter foolishness, which far from being useful, is instead of incalculable damage.

Pasquino: Certainly He [i.e. God] does not push us in any other direction, nor wants anything else from us. Because the day he will come to make His judgment, he will not ask us "Have you been to Mass? Have you read the prayers of Saint Birgitta? Have you respected the third rule of St. Francis? Are you a virgin?" Nor will he ask other similar things. Rather he will ask whether we were observant of what he left in his testament with such emphasis when He said: "I give you my peace, peace I leave with you, so that you love each other."⁵

Certainly, one could find similar references to Birgitta in other religious and satirical texts from the 1530s and 1540s. For my purposes, it suffices to show

me. On Iacopone as a pseudo-prophet see Michele Lodone, "Iacopone profeta," *Linguistica e letteratura* 45 (2020), 227–79.

3 On the Italian circulation of the Revelations see Michele Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgarizzamenti e riscritture profetiche," *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 73 (2019), 69–84.

4 I use the translation by William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society) available online at the following address: <https://ccl.org/ccl/luther/tabletalk/tabletalk.i.html> (accessed on 24/09/2020), here 12.

5 Celio Secondo Curione, "*Pasquillus extaticus*" e "*Pasquino in estasi*". *Edizione storico-critica commentata*, ed. Giovanna Cordibella-Stefano Prandi (Florence: 2018): "Marforio: O miseri e infelici uomini, anzi, bestiazze che, potendo esser servi di Cristo, vogliono più tosto sottoporsi a queste espresse pazzie che non sono di utile alcuno, anzi che sono di danno incomprendibile [...]. Pasquino: Certo che ei non ci sollecita ad altro, né cerca altro da noi. Imperò che, quando verrà a fare il suo giudizio, ei non ci domanderà: 'Sete voi stati a messa? Avete voi letto le orazioni di santa Brigida? Avete voi osservato la terza regola di san Francesco? Sete voi vergini? Né simil altre cose. Ma ei ci domanderà se noi abbiamo osservato quello che con tanta diligenza nel suo testamento ci lasciò mentre disse: 'io vi do la pace mia, io vi lascio la pace mia, acciò che voi vi amiate l'un l'altro'" (236). Curione's text dates from 1541(?)/1542(?).

how certain aspects of Birgitta's cult, especially the so-called and apocryphal "fifteen prayers" had become, by that time, the target of religious reformers, one of the signs of the corruption and superficiality of Roman Catholic devotion and of its fool "superstitions." Birgitta's prayers – but, one may suggest, her prophecies too – were at odds with the new evangelical and Christocentric devotion that spread in Italy from around the 1520s. We may recall for example a passage from the Inquisitorial trial of Vittore Soranzo (1500–1558), *coadiutore* of Pietro Bembo while he was serving as bishop of Bergamo (and bishop himself after Bembo's death in 1547). In September 1550, one Giovanni Consoli accused Soranzo of having subtracted several devotional books from the convent of Santa Grata, warning the nuns that "they should not recite so many prayers, such as the prayers of St. Augustine, of saint Birgitta, and the rosary."⁶ Soranzo had allegedly replaced these books with copies of the *Beneficio di Cristo* and other works more in tune with evangelical spirituality, apparently with the collaboration and support of the abbess Clemenza Vitali. In his defense in May 1551, Soranzo blamed this initiative on his vicar, arguing that in taking from the nuns some books "unworthy of religious persons or [concerning] false miracles" he may have inadvertently also taken copies of Birgitta's prayers.⁷ While this last passage seems to place Birgitta's prayers on a different level than the other unnamed works (although there is no evidence of a specific cult to Birgitta within the convent), the connection between the prayers of Birgitta and those of Augustine seems to point to a specific typology of books.⁸ Little books containing the fifteen prayers and a prayer to St. Augustine had been published from the late 15th century onwards, often accompanied by elaborated rubrics stating the supernatural and prodigious powers of said

6 "Non dovessero dir tante orationi, come sonno le orationi de santo Agostino, de santa Brigida et lo rosario," Massimo Firpo and Sergio Pagano, *I processi inquisitoriali di Vittore Soranzo (1550–1558)*. Edizione critica (Città del Vaticano: 2004), vol. 1: 62. On Soranzo see Massimo Firpo, *Vittore Soranzo vescovo ed eretico. Riforma della Chiesa e Inquisizione nell'Italia del Cinquecento* (Rome-Bari: 2006). For a review of the bibliography on Santa Grata see Giulio Orazio Bravi, *Il monastero benedettino di Santa Grata in Bergamo*, available on line at https://www.academia.edu/41731347/Il_monastero_benedettino_di_Santa_Grata_in_Bergamo_gennaio_2020_ (accessed on 08/25/2020). See also Vincenzo Lavenia, "La lunga possessione. Il caso del monastero di Santa Grata a Bergamo, 1577–1625," in *Non lasciar vivere la malefica. Le streghe nei trattati e nei processi (secoli XIV–XVII)*, ed. Dinora Corsi and Matteo Duni (Florence: 2008), 213–42.

7 "Non degni de relligiosi o de qualche miracoli falsi," Firpo and Pagano, *I processi*, vol. 1: 309.

8 Dario Personeni, "Santi, culti e reliquie nel monastero fra Medioevo e prima età moderna," in *Il monastero di santa Grata in Bergamo. Storia e segni di un'antica presenza in città. Studi e documenti*, vol. 3: *Piantato è su le mura al mezzogiorno. Il cenobio*, ed. Paolo Mazzariol (Bergamo: 2019), 183–221.

prayers. As such, these tiny books epitomized the kind of “superstitious” and “popular” devotion that the *spirituali* tried to eradicate.

These publications – along with other cheap prints and broad-sheets advertising the miraculous effects of the prayers – will be the object of this essay. After exploring their materiality and their content, I will turn to their circulation, especially in the post-Trent period, focusing on issues of censorship and on what these works can tell us about changes and continuities in popular devotion.⁹

Using the Prayers: Rubrics and Preternatural Powers

We can easily imagine what the books confiscated by Soranzo looked like. 31 editions of the fifteen prayers appeared from the 1470s to 1538; sometimes the prayers were published as an appendix to other works, such as the 1516 (ca.) edition of the *Traslato miraculosa ecclesie beate Marie virginis de Loreto* (Rome, Antonio Blado) or the 1543 edition of Bernardo of Clairvaux's *Divi Bernardi abbatis meditationes* (Venice, Bernardino Bindoni). In at least 24 of these editions, the oration to St. Augustine appeared alongside the main text.¹⁰ They were generally *in-ottavo* books displaying on the frontispiece a woodcut showing Birgitta kneeling in front of the Crucifix.¹¹ Thus, the image of Birgitta visualizes the title of the work, which states that what the reader is about to read are the fifteen prayers that Birgitta used to recite devoutly kneeling in front of the Crucifix.

Other small vignettes could be placed here and there in the text. For example, in a copy printed in Rome by Eucharius Silber not before 1510 (*Orationes sancta Brigitte cum oratione sancti Augustini*) the prayer to St. Augustine is introduced by a woodcut occupying roughly three-quarters of the page, showing the saint in full episcopal attire in an interior, kneeling in front of an image of Christ on a wall, with an open book on the floor.¹² Another edition

9 On “popular religion” see Ottavia Niccoli, “Cultura popolare: Un relitto abbandonato?,” *Studi Storici* 56 (2015), 997–1010; Ottavia Niccoli, “Malintesi. Fenomeni di incomprendione tra livelli di cultura,” in *Un mondo perduto? Religione e cultura popolare*, ed. Lucia Felici and Pierroberto Scaramella (Rome: 2019), 33–58.

10 I am relying on the census on the editions that can be consulted on the website of the project *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden* at the following address: <https://birgitta.hf.uio.no/works/709/>.

11 Same or similar woodcuts appear also on many editions of the prophecies: I thank Anna Wainwright for pointing this out to me.

12 The same set of woodcuts appears in an edition also printed in Rome around 1513 by Marcello Silber.

(probably Rome, Johannes Besicken?) is accompanied by the customary image of Birgitta, while the beginning of the text has a tiny woodcut showing Christ with a chalice and host at his feet. This particular edition does not contain the prayer to St. Augustine – replaced by the *Stabat mater* and by two short prayers to the Virgin Mary. The beginning of the *Stabat mater* is marked by another small woodcut showing a crowned Mary holding a scepter with one hand and the baby Jesus with the other.¹³ Most of these editions were printed, with few exceptions, by German typographers active in Rome such as Johannes Besicken or by Eucario Silber and/or his son Marcello. Another German typographer, Stephan Planck printed in 1495 a version of the text with the title *Hec sunt quindecim collecte sive orationes*, while an edition by Johann Bull dates back to 1478: I shall return to both of them. The fifteen prayers seem to have been extremely popular from the 1470s to ca. 1515; later editions are indeed quite rare.

I must pause at this point to recall that, although Birgitta's authorship of the "fifteen prayers" has been dismissed by scholarship, "to a large part of the wide 15th century audience the question of authorship was not a problem. Birgitta was regarded as the author, a fact that is clearly shown by rubrics in many manuscripts."¹⁴ Besides, I shall recall how the textual tradition of the prayers is rather fluid and unstable both in their manuscript and printed versions. It has been observed that "as the popularity of the prayers grew, there seems to have been a tendency to elaborate the Latin versions by adding words and filling in new phrases where possible." To further complicate the picture, one should recall that "in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the diverging textual tradition is hard to follow, as new versions were printed and disseminated."¹⁵ All these caveats should not prevent us from acknowledging that the fifteen prayers can be fruitfully put in dialogue with Birgitta's works. The emphasis on the Passion of Christ, the vivid, if not morbid, depictions of the torments inflicted on his virginal body find echoes in famous passages penned by Birgitta, such as the vision of the Passion of Christ as described in chapter 15 of *The Book of Pilgrimage (Revelaciones VII)*. During her pilgrimage

13 I saw the copy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, shelfmark *Inc.c.a.142m°Beibd.3*. The work is available at the following address: <https://bildsuche.digitale-sammlungen.de/index.html?c=viewer&bandnummer=bsb00006701&pimage=00001&v=2p&nav=&l=it> [accessed on 03/22/2020].

14 Claes Gejrot, "The *Fifteen Oes*: Latin and Vernacular Versions. With an Edition of the Latin Text," in *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into the Medieval European Vernaculars*, ed. Bridget Morris and Veronica O'Mara (Turnhout: 2000), 213–38: 213. On the circulation of apocryphal works by Birgitta, see Brian Richardson's chapter in this volume.

15 Gejrot, "The *Fifteen Oes*," 221 and 222.

to the Holy Land in 1371/72 Birgitta received three visions, the last of which occurred “in ecclesia Sancti Sepulchri in capella montis Calvarie.” In her vision, Birgitta witnessed not only the tortures that Christ endured, but also Mary’s grief. According to Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, the vision gives the tale a “dual structure” which culminates in the idea of Christ and Mary sharing the same heart: an idea that serves the purpose of installing Mary at the very center of the process of redemption of mankind.¹⁶ The description of Christ’s passion plays a central stance also in the second of *The Four prayers* (*Revelaciones XII*), where the aforementioned “dual structure” is less evident, as is in the fifteen prayers.

Over the course of the 16th century, religious authorities became suspicious of the fifteen prayers, despite their learned content, deeply rooted in late Medieval spirituality.¹⁷ Although their Christocentric spirituality could resonate with some evangelical ideas, the Church seemed more troubled by the rubrics that often accompanied the text, showcasing in full detail its talismanic and preternatural powers. Therefore, the prayers came to be included in lists of “superstitious” works, and they had to undergo processes of expurgation.¹⁸ Recent scholarship has explored with growing interest these “superstitious” prayers (often referred to as “historie,” “leggende,” “orazioni”) which provide an invaluable access to domestic and private devotion. The study of rubrics, in particular, allows for a move away from traditional perspectives such as that of the history of the book and the history of devotion toward a more “anthropological” understanding of this production.¹⁹ Before turning to a closer study of censorial practices, I will linger on these rubrics. I was able to consult the following editions: Rome 1478; Rome ca. 1481–85; Rome ca. 1492–98; Rome 1495; Rome 1510; Rome ca. 1510; Rome 1513; Venice 1525 (Paolo Danza); while my

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- 16 “Ma tratto peculiare del racconto di Brigida era la struttura duale della *passio*, dove il dolore del figlio era speculare a quello della madre, una vera e propria compenetrazione carnale, sino alla condivisione di uno stesso e medesimo cuore. [...] Questa sofferenza muta e straziante innalzava Maria al ruolo di corredentrice,” Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, “Brigida di Svezia e la reinvenzione della Storia Sacra. Il cammino la terra la visione,” in *Predicatori, mercanti, pellegrini. L’Occidente medievale e lo sguardo letterario sull’Altro tra l’Europa e il Levante*, ed. Giuseppe Mascherpa and Giovanni Strinna (Mantua: 2018), 189–217: 194. On this role of Mary see Beth Williamson, “The Cloisters Double Intercession. The Virgin as Co-Redemptrix,” *Apollo* 152 (2000), 48–54.
- 17 See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London: 2005), 249–56.
- 18 Giorgio Caravale, *Forbidden Prayer: Church, Censorship, and Devotional Literature in Renaissance Italy* (Farnham: 2011); Gigliola Fragnito, *Proibito capire. La Chiesa e il volgare nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: 2005), 232–59.
- 19 Marco Faini, “Vernacular Books and Domestic Devotion in Cinquecento Italy,” *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 6 (2019), 299–318.

corpus may appear comparatively restricted, one should recall that many editions were in fact reprints.²⁰ For example, the Silber family issued fourteen editions of the prayers; Johann Besicken printed nine, although one of these may have been printed with or by Andreas Freitag.

In some of the editions I consulted, an articulated rubric precedes the fifteen prayers, boasting their power and their manifold effects. The same does not happen with the prayer to St. Augustine: in the copies I was able to consult the prayer is generally introduced by a laconic rubric saying: "Prayer of the eminent doctor St. Augustine" (*Oratio eximii doctoris sancti Augustini*). In the 1495 edition by Stephan Planck the rubric gives simple instructions on how to recite the prayer: "Prayer to St. Augustine, to be recited most devoutly for 33 days on your knees to obtain grace."²¹ As in the case of similar works, besides suggesting the powers of a given prayer, rubrics also provided instructions on how to perform it to achieve the desired results.

The rubric introducing the fifteen prayers, in fact a rather articulated Latin text, conveys more information, starting from a few notes on the famous episode of Birgitta's prayer in the church of San Paolo fuori le mura in Rome [Fig. 5.1 a/b], when the Crucifix spoke to her as a reward for her fervent devotion. Scholars suggest that it was only in mid-Cinquecento that the miracle entered official hagiography on Birgitta, thanks to the publications of Olaus Magnus (1490–1557), the Swedish humanist and geographer (but active in Rome) who published a series of works on Birgitta, among which the *Vita abbreviata sanctae Birgittae* (1553). The episode of the prodigious dialogue between Birgitta and the Crucifix was already circulating in Roman devotional culture but was not part of official Birgittine hagiography at the time of her canonization (1391). However, Claudia D'Alberto alerts us to the fact that this does not imply that the tale originated in the late 15th century, at the time when the booklets we are examining began to appear. More likely, Birgitta's strongly Christocentric devotion was already well known and those crucifixes she venerated the most may have enjoyed special consideration. Hence, tales on Birgitta's prodigious relationship with the crucifix at San Paolo may have been born.²²

20 The copy in the Biblioteca Marciana of Venice (*Hec sunt quindecim collecte siue orationes illius preclarissime virginis beate Brigitte*, Rome: Eucharius Silber, after 1500, shelfmark Misc. 4044 003.A) lacks the first folio.

21 "Oratio sancti Augustini devotissime dicenda xxxiii diebus genibus flexis ad obtinendam gratiam," *Quindecim orationes sanctae Brigidae* [...] (Rome: Stephan Planck, ca. 1495), fol. 7r (see *infra*).

22 Claudia D'Alberto, "Il crocifisso parlante di santa Brigida di Svezia nella basilica di San Paolo fuori le mura e i crocifissi replicati, copiati e riprodotti a Roma al tempo del papato avignonese," *Studi Medievali e Moderni. Arte letteratura storia* 15 (2011) [= Gaetano Curzi

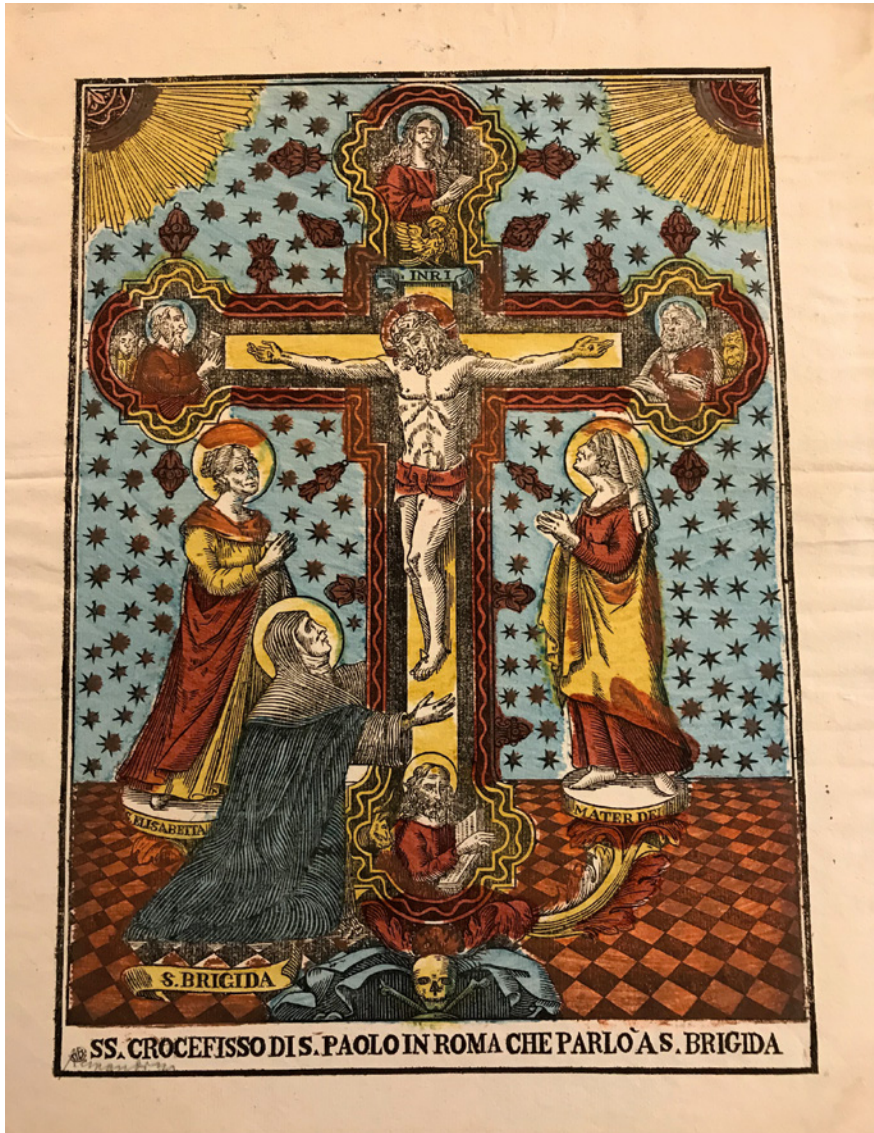


FIGURE 5.1A *ss. Crocefisso di San Paolo in Roma che parlò a S. Brigida*. Woodcut. Milan, Civica Raccolta Bertarelli, *Sacre Popolari* m. 36, 54

The rubric purports to report the words that Christ spoke to Birgitta, warning the reader that they will read “amazing things” (*stupenda leges*). In fact, the printed text is an abridged version of the legend that often precedes the prayers

et al. (eds.), *Abruzzo: un laboratorio di ricerca sulla scultura lignea*], 229–55, esp. 234 and 236–37. See also the chapter in this volume by Virginia Cox.



FIGURE 5.1B *Il ss. Crocefisso di San Paolo in Roma che parlò a S. Brigida.* Woodcut. Milan, Civica Raccolta Bertarelli, Sacre Popolari m. 36, 55

in some manuscript versions. The printed text lacks the first part of this legend, wherein an old woman – sometimes identified with Birgitta herself – who lives “solitary and reclusive” (*solitaria et reclusa*), desires to learn the number of wounds inflicted on Christ during his Passion. In a 15th-century French book of hours (now ms. *Lat.* 13285 of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France) the incipit of this legendary tale reads: “A certain woman, alone and a recluse, because she

wanted to know the number of Christ's wounds, prayed to God that he reveal it to her, and God said to her [...]."²³ The rubric then claims that the person who will recite the prayers for a whole year will be able to free from Purgatory fifteen souls of relatives (*de eius progenie*), and will convert fifteen sinners into fifteen just persons. They will also obtain knowledge of, and contrition for, their sins, thus achieving the first degree of perfection. Fifteen days before the death of said person, Christ will share his body with them so that they will not suffer eternal hunger, and he will share his blood with them so that they will not suffer eternal thirst. Christ promises to place his Cross in front of this person as a protection against all enemies (*in subsidium contra omnes insidias inimicorum eius*). Before the death of said person, Christ will descend with his mother to greet their soul and escort it to eternal joy (*ad gaudia eterna*). If someone who has been in a condition of mortal sin for 30 year decides to recite the prayers, Christ will offer his pardon to them, protect them from temptations and will guard their five senses (from sin, i.e.), save them from sudden death and their soul from eternal damnation. In addition, Christ will erase all the sins this person has committed from their childhood onwards, while also supporting their spiritual path to improvement, perfecting their virtues. If this person were to die of sudden death within a day, Christ would prolong their life (*si cras mori deberet vita eius prolongabitur*). The text then promises other indulgences and, interestingly, spiritual happiness to whoever will teach the prayers. Finally, the text states that God will be present with his grace in every place where Birgitta's prayers shall be recited or in whatever place they happen to be placed (*ubicunque locorum fuerint vel dicantur*). This last passage stresses the talismanic power of the text, whose mere presence grants spiritual benefits.²⁴

The bulk of this introductory text appears also in the version of the fifteen prayers printed along with Bernard of Clairvaux's *Meditationes devotissime* by Bernardino Bindoni (Venice, 1543). In Bindoni's edition, Bernard's *Meditationes* are followed by a series of other spiritual works, among which the *Exercitium vitae et passionis domini ad modum rosarii distinctum*, which immediately

23 "Femina quaedam solitaria et reclusa numerum vulnerum Christi scire cupiens, oravit Domino ut sibi riveleret et dixit ei Deus [...]" the text of the legend is published in Abbé V[ictor] Leroquais, *Les Livres d'Heures manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris: 1927), vol. 2: 97–98 (97); see also Duffy, *The Stripping*, 254–55.

24 I use the 1478 edition (Rome: Johann Bull), copy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, *Inc.5.a.11#Beibd.4* <https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0003/bsb00035645/images/index.html?seite=00001&l=de> [accessed on 03/22/2020]; and the edition of Rome, 1481–85, copy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, *Inc.c.a.71#Beibd.3* <https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0003/bsb00035647/images/index.html?seite=00001&l=de> [accessed on 03/22/2020].

precedes the fifteen prayers. Its author is the German Carthusian monk Johann Landsberg (Johannes Lanspergius, 1489–1539), whose works enjoyed a great success in Italy in the 16th century. It is not by chance that this work – a series of prayers, or meditations, connected to each one of Christ’s wounds and interspersed with Hail Marys and Holy Fathers – precedes the fifteen prayers. An edition of the two works had in fact already appeared in Cologne in 1530 and the association between Lanspergius and Birgitta was sensible, since Lanspergius had published in Cologne in 1536 the life and revelations of another Medieval saint, St. Gertrude of Helfta (Gertrude the Great, 1256–1302 ca.).²⁵ Moreover, the *Exercitium* and the fifteen prayers share some features, in particular the strong focus on the Passion of Christ. In the same year, 1543, Bernardino Bindoni printed the *Beneficio di Cristo*, the most influential text of the Italian evangelical movement (the very work with which Soranzo wanted to replace the fifteen prayers in the convent of Santa Grata). It may appear at first surprising that the same person could print the manifesto of the new spirituality and late-Medieval fossils (although focused on Christocentric spirituality), especially the fifteen prayers with their long “superstitious” rubric, utterly at odds with the austere (for all its “sweetness”) spirituality of the *Beneficio*. Possibly, in Bindoni’s eyes, the rubric must have been less relevant than the strongly Christocentric content of the fifteen prayers; as we shall see, some passages in this text could even resonate well with the *Beneficio di Cristo*, helping to bridge an otherwise seemingly problematic gap. It is probably not too far-fetched to suggest that the 1543 edition of the fifteen prayers establishes a dialogue with Italian evangelism, *pace* Soranzo.

The Bindoni edition deserves some further scrutiny. Firstly, the printer claims to have drawn the text from some most ancient and authoritative copies, possibly manuscripts that allegedly served to emend the text.²⁶ The rubric serves as a prologue to the “prayers of the blessed widow Birgitta” (“Prologus in orationes beatae Brigittae viduae”) and is longer and more detailed (one may say more “superstitious”) than in the editions considered so far. The story of the miraculous speech of the Crucifix is more elaborate and we read that Birgitta herself wanted to know from the Crucifix the number of Christ’s

25 *Exercitium vitae et passionis Christi, ad modum [sic] rosarii quinquaginta articulis et totidem oratiunculis distinctum. Item, Divae Brigittae orationes xv de passione domini* (Cologne: apud Io. Soterem, 1530). Giolito printed the life of Gertrude in the vernacular translation by Vincenzo Buondi five times between 1562 and 1589.

26 “Sequuntur Orationes 15 d. Brigittae de passione Domini, ad vetustissima exemplaria diligenter correctae,” [Bernardus Claraevallensis], *Divi Bernardi Abbatis meditationes devotissime* (Venice: Bernardinum de Bindonis, 1543), fol. 278v (= MMviv).

wounds (*scire cupiens numerum vulnerum Christi*).²⁷ Christ reveals that there are 5,460 (*Quinque milia, quadringenta et sexaginta corporis mei extiterunt vulnera*) of them.²⁸ To honor these wounds, one should recite for a year, kneeling, the fifteen prayers and an equal number of Holy Fathers and Hail Marys.²⁹ The text that follows reproduces the one I have already considered. However, the final section is slightly different and puts a stronger emphasis on the protective and practical powers of the text in everyday occurrences:

Finally, wherever these prayers are recited or placed, be it in fire or in water, God will intervene with his grace and will protect and save him [who recites or owns them, i.e.], in the same way he saved St. Peter on the stormy sea and rescued St. Paul, who was shipwrecked three times, from the depths of the sea.³⁰

The fifteen prayers are a complex, somewhat anamorphic textual object: a refined work of late-medieval spirituality and an aggregate of apocryphal tales and popular beliefs; as such, it could simultaneously resonate with Christocentric evangelism and be utterly at odds with it. It is probably not entirely inaccurate to say that the fifteen prayers live in a sort of grey area between orthodoxy and what might be labelled as heterodoxy, and between “high” and “popular” culture.

Before turning to issues of censorship and to the circulation of the text in the second half of the century, I would like to illustrate another printed text connected with Birgitta’s cult, which enjoyed a lasting popularity well into the 20th century. This text finds its place within the “popular” section of the spectrum on which the fifteen prayers are located. I am referring to a letter sent to Birgitta by Jesus Christ himself. Although the text does not contain the fifteen prayers it is easy to detect the reciprocal connections between the two works, starting from the recurrent presence of the number “fifteen.”

27 Ibid., fol. 279r (= MMviii).

28 Ibid.

29 “Quae si veneratione aliqua persequi volueris, has xv. orationes et totidem Pater noster cum Ave Maria dicas per annum integrum flexis genibus,” Ibid.

30 “Postremo, ubicunque orationes istae dicentur vel erunt, sive sit in igne, sive in aqua, Deus cum gratia sua aderita protegens et salvans eum, quemadmodum sanctum Petrum in mari fluctuantem, et Paulum tertio naufragantem de profundo pelagi liberavit,” Ibid., fol. 279v (= MMviii). The reference to the three shipwrecks comes from 2 Corinthians 11:25; the whole passage concerning “Paulum, tertio naufragantem, de profundo pelagi liberavit” is also part of the liturgy on the octave day of the apostles Peter and Paul.

A Letter from Jesus Christ to Birgitta and Her Sisters

In 1899, a note in the journal *Monitore ecclesiastico*, devoted to the publication of decrees issued by the various Congregations of the Holy See, reported that the Sacra Congregazione delle Indulgenze had declared apocryphal the indulgences connected with some prayers, therefore prohibiting them. The forbidden texts were published in their entirety on the journal. The first was titled *Lettera di Gesù Cristo delle gocce di sangue che sparse n. s. g. c. mentre andava al Calvario* (A letter from Jesus Christ on the drops of blood that Our Lord Jesus Christ spilled on his way to Calvary). The letter, reporting the apparition of Christ to Birgitta, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, and St. Matilda, was allegedly the copy of a prayer found in the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, kept guarded in a silver box by the Pontiff and the Christian Emperors and Empresses (although this is not entirely clear: were there more copies of the prayer? Was it passed from hand to hand?). Because the three saints desired to know certain details (*alcune cose*) regarding the Passion, Jesus Christ had spoken to them. His revelations regarded the number and the quality of the wounds and blows he suffered during the passion, the number of his sighs as well as the number of the soldiers who took part in his torture. The count is very precise, and we learn, for example, that throughout the entire Passion Jesus spilled 28,430 drops of blood. Jesus Christ will grant five special graces to those who will recite seven “Pater, Ave, Gloria” each day for fifteen years, until they match the number of his drops of blood. These five graces are: 1) full indulgence and pardon of all sins; 2) liberation from Purgatory; 3) if someone should die before the fifteen years are over, Jesus will act as if they had completed the whole cycle; 4) Jesus will consider them as if they had died for the Holy Faith (as a martyr, in other words); 5) at the moment of their death, Jesus will descend from Heaven to escort their soul and that of their relatives within the fourth degree. Other favors are bestowed on the persons who will carry the letter on their bodies: for example, they will not drown, or die suddenly, nor will they suffer from plague or lightning, and the power of Justice will not harm them (the preoccupation with justice and tribunals is a recurrent theme in this kind of texts). Women who will carry the prayer on their body will give birth easily, and those who have been infertile until that moment will be able to give birth. While in the above-mentioned editions of the fifteen prayers their benefits were mostly spiritual, in the case of the letter its talismanic power comes to the fore, extending its influence on everyday life. In addition, the letter describes two wondrous episodes that should prove its authenticity and effectiveness. The first concerns a Spanish captain who, while walking towards Barcelona, came across a severed head that told him to please go and fetch it a confessor because otherwise it

would not be able to die. After the confession the “living head” (*la testa vivente*) died; once the corpse to which the prodigious head belonged was found, people discovered on it a copy of this letter – approved by numerous tribunals of the Spanish Inquisition (again the discovery of a magic prayer in Spain and its alleged approval by the local Inquisition is a commonplace).³¹ Another copy of the letter, written in golden characters, was found miraculously on a seven year-old boy near Marseille.³²

This text shows the degree to which popular religion could appropriate the cult of Birgitta, mixing it with wondrous tales. Versions of the text circulated until at least 1928 and possibly later, sometimes printed on textile, and various versions of it can still be found on the Internet, testifying to its long-lasting influence. A slightly different version of the letter circulated declaring an apocryphal blessing by Pope Leo XIII carried the date of 5 April 1890.

Curious as it may be, this text had a long story behind it. The Inquisition had been worrying about it at least since 1642, when it ordered the bishop of Nepi and Sutri to confiscate all the existing copies in his diocese.³³ It is likely, however, that at that point the text had been circulating for some time, as one can gather from another version of the text now in the *Raccolta Bertarelli* in Milan [Fig. 5.2]. It is a flysheet, printed probably at some point in the 19th century.

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- 31 See Katherine M. Tycz, “Material Prayers and Maternity in Early Modern Italy: Signed, Sealed, Delivered,” in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Maya Corry, Marco Faini, and Alessia Meneghin (Leiden-Boston: 2018), 244–71: 258–60.
- 32 The text is in *Monitore ecclesiastico* 11 (1899), 534–35. This particular version of the text was printed in Fiorenzuola d’Arda in 1893 by the typographer Pennaroli, who specialized in popular literature and fly-sheets. The letter belongs to the “micro-genre” of fictional letters; see Genoveffa Palumbo, “Lettere immaginarie, apocrife, inventate,” in Gabriella Zari (ed.), *Per lettera: La scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia secoli XVI–XVII* (Rome: Viella, 1999), 151–177.
- 33 See the entry by Mario Marino “L’unica e vera lettera [...],” in *Rari e preziosi. Documenti dell’età moderna e contemporanea dall’Archivio del Sant’Uffizio*, Alejandro Cifres-Marco Pizzo (eds.) (Rome: 2009), 136–37. See Antonio Leoni, *Breve raccolta d’alcune particolari operette spirituali proibite, orazioni e divozioni vane e superstiziose, Indulgenze nulle, o apocrife* [...] (1708?), p. 80: “La rivelazione di S. Brigida delle Piaghe di N.S. Giesù Christo. Per Decreto del S. Officio primo luglio 1642 e 2 giugno 1662.” See also *Appendix novissimae appendici ad Indicem librorum prohibitorum* [...] (Romae: typis Hieronymi Mainardi, 1739), 536: “Indulgenze che si dicono fondate ed annesse alle Rivelationi fatte a Santa Brigida, o a Santa Metilde, o a Santa Elisabetta.” In this case, the reference comes from the *Raccolta d’alcune particolari operette spirituali, e profane proibite* included in the volume. A similar text titled *Revelatione fatta dal nostro Signore della sua santissima Passione a S. Brigida, alla beata Melchiade [= Matilde] et a santa Lisabetta* is in Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 1783, fols. 136v–137r. The manuscript was written by the Dominican Gherardo di Fiandra which suggests the circulation of these texts also within convents. I thank Michele Lodone for this reference.



FIGURE 5.2 *Rivelazione fatta dalla bocca di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo.* Woodcut. Milan, Civica Raccolta Bertarelli

On the left-hand side there is the text of the letter accompanied by small images of Christ and of the Virgin. On the right-hand side of the sheet one sees a woodcut showing Matilda and Elizabeth at the sides of a Crucifix while Birgitta is kneeling in front of it. The text, allegedly printed in Rome “with permission” does not have a proper title, but a sort of epigraphic incipit declaring that “On 7 April 1575 the following revelation was copied.” The text is shorter than the one published on the *Monitore*; the numbers differ, but its talismanic power is clearly stated. It is possible that this flysheet reflects a simpler version of the *Lettera*, already circulating in the sixteenth century. The letter seems to point to a conflation of Birgitta’s revelations with the talismanic power attributed to the apocryphal fifteen prayers. For sure, it entirely lacks the profound spirituality of the prayers themselves.

Censorship

In the second half of the 16th century and until the 20th century, the Inquisition and the Congregation of the Index fought a long battle against “superstitious” prayers. As a consequence, many of them have disappeared, a combined result of the authorities’ efforts, of these works’ poor material quality, and of their

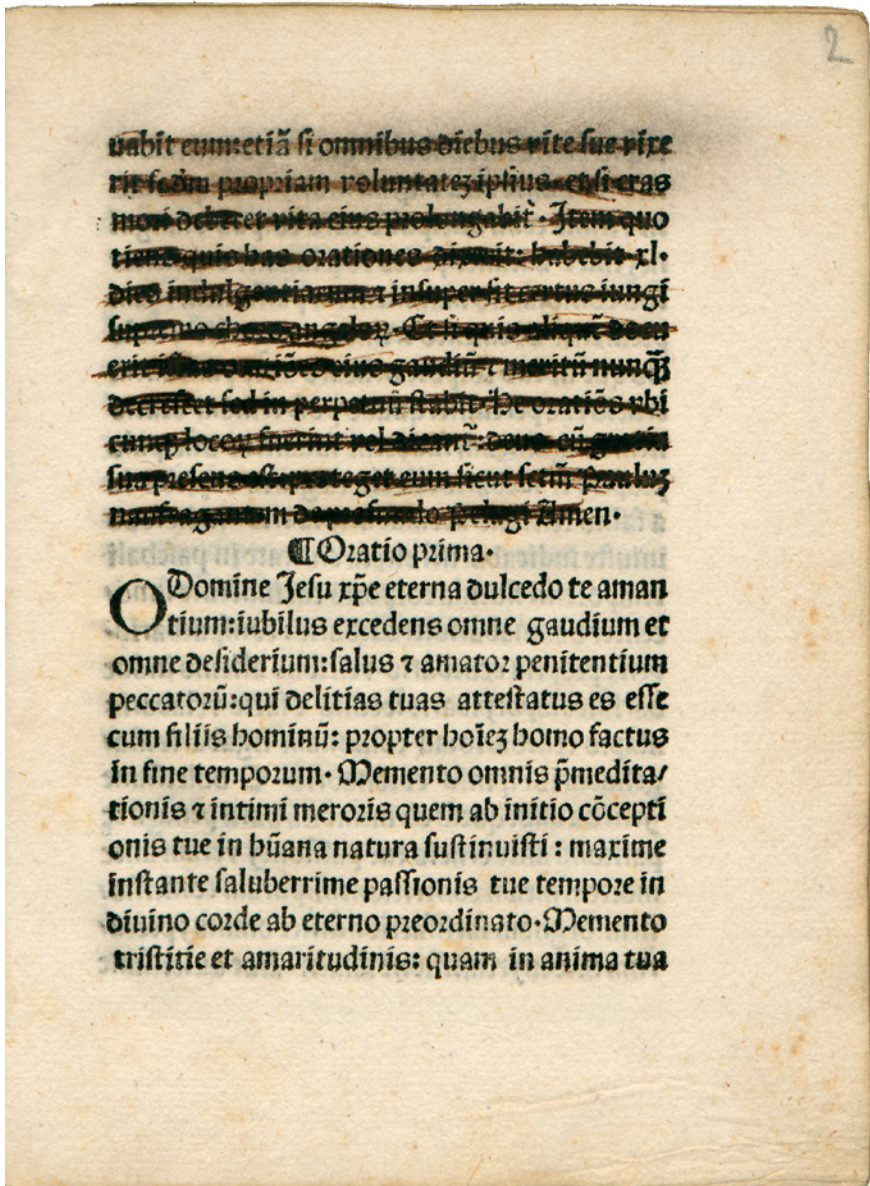


FIGURE 5.3 *Quindecim orationes sanctae Brigittae de passione Domini* (Rome: Stephan Planck, ca. 1495), fol. 2v. Biblioteca de Catalunya, Inc. 26/1-12

heavy use. Some survive, sometimes bearing signs of censorial interventions: this is the case with the copy of the 1495 edition of the fifteen prayers now in Biblioteca de Catalunya [Fig. 5.3]. The rubric that introduces the text is missing its first part (due to the loss of the first page) and an anonymous reader

has censored the rest of the rubric, covering it with heavy pen strokes.³⁴ It is an interesting example, showing that this edition may have been still circulating some 75 years after it was printed. In fact, although the fifteen prayers did not appear on the Index of prohibited books for a long time, as early as the 1570s they featured among a group of works requiring corrections. In March 1571, Pius v issued a bull concerning the Offices of the Virgin, which prohibited most of the Offices printed until that moment. The bull also addressed “superstitious” prayers in general, dealing with them in a section titled *Modo, et regola di espurgare gl’ufficioli, et altri libri d’orationi* (A method, and rule to purge the Offices and other books of orations). The *Modo, et regola* provided a sort of general “methodological” introduction on how to perform censorship on superstitious prayers, focusing especially on those rubrics “speaking of uncertain indulgences, or vain or superstitious practices, or of the prayer’s powers, telling things neither credible nor reasonable.”³⁵ It then provided two lists of prayers: the first included prayers to be absolutely prohibited; the second, prayers that could be tolerated but required censorial interventions. The fifteen prayers feature on this second list along with the prayer to St. Augustine [Fig. 5.4a/b]. The text of the *Modo et regola* is reprinted, with few variations, in the *Modo, et regola di espurgare li ufficij, & altri libri di orationi*, a flysheet printed in Rome at some point after 1571 and before 1590 [Fig. 5.5].³⁶

Before turning to the content of the instructions concerning the fifteen prayers, it is worth recalling that the list provided by the *Modo et regola* is at the basis of similar catalogs of prohibited prayers printed throughout the 18th century. In some cases, these catalogs were additions to other works; in some other cases, they were printed autonomously in the form of booklets.

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- 34 The shelfmark of the copy is *Inc. 26/1–12*^o; the passage at fol. 2v. The copy is available online: <http://mdc.csuc.cat/cdm/ref/collection/incunableBC/id/121198> [accessed on 03/22/2020]. The fifteen prayers inspired similar works which, analogously, ended up being prohibited for their “superstitious” content; an extraordinary example is the so-called *A muyto devota oração da empardeada* (an “empardeada” or “emparedada” being a walled-in woman who lived a life of prayer and repentance); see Noel Blanco Mourelle, “The Voice inside the Wall: *A muyto devota oração de empardeada* as a Confession of Enclosure,” *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 11 (2020), 264–71. I thank Michele Lodone for providing me with this reference.
- 35 “Parlano d’Indulgentie incerte, o d’osservazioni vane, o superstitiose, overo del valore dell’Orationi, con raccontare cose non verisimili né ragionevoli,” “Sommario della bolla del Santiss. Padre papa Pio v sopra la recitatione dell’Ufficio della B. Vergine Maria, colli decreti e indulgentie,” in Giovanni Battista Porcelli, *Scriniolum Sanctae Inquisitionis Astensis* [...] (Asti: apud Virgiliulum de Zangrandis, 1612), 55–57. The *Modo et regola* is at 56–57. See Caravale, *Forbidden Prayer*, 81–87.
- 36 Rome: per gli Heredi d’Antonio Blado Stampatori Camerali. I use the copy in the Biblioteca Passerini Landi of Piacenza – shelfmark (C) *TT.03.034.04*. I thank Dr Massimo Baucia for providing me a free image of the work.

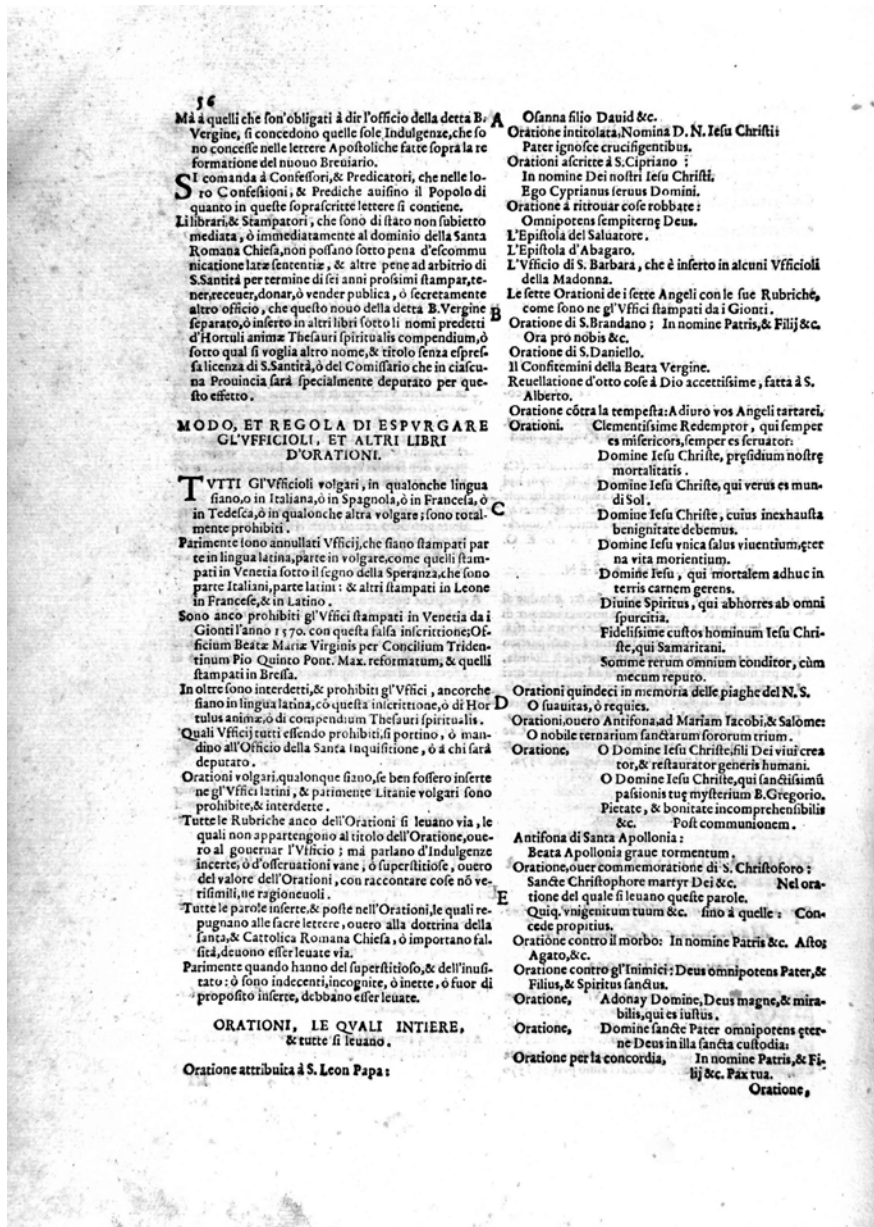


FIGURE 5.4 A/B

Giovanni Battista Porcelli, *Scriniolum Sanctae Inquisitionis Astensis* [...] (Asti: apud Virgiliulum de Zangrandis, 1612), 56–57

Oratione, O Iesu Nazarene, respice ad meas miserias, & angustias.
Oratione, Domina mea sanctissima, Dei genitrix perpetua virgo &c.
Oratione, Deus pater piissimus, Iesu Christe dulcissime, spiritus dulcissime &c.
Vtilitates Missæ &c. Si Homo peregrinaretur per totum mundum.
Hino di Gildo Rei Deus summe, pacis, & celi habitator.

Oratione di S. Rocho.
Oratione contra il male della gotta.
Oratione contra la febre.
Oratione che è intitolata, Oratio quam dicebat Beata Maria.

ORATIONI, ANTIFONE, LETANIE, ET HINI, che debbono esser corrette, come di sotto.
Oratio S. Augustini, O Dulcissime Dñe. In questa oratione si leua la rubrica, & si facci. Orò in afflictione. Nel testo d'essa oratione, leuansi queste parole: Saul, ouero, Populum tuum de monte Gelboe.
Item si leuano queste: Quia inimici mei super me faciunt, & facere volunt mala consilia, sino à quelle parole, Per sancta beneficia tua.

Auxilium mihi Domine Iesu: In questa oratione si leuano queste, Scio enim quod, sino à quelle, ideo de tua pietate confidit.
Gaspardus dicit: In questa oratione leuasi, Iesus autem transiens per medium illorum ibat. Item si leua: Si ergo me quæritis, finite hos abire. Tetragramma cono.
Nelle Letanie della Madonna si togli: Spiritus sancti solatium. Item, Calandra sancta.
Nel Gloria in excelsis della Messa della Madonna si leuano quelle particole aggiunte. Ad Mariæ gloriam, Mariam sanctificans &c.

O intermerata, & in æternum. In questa oratione si leuano primieramente tutte queste parole: Te enim vnigenitus filius, & omnipotens Deus, & quel che seguita sino à Inclina aures &c.
Dipoi si togliano quest'altre: Rogans pro me apud fontem pietatis, & il resto sino à O Ioannes beatissime Christi familiaris.

In altre si leuano queste: Credo enim firmiter, & factor indubitanter, quod velle vestrum &c. sino ad Pollice queso, & di qui si lascia tutto il restante sino alle parole, Benignissimus paraclitus, doue è da terminare l'oratione, & troncare il rimanente.
Obsecro te Domina mea &c. si leuano circa il fine le parole: Et in nouissimis diebus, sino, Et hanc orationem supplicem.

Nell'oratione, Salue sancta facies, che è al S. Sudario, si leua, Salue decus sæculi, sino al verso, Adoramus te Christe.
Aue facies omnipotentis in throno: In questa oratione è da leuare, Aue nostra gloria, sino al verso, signatum est.

Oratione di Beda. Domine Iesu Christe: In questa si leuano, Vt semper illa verba in memoria habermus: Item, Per virtutum illorum verborum.
Oratio S. Bepidæ: nella xliij. si leua, ruptoq; corde, nella xy. Ita vt minima gutta, sino ad, Per hanc amarissimam.
Oratio ad dexteram manum Christi: Domine Iesu Christe, qui ista manu, si scancellano queste due parole: Ista manu.

Nell'Vfficio del santissimo Sacramento all'Hino di No-
 na, leuasi, Iudus cum heloy clamauit, hoc est Deus meus.

L'Oratione, Conditor Celi, & terra, s'intirola. Oratio preparatoria ad confessionem. Nell'oratione istessa si leuano queste parole, In superbia, auaritia, gula, &c. sino à Cogitando.
La Salue Regina, doue in alcuni Vfficioli è intitolata, Canticum Angelorum, s'intirola, Antiphona Beate Mariæ Virginis.

Oratio deuotissima ad Beatam Virginem Mariam, Scabam mater dolorosa, s'intirola, Planctus Beate Mariæ Virginis.

La Institutione Christiana intitolata di S. Antonio, è da correggere per modo, che la dichiarazione del primo Precepto dica, Che tu facci riverentia à vn Dio, & che tu l'ami sopra tutte le cose &c. sino & Nota, leuando via quel, Non, Et Se non: & ne à cose temporali, sia' à che tu ami. & nel fine si leua: Nota, che quando dicit la bugia &c. Nella dichiarazione dell'articolo ortauo, Credo in Spiritum sanctum, si leua via, Et sua il padre vno. Doue si parla del Battesimo, è da leuare, Et nota, Che sono quattro cose, sino à Et nota, Che quello sacramento &c.

Doue si parla dell'alcantara contra l'iradone dice, Sappi che non ti lecito &c. si leua il, Non, & Se non.
Nella seconda maledictione dell' figliuoli disubediens alli pa-tri si leua, Percio che niente altro è esse maledetto &c. sino al fine d'essa.
Nell'Institutione alla Christiana religione, doue nel sermone della confessione si dice, La confessione rimette li peccati, si leuano queste parole, tutta la speranza della remissione de li peccati, &c. sino, Della quale esso Saluatore.

EDITTO DI MONSIGNORE REVERENDISS.
 Il Vescouo di Tortoua, per effecutione delle sopradette lettere Apostoliche.

Volendo Monsig. Reuerendiss. Cesare di Gambarà Vescouo di Tortoua effequire la piua mente di N. Sig. comanda ad ogni Curato così della Città, come della Diocesi di Tortoua, che il primo giorno di festa doppo che le sudette lettere Apostoliche li saranno peruenute alle mani, le publichino al suo popolo nel tempo della Messa.

Inoltre comanda sotto pene arbitrarie à sua S. Reuerendiss. che fra termine di dieci giorni à venire doppo la publicatione delle predette ciascuna persona secularè o regularè, o laica debbia hauer portato in mano del del R. P. Inquisitore di Tortoua, o del tutti li Vffici della B. Vergine, che habbia appresso, così latini, come volgari, à fine, che si effequisca la mente di S. Beattitudine eipressa nella sopra detta bolla.

Et volendo sua S. Reuerendiss. che li libri, & vfficij della disciplina quali vñano nelle loro cascacie, & oratorij siano purgati nel medesimo modo, com'ada sotto le medesime pene alli Priori di detti Disciplinanti, & à ciascun d'essi in specie, che nel detto tempo habbino congnato al detto P. Inquisitore, ouero al detto libri, & vffici, che hanno presso di se, affine, come si è detto possino esser purgati come li altri. Dat. Det. conq. in Aedib. Epil. noit. re sidit. die 16. Aug. 1571. Bartholom. Paderus Vic. Gen.

F. Claudius de Cherio Inq. Dertone.
 M. Ant. Cauagnolus Curia Epil. Dert. C. cell. &c. Reuer.

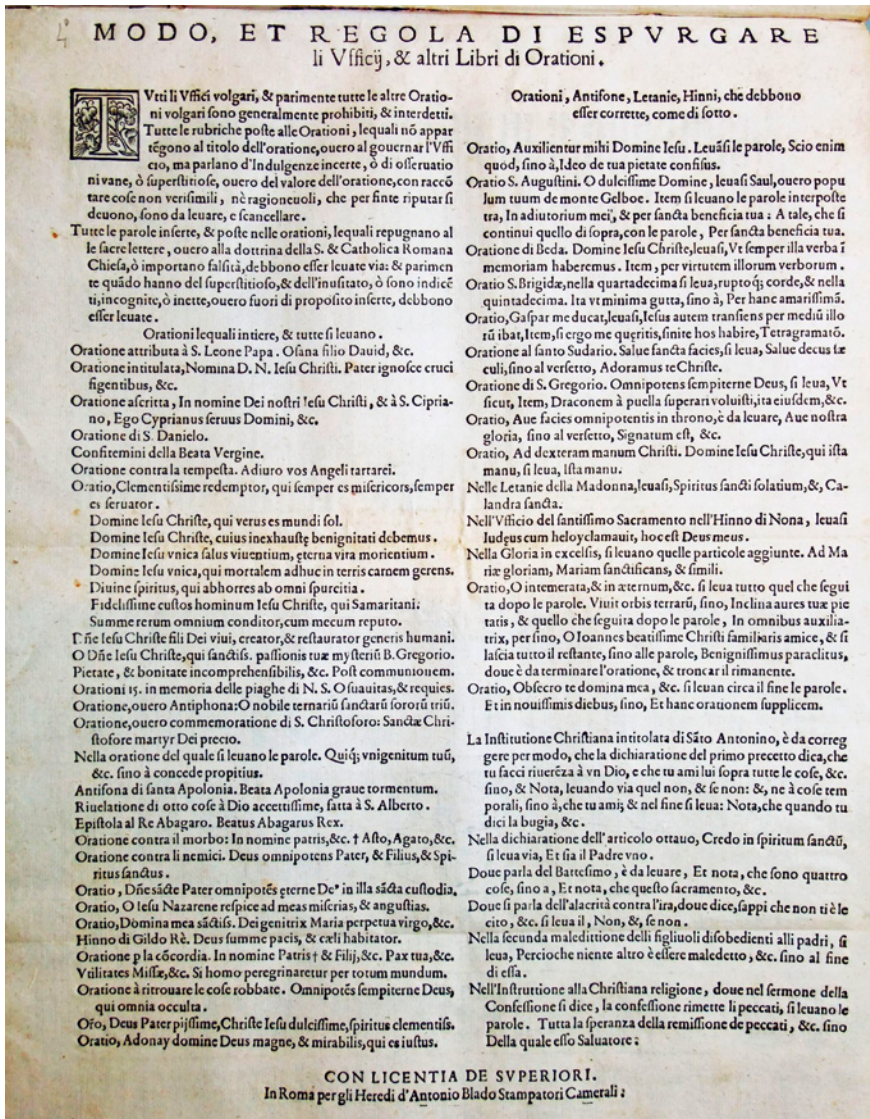


FIGURE 5.5 *Modo, et regula di espurgare li ufficy, & altri libri di orationi* (Roma: per gli Heredi d'Antonio Blado Stampatori Camerali). Piacenza, Biblioteca Passerini Landi, (C) TT.03.034.04

The *operette* that appear on these lists are generally small booklets – prayers, histories, legends – containing apocryphal and/or superstitious texts. These lists, variously titled *Aggionta d'alcune operette, et historiette prohibite* (An addition of some prohibited little works and histories), *Nota d'alcune operette, et historiette prohibite* (A list of some prohibited little works and histories) and

similar tended to increase over time, including a growing number of works. Generally issued by local and not Roman authorities, they were in turn banned in 1621, only to resurface in the second half of the century.³⁷

To some extent, the church tolerated the *operette*, *orationi*, and *historiette*, at least as long as they did not interfere with the official and public cult. Both the Inquisition and the Congregation of the Index adopted a sort of compromise, allowing them for domestic and private devotion, and banning them from public devotion and liturgy. In doing so, the authorities acknowledged the practical impossibility of restraining their circulation. Easily printed and easily memorized, sometimes copied, requiring a low level of literacy, these works circulated widely. The fifteen prayers were part of this world of cheap religious print that the lists of superstitious works tried, often in vain, to chart. Interestingly, after their precocious insertion in the *Modo et regola*, the fifteen prayers seem to disappear from the radar of 17th-century lists of superstitious prayers. In fact, they do not appear in the *Breve informazione del modo di trattare le cause del Sant'Officio* (A short information on the way of handling the Holy Office trials) issued by the Modenese Inquisitor Michelangelo Lerri (1608) nor in the *Syllabus sive collectio librorum prohibitorum et suspensorum* (Syllabus, or a collection of prohibited and suspended books, Bologna 1618). They do not even appear in the 1687 edition of the *Regole del tribunale del Sant'Officio* (Rules of the Tribunal of the Holy Office) by Tommaso Menghini. In fact, they feature in the 1665 edition of Eliseo Masini's *Sacro arsenale* (The sacred arsenal), a sort of manual for Inquisitors, in which Masini reprinted the early-1570s *Modo et regola*. After Masini's work, they appear on the 1704 Index of prohibited books and, again, in a work printed after 1708 by the Bolognese Inquisitor Antonio Leoni titled *Breve raccolta d'alcune particolari operette spirituali proibite, orationi e divozioni vane e superstiziose, indulgenze nulle o apocrife, et immagini indecenti ed illecite, che più frequentemente sogliono oggidi andare intorno* (A short collection of some particular prohibited spiritual works, vain and superstitious orations and devotions, invalid or apocryphal indulgences, and obscene and prohibited images, which nowadays circulate more frequently).

Within this tradition, we see two approaches to the fifteen prayers. One is the approach we find in the *Index* and in the *Breve raccolta*, focusing on the rubric or prologue to the prayers, formally prohibited by a decree issued on June 30, 1671 [Fig. 5.6].³⁸ The 1704 *Index* declares that "the prologue should be

37 For this paragraph I acknowledge the importance of the essay by Rudj Gorian, "La *Distinta notitia di molte orationi et istorie proibite*: due edizioni censorie minori del 1710," in *Dalla bibliografia alla storia. Studi in onore di Ugo Rozzo*, ed. Rudj Gorian (Udine: 2010), 141–70.

38 Romae: ex typographia Reverendae Camerae Apostolicae, 1671: "Ex folio quodam circumfertur cum hoc titulo le quindici Orationi di S. Brigida deleatur Prologus." The text

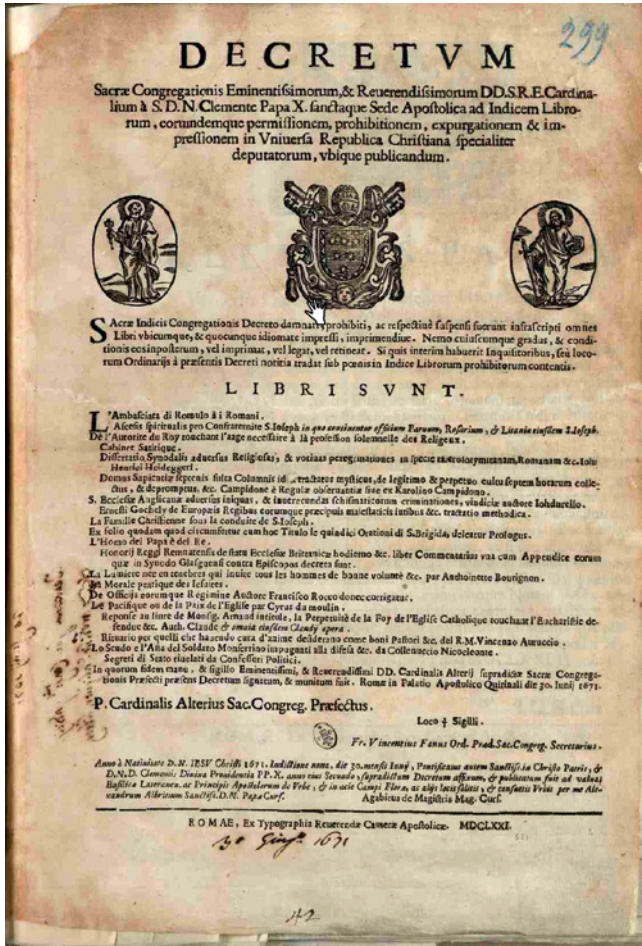


FIGURE 5.6 *Decretum Sacrae Inquisitionis* [...], June 30, 1671 (Romae: ex typographia Reverendae Camerae Apostolicae, 1671). Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense

deleted from a certain sheet circulating with the title “The fifteen prayers of S. Brigida.”³⁹ A few years later, we read in the *Breve raccolta* that “The fifteen

is available on line: The text is available on line: <http://dr.casanatense.it/drviewng.html?action=jumpin;idbib=394;idpiece=-1;imageNumber=1> [accessed on 27/03/2020].

39 “Ex folio quodam, quod circumfertur cum hoc titulo: Le quindeci orazioni di S. Brigida, deleatur Prologus,” *Index librorum prohibitorum* [...] (Romae: typis Rev. Cam. Apost., 1704), 104. In 1737, the Congregation of the Index prohibited a book titled *Corona d'oro a Maria Vergine* which also included the fifteen prayers; see *Appendix novissimae appendici*, 485.

prayers to S. Brigida are not permitted with the prologue but only if said prologue is taken away."⁴⁰

The second approach is that of the *Modo et regula* and, consequently, of Eliseo Masini's *Sacro Arsenale*. In addition to the general instructions on rubrics, which had to be eliminated altogether from all printed prayers, the *Modo et regula* suggested two cuts from the text of the fifteen prayers:

Prayer to St. Brigida: from [prayer] 14 *ruptoque corde* should be taken away; from [prayer] 15 *Ita ut minima gutta* until *per hanc amarissimam*.⁴¹

While the first required intervention is surgical, the second suggests a more substantial cut; the incriminated passage reads as follows:

Et ex lancea militari perfosso latere tuo nobis sanguinem et aquam propinasti, *ita ut nec minima gutta in te remansit. Tunc demum quasi mirre fasciculus in altum crucis suspensus fuisti et medulla ossium tuorum emarcuit et liquor viscerum tuarum exaruit et caro tua delicata caro tua evacuit*.⁴²

They pressed your blessed body on the press of the cross and gave us both blood and water to drink out of your body pierced with a knight's spear so that not one drop of blood or of water was left. Then at the end you hung high on the cross like a bundle of myrrh; your tender flesh changed color because the liquor of your bowels and the marrow of your bones was dried up.⁴³

Arguably, the insistence on graphic violence and morbid descriptions, as well as the presence of apocryphal details not included in the Gospels, lie at the base of both censorial interventions. Interestingly, authorities seem to pay no attention to certain passages of the fifteen prayers that could resonate with evangelical ideas. Their preoccupation seems to lie instead in a different kind of "abuse": superstitious and apocryphal passages. So, for example, in the fifth prayer the reference to the predestination of the "chosen souls", or of the elect

⁴⁰ "L'orazioni quindici di S. Brigida non si permettono col prologo, bensì levato che sia lo stesso prologo," Leoni, *Breve raccolta d'alcune particolari operette spirituali proibite* [...], 70.

⁴¹ "Oratio S. Brigidae: nella xiii si leva ruptoque corde; nella xv *Ita ut minima gutta* fino ad *Per hanc amarissimam*," *Scriniolum sanctae Inquisitionis*, 57.

⁴² Gejrot, "The *Fifteen Oes*," 228.

⁴³ I use the translation of Rebecca Krug, "The Fifteen Oes," in *Cultures of Piety. Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation*, ed. Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas H. Bestul (Ithaca and London: 1999), 107–17: 117.

goes unnoticed: “Remember how you beheld the chosen souls predestined to the saved through the merit of your Passion.”⁴⁴

A Case Study: The *Selva di orationi*

So far, I have considered the prescriptive aspects of censorship. Did readers or printers comply with these rules? The reader of the above-mentioned 1495 edition now in the Catalunya Library certainly did, and they duly censored the rubric in their copy. A systematic study of all the surviving copies of late 15th- and 16th-century editions of the text could yield interesting results, although no one of the nine copies (in eight different editions) which I was able to consult bear any trace of censorship apart from the Barcelona one. Here I will examine an interesting example of the circulation of the prayers in the second half of the sixteenth century, a very popular collection of prayers titled *Selva di orationi di diversi s. dottori e di molti scrittori antichi, & moderni* (A collection of prayers by different holy doctors and several ancient and modern writers). This anthology was assembled by the Sienese Carmelite Niccolò Aurifico Bonfigli (ca. 1530–ca. 1603). The work, printed by the Giolito brothers in Venice, was a best-seller, published at least ten times from 1569 to 1598 (and again in 1603 and 1616). The *Selva di orationi* – whose first edition immediately precedes Pius v’s bull on superstitious prayers – contains a vernacular translation of the fifteen prayers along with several other texts, including a vernacular version of the Psalms. The *Selva* soon became a concern to local authorities: despite not featuring on any list of prohibited books, it was nevertheless a potentially problematic text. Fra Girolamo, Inquisitor of Pisa wrote to the Roman Inquisitors as early as 29 December 1571, sending, among others, a copy of the *Selva*, asking whether it was to be censored or prohibited.⁴⁵ Another document now in the Archive of the Congregation of the Holy Office, a list of books requiring some kind of censorial intervention (drafted probably around 1597), also mentions the *Selva* “because it contains the Penitential Psalms in the vernacular and the Passion of St. John [also in the vernacular].”⁴⁶ Interestingly, the vernacular

44 Ibid., 114. The Italian version reads “Rammentati Giesù [...] la predestinatione di quegli eletti che per i meriti della tua Passione dovevan salvarsi,” Niccolò Aurifico Bonfigli, *Selva d'orationi* [...] (Venice: Giolito, 1597), 351. See the Latin text in Gejrot, “The Fifteen Oes,” 225: “conspexisti predestinationem electorum tuorum per merita tue passionis salvandorum.”

45 Caravale, *Forbidden Prayer*, 173–74.

46 “Selva di orationi di Nicolao Aurifico perché contengono li salmi penitentiali volgari, et il passio di S. Giovanni,” transcribed in Jennifer Helm, *Poetry and Censorship in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Leiden-Boston: 2015), 369.

version of the Passion according to the Gospel of John immediately follows the fifteen prayers, which do not appear to be of any concern to the authorities.

Unfortunately, I could not perform a systematic survey of the copies of the *Selva*. However, I was able to see the following copies:

- Copy of the 1597 Giolito edition in the Biblioteca Statale of Cremona;
- Copy of the 1610 edition (? The frontispiece is missing) in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek;
- Copy of the 1616 edition (Venice, Vincenzo Fiorina) in the Biblioteca Nazionale of Naples
- Another copy of the same edition in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana of Venice (220 C 107)

None of these bear traces of censorship, meaning that the printer printed the prayers disregarding official guidelines and no reader ever took pains to erase the prohibited passages from the text (notably, the Munich copy belonged to a religious library). More interesting is the other copy I was able to consult, a 1597 Giolito edition now in the Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon, in which the fourteenth prayer shows no signs of censorship. Instead, in the fifteenth prayer, the prohibited section has been partially erased: “your tender flesh changed color because the liquor of your bowels and the marrow of your bones was dried up.”⁴⁷ From the concluding line *et liquor viscerum tuarum exaruit et medulla ossium tuorum emaruit* – which reads in Italian “seccossi il liquore delle tue viscere, marcì finalmente la medulla delle ossa tue”⁴⁸ – a reader has deleted the portion “marcì [...] tue.”⁴⁹ This particular copy bears another sign of censorship: in orations eight to eleven, in the initial formula “O Signor mio” a reader has erased “mio,” a word that in fact does not appear in the original text (the same reader forgot to correct the same formula in the last prayer). Whether this was due to a philological scruple, or to preoccupation with decorum, we do not know.

Conclusion

The fifteen prayers contributed to shaping Birgittine devotion in Italy from at least the 15th to the 17th century. Perceived as an authentic text they presented the reader with numerous spiritual and material benefits. Placed half-way between the prophetic inspiration of Birgitta’s authentic texts and “popular”

47 Krug, “The Fifteen Oes,” 117.

48 Nicolò Aurifco Bonfigli, *Selva d'orationi* [...] (Venice: Giolito, 1597), 356. Copy of Cremona.

49 Nicolò Aurifco Bonfigli, *Selva d'orationi* [...] (Venice: Giolito, 1597), 356. Copy of Lyon.

allure of prayers such as the Letter sent from Jesus to Birgitta, they could attract a diverse readership. As I have suggested, they might even have resonated with some aspects of Italian evangelism although, as we have seen, the number of their editions drops dramatically in the central decades of the century. In the second half of the century, their printed circulation is granted by anthologies such as that by Nicolò Bonfigli. Once severed from their rubrics and surgically censored, their intense Christocentric devotion is not perceived as problematic or threatening. Further studies should investigate their presence in other printed collections of prayers as well as mapping their manuscript circulation. However, it seems to me undeniable that the fifteen prayers remained appealing to generations of devotees throughout the most troubled decades of Italian religious history.

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Ventriloquizing Birgitta: The Saint's Prophetic Voice During the Italian Wars

Jessica Goethals and Anna Wainwright

The church of Santa Maria della Pace in Rome near Piazza Navona, home to Bramante's famous cloister, is perhaps best known for its glorious frescoes by Raphael, which depict the four sibyls receiving word from angels of the coming of Christ (Fig. 6.1). The frescoes, long noted for their innovation and similarity to those by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, are splayed above the Chigi chapel and were commissioned by the Sienese banker Agostino Chigi in c. 1514.¹ In them, the sibyls of Cumae, Persia, Phrygia, and Tibur are each visited by angels heralding the birth of Christ. Renaissance sibyls such as these and Michelangelo's helped cement the longstanding importance of pagan visionaries to the Christian prophetic tradition, reminding pilgrims to the Eternal City that before Christ was born, women prophets under the dominion of the Roman Empire foretold the arrival of a messiah under Roman Caesar.

Directly across the nave from Raphael's sibyls, in the Ponzetti chapel, is an altarpiece depicting the Virgin and Child, flanked by St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Birgitta of Sweden (Fig. 6.2). The handiwork of the Sienese artist Baldassare Peruzzi (1481–1536), the altarpiece was commissioned in roughly 1516, two years after work began on the frescoes by Raphael. The chapel's commissioner was the influential Cardinal Ferdinando Ponzetti (1444–1527), a Florentine by birth who had served as the personal doctor of Innocent VIII (1432–1492). In the altarpiece, Ponzetti himself appears next to Birgitta. Birgitta, clad in her trademark white wimple or *bianche bende* of widowhood, looks reverently at the Virgin, one hand at her chest; her other hand is extended in a protective gesture over the cardinal's arm, as he too gazes up at the Virgin and Child.²

1 See Michael Hirst, "The Chigi Chapel in Santa Maria della Pace," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 24 (1961): 161–85, especially 164–65.

2 By Birgitta's day, the *bianche bende* had become an important cultural signifier for widowhood, perhaps seen most famously in Nino Visconti's angry description of his widow Beatrice d'Este in Dante's *Purgatorio* VIII.74. Birgitta is depicted almost universally in this way.



FIGURE 6.1 Raphael Sanzio, *The Four Sibyls*, c. 1514. Chigi Chapel, Church of Santa Maria della Pace, Rome

ADAM EASTLAND ART + ARCHITECTURE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



FIGURE 6.2 Baldassarre Peruzzi, *Virgin and Child Flanked by St. Catherine of Alexandria, St. Birgitta of Sweden, and Cardinal Ferdinando Ponzetti*, c. 1516. Ponzetti Chapel, Church of Santa Maria della Pace, Rome

VITO ARCOMANO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Peruzzi's is a notable, seemingly unusual depiction of Saint Birgitta. The chapel itself is named for her; Ponzetti's sister was Brigida, which became a somewhat common name for the girls of Florentine families in the Renaissance due to the saint's popularity in the city.³ Given Birgitta's frequent and well-documented visions of the Virgin and Christ Child, it is not surprising that she is depicted gazing in rapture at the pair; more interesting is the choice of Birgitta in this chapel directly across from Raphael's spectacular sibyls. While Chigi and his artist chose to focus on ancient visionaries, Ponzetti and Peruzzi instead place a woman prophet of the recent Christian era at the center of the action – and conspicuously across from her pagan counterparts. Little over a century separated Birgitta's death from when she was painted into the chapel. Despite the fact that she was a relatively “new” saint, the extent of her influence was already well evidenced in contemporary art, literature, and the popular imagination. Ponzetti's choice of Birgitta for his chapel is an acknowledgment of her influence and authority as a prophet engaged in the politics of reform, whose visions sought a return of the Church to Rome following the disastrous rupture of the Church during the Avignon Papacy (1309–1377).⁴ In the midst of the Italian Wars, a Florentine cardinal, building his family chapel in Rome, may have viewed her as the ideal representative of Christian prophecy to sit across from Raphael's sibyls, as a woman warning of danger but heralding a possible future peace.⁵ The chapel's patron himself would not survive the upheaval of his time: with the misfortune to find himself in Rome in 1527, Ponzetti was captured by invading soldiers during the Sack and succumbed to his injuries in September of that year, a broken man, his fortune dismantled. He was buried beneath the altar of his chapel in Santa Maria della Pace, forever immortalized as a pious cardinal under the protection of Saint Birgitta.⁶

3 Baptismal registries for the city of Florence in the early years of the 16th century demonstrate an especially high number of Brigidas being baptized. A search of baptismal records for the year 1513, for example, demonstrates that the name Brigida appears at least once on nearly every page of the registry, eclipsed seemingly only by the common names Caterina, Lucretia, and Magdalena. See *Registri battesimali*, Registro 227, c. 6r, records from July 19, 1513–August 3, 1513. <https://battesimi.duomo.firenze.it/registri/227>.

4 On Birgitta's litigation for the return of the papacy from Avignon to Rome, see especially Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested: An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge, MA: 2017).

5 While many sibyls foresaw tribulations and destruction for Rome, not all also predicted such an era of coming peace; the *Sibylline Oracles* are one such case. Our thanks to Kelly Shannon-Henderson for this observation.

6 On Ponzetti's fortunes, see especially Isabella Ianuzzi, “Ponzetti, Ferdinando” in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 84 (2015); https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ferdinando-ponzetti_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

This chapter considers the ways in which Birgitta of Sweden's prophetic identity and voice were appropriated during the long half century of the Italian Wars (1494–1559), especially in Florentine and Tuscan texts that bore her name. The saint's authority as a visionary and prophet had already been hotly litigated by her own confessors and by the leading theologians of the late Middle Ages. Following her 1391 canonization, we see a full century of debate by figures of authority over whether her visions should be taken as true prophecy or dismissed wholesale before her papal re-legitimization in 1484. As the Italian Wars progressed, and literary output on the subject flourished up and down the peninsula, Birgitta's long-established identity as a woman prophet – a Christian sibyl – was deployed as a voice of warning for the certain destruction that would befall towns and cities saturated in discord. Indeed, Birgitta's particularly gendered voice fit neatly into the larger way gender was appropriated in a variety of texts focused on the Italian Wars, chiming with longstanding literary notions of the city, or nation, as a woman destroyed by invading hordes. In this piece, we argue that despite her status as a foreign saint whose words had been the subject of deep suspicion, in the bloodiest years of the Italian Wars Birgitta had an outsized role in the prophetic material circulating across Italy, especially in the towns and cities of Tuscany. As a result, her reputation as a prophet broadened to include an enduring connection to the tumult of the period. By the time the Florentine Ponzetti commissioned his chapel in Rome across from that of the Sienese Chigi, “Santa Brigida” possessed a particular authority in Tuscany on political disaster and ruin. Her prophetic profile would only grow following the Sack of Rome in which Ponzetti died and during the crises in Tuscany that came in the wake of the 1529–30 Siege of Florence. We conclude by tracing her legacy in the years after the Italian Wars, demonstrating that her prophetic weight remained imaginatively tied to that long period of unrest, her authority reshaped and repurposed to fit the later Counter-Reformation context. Through the prism of sacred relics, commentators reconnected Birgitta's fatidic role during the Italian Wars to her *Revelations* in both historical tomes and her biography, securing the identification of her voice as one that had uniquely spoken to the political, military, and social woes of the era.

Birgitta's Authority as Political Prophet

Birgitta as political prophet was not a new idea at the start of the Italian Wars, but it bears thinking about why she made sense as a choice for those who referenced and ventriloquized her during this period. The saint's prophetic profile was carefully established during her canonization process in the

late 14th century and had already been tested against the slings and arrows of theologians suspicious of female visionaries at the Council of Constance (1414–1418), especially the Parisian scholar Jean Gerson.⁷ This was due first to her impassioned litigation in favor of the return to Rome of the papacy from its Babylonian captivity in Avignon, her primary focus from her arrival in Italy to her death over twenty years later, and a central idea in many of her revelations to take place in Italy.⁸ In Rev. IV: 138, for example, Birgitta recounts a vision in which the Queen of Heaven complains that Pope Urban V disregarded her instructions “to go back to Rome and Italy for no other purpose than to carry out mercy and justice, strengthen the Catholic faith, reestablish the peace, and, in this way, renew the Holy Church.”⁹ The saint’s allies and promoters in Rome felt keenly the unconventional nature of her *Revelations* and self-positioning as a visionary who waded boldly into matters political, and sought to affirm her as an authority, specifically, on the relationship between earthly politics and the supremacy of God as King. It is significant that the most famous defense of her visions, the *Epistola solitarii ad reges* (The Hermit’s Letter to Kings) by her confessor Alfonso de Jaén, written sometime in the mid-1370s, serves as prologue for Book VIII of the *Revelations*. It is the most political book of her visions, the spiritual princely mirror *Liber celestis imperatoris ad reges* (The Heavenly Emperor’s Book to Kings).¹⁰ The revelations contained therein focus above all on what lay at the heart of Birgitta’s political philosophy: how earthly princes should rule to ensure harmony and peace in the global Christian community. The broader message of unity also reflects Birgitta’s desire for a return of the papacy from Avignon, and her vision of the Church Militant as a single, seamless piece of cloth that cannot be divided.¹¹ A persistent thread in her

7 For an important and provocative new reading of Gerson’s view of Birgitta, see Anna Fredriksson, “Challenging and Championing St. Birgitta’s Revelations at the Councils of Constance and Basel,” in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Maria Oen (Leiden: 2019), 103–31. See also Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (London: 2001), especially 136–69.

8 See especially Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested*, and Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, especially 109–136.

9 Rev. IV: 138.12, in *The Revelations of Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Denis Searby, with an introduction and notes by Bridget Morris, 4 vols. (Oxford: 2006–15), Vol. 2, 249. In the same revelation, she also warns that if Urban returns to Avignon instead, “within a short time he shall be struck with a blow that will knock his teeth out.”

10 On Birgitta’s political discourse and her place in 14th-century political rhetoric see Unn Falkeid, “The Political Discourse of Birgitta of Sweden,” in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 80–102.

11 On this see especially Mary Dzon, “Birgitta of Sweden and Christ’s Clothing,” in *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture*, ed. Mary Dzon and Theresa M. Kenney (Toronto: 2012), 117–144.

revelations is that of coming apocalypse: the world is in a moment of great trouble and risks descending into complete catastrophe if the right actions are not taken by those in power.

Alfonso reinforces her message of unity and Christian community in the *Epistola*, and works to justify Birgitta's political visions by identifying her as a prophet in a long and hallowed tradition. He identifies her as "a bright star" who has emerged in "these modern times so darkened by dense clouds," chosen by God alongside the long genealogy of prophets from both the Old and New Testaments, as well as the sibyls who foretold Jesus' arrival – the first time that she is aligned with the sibyls we see in Raphael's frescoes in Santa Maria della Pace.¹² His *Epistola* does double-duty: he defends Birgitta against those who may doubt the authenticity of her visions, while pointing specifically to God's consistent choice of women as earthly ambassadors for his word: "[Naysayers] ... forget that almighty God in the Old Testament as well as in the New chose the weak things of the world, of both the female and male sex, to show forth his might and put the wise to shame." He points to Judith, Esther, and Deborah of the Old Testament, the widow Anna of Phanuel from the New, and, notably, the Tiburtine and Erythraean Sibyls as forerunners for Birgitta.¹³

Despite Alfonso's pointed elevation of Birgitta to the level of earlier sibyls and visionaries, however, there remained a debate at the highest echelons of church power about her visionary authority throughout the 15th century. In particular, the *Revelations* themselves, though the visions of a canonized saint, continued to be questioned as inaccurate and unorthodox.¹⁴ Reinforcing Gerson's notorious attack on Birgitta's message at the Council of Constance, in 1436 Cardinal Louis d'Allemand of Arles ruled at the Council of Basel that while Birgitta was a saint, her *Revelations* were still suspect and could not be read as doctrinal as her followers had long claimed. Furthermore, her visions would have to be corrected by church authorities "well versed in scripture."¹⁵ In other words, male clerics and scholars would rework the prophetic visions of a woman who had already been legitimated through her canonization half a century earlier.

This carefully legislated discrediting of Birgitta's words served a dual function: it effectively removed the *Revelations* from its already shaky place in the church canon, and it allowed the Church to accept Birgitta's sainthood

12 In *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Searby, Vol. 4, 16–17.

13 Ibid., 17. Birgitta herself focused less on her connection to the women prophets of the Bible than she did on the prophet *par excellence*, Moses. On this see especially Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, 74.

14 See again Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, especially 136–45.

15 Ibid., 222–23.

without worrying about the incorporation of her apocalyptic message of unity – especially for French clerics in the years of the Great Schism. And yet Birgitta's message persisted, and her texts circulated, even with some clerical approval, such as Juan de Torquemada's 15th-century defense of Birgitta that largely discredited Allemand's earlier ruling.¹⁶ It was not, however, until 1484 that the prohibition was officially overruled, when the Italian pope Sixtus IV (1414–1484) officially renounced a century's worth of churchmen in Paris, Rome, and Constance chipping away at the legitimacy of Birgitta's visions, and Birgitta's *Revelations* were again fully legitimated.¹⁷

The date of this official change is crucial for our understanding of Birgitta's reputation at the end of the 15th century and the start of the Italian Wars. Held in contempt by French clerics, her steadfast insistence in the *Revelations* that Rome, and thus Italy, was the rightful center of the Christian world was a decidedly welcome message as the peninsula was being violently cleaved apart, as was her belief in the need for a restoration of the plague- and violence-ridden Eternal City. That her texts had once again been given the all-clear by the (Italian) pope would have strengthened their profile as worthy of use and contemplation. It also strengthened Birgitta's appeal as a mouthpiece for other political prophecies. As we will demonstrate, as the *Revelations* themselves were welcomed back into the fold, Birgitta's name also began to be attached to the verse prophecies addressing the violence and discord of the Italian Wars.

The complex prophetic profile that was developed earlier for Birgitta by her champions, and the way she was debated by male clerics of the Church across the various theological debates of the 14th century, offer us a clearer understanding of what she represented at the beginning of the Italian Wars. The political thrust of her own writings – her urging for unity among Christian princes, her insistence on the return of the papacy to Rome from Avignon, and her frank criticisms of individual leaders – were certainly part of why she was such a hotly-debated figure, and her reaffirmation by Sixtus was a great boon to her image. The very concerns to which she had devoted her attention more than a century earlier were still plaguing Italian politics, albeit in a slightly different form. That she became a player in popular works outside of Italy, most notably the German Johannes Lichtenberger's 1488 *Pronosticatio*, certainly reinforced her authority, as did its later translation into Italian.

Two other features of the saint's personal identity as a political prophet bear mentioning at this juncture: Birgitta's status as a foreigner, and as a widow.

16 Ibid. See also Brian Richardson's chapter in this volume.

17 See especially Torvald Magnusson Höjer, *Studier i Vadstena Klosters och Birgittinordens historia intill midten af 1400-talet* (Uppsala: 1905), 210–23.

While she lived the last twenty-three years of her life in Rome, and is believed to have spoken good Italian, she nevertheless remained a foreign entity, a northern “principessa” who came from a distant land to spread the revelations she claimed to have received from Heaven.¹⁸ This status as an outsider was compounded by the prominence of her widowed state: it was shortly after her husband’s death that she received her calling vision.¹⁹ As several scholars have noted, Birgitta’s authority as a prophet was tied closely to her identity as a widow, and she capitalized on the long history of the widowed voice speaking out in times of political strife.²⁰ The widow’s as the voice *par excellence* that speaks to political destruction – which, as we will see, was a strong motif in texts distributed during the Italian Wars – can be traced to the widowed city of Jerusalem in Lamentations, who mourns the destruction of her people by Nebuchadnezzar’s army, and its long history in political discourse to follow. It is no surprise that it was also a voice that found particular resonance during the Italian Wars, in which the peninsula was witness to destruction from north to south by foreigners and Italians alike, and in which longstanding Italian literary references to Italy herself as a destroyed woman seemed especially apt. We thus see, by the time of the Italian Wars, a Birgitta who could be identified as a political voice as well as a prophet; as a foreign woman with the authority to comment on the political situation in Italy; and as a widow who was part of the longstanding tradition of widows who spoke out in moments of political crisis.

Textual Responses to the Italian Wars

For the decades between 1494 and 1559, the Italian peninsula repeatedly served as the theater of war as France, Spain, and its own various city-states jockeyed for territory and power.²¹ Notably, the invasion of the peninsula by Charles VIII

18 That she stayed a foreigner in the eyes of her Italian hosts is made particularly clear by the legacy she left in Rome: the house in which she lived and died, once the property of her hostess Francesca Papazzurri, became an important embassy for Swedish Catholics after her canonization. After the Reformation, it was also a place of refuge for emigrants from the newly-Protestant Sweden.

19 On her calling vision, see especially Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, 45.

20 On the use of the widow in the Roman context, see especially Cristelle Baskins, “Trecento Rome: The Poetics and Politics of Widowhood,” *Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allison Levy (Aldershot: 2003), 197–209. On Birgitta’s use of the widowed voice, see especially Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested*, particularly 121–45.

21 For a succinct historical overview, see Michael Mallett and Christine Shaw, *The Italian Wars 1494–1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe* (New York: 2012).

of France that began these conflicts was itself already cloaked in apocalyptic expectation, as the king's advisors encouraged him to see himself reflected in a new adaptation of the so-called "Second Charlemagne" prophecy, a text that anticipated the crowning of a righteous Last Emperor who would deliver his kingdom back to God in Jerusalem – but only after "destroy[ing] and burn[ing] both Rome and Florence along the way."²² The ease and speed with which the king's armies swept through Italy, arriving in Naples (to which the king claimed dynastic rights), seemed to many to confirm these predictions. Included among these was the preacher Savonarola, whose identification of the threat posed to Florence by the French armies outside the city's gates as a divine scourge against Florentine immorality and corruption, particularly under the Medici (the current representative of which, Piero de' Medici, capitulated to the French before going into exile), solidified his authority and contributed to the ushering in of the Florentine Republic.²³

A complicated tapestry of leagues and continually realigning loyalties, declarations of peace and reignition of war, *condottieri* and mercenary armies, defined the years that followed. Most vividly memorable were the era's bloody sieges and invasions, such as the Battle of Agnadello (1509), the Battle of Pavia (1525), and especially the symbolic climax of the wars, the 1527 Sack of Rome, in which the Spanish and German troops of Holy Roman Emperor Charles v (1500–58) broke through the walls of the supposedly Eternal City and for over nine months subjected Rome and its bodies, both sacred and profane, to murder, torture, rape, and destruction to a degree remarkable even during this era of warfare.²⁴ Given Birgitta's (and her prophecies') close ties to Florence and Tuscany, of particular relevance is also the Siege of Florence (1529–30), when the Medici (recently expelled from the city in the wake of the Sack of Rome, thanks in part to the weakness of the beleaguered Medici pope, Clement VII) employed the help of Charles v to disperse the republicans and reinstate themselves. As one scholar has noted, "these conflicts provoked Renaissance commentators ... to respond with language of unprecedented magnitude."²⁵

22 Prophecy transcribed in translation in Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: 1998 [2nd ed]), 250.

23 See David Abulafia, ed., *The French Descent into Renaissance Italy, 1494–95: Antecedents and Effects* (Aldershot: 1995); Lorenzo Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence 1494–1545* (Oxford: 1994); Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: 1970).

24 For overviews of the Sack and its consequences, see Judith Hook, *The Sack of Rome 1527*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, UK: 2004); André Chastel, *The Sack of Rome, 1527*, trans. Beth Archer (Princeton, NJ: 1983).

25 John Gagné, "Counting the Dead: Traditions of Enumeration and the Italian Wars," *Renaissance Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2014): 791–840, 793.

Contemporaries found diverse means of grappling with the grisly facts of these wars beyond just oral accounts and eyewitness letters. These sources ranged from *poemi bellici*, on the one hand, which narrated actual clashes between military heroes in often exhilarating *ottava rima*,²⁶ to far more despondent *lamenti storici* on the other. These historical laments interpreted the wars in terms of abandoned, violated, and ransacked cities and states – social-political spaces poetically animated through apostrophe to cry out against their own destruction. Situated within the long tradition of depicting Italy as a victimized woman (one readily recalls Dante’s *serva Italia*, the wounds suffered by Petrarch’s *Italia mia*, and the image campaign of Cola di Rienzo of the Church and Italy as despondent and neglected women), these laments typically speak with the personified voice of an anguished woman.²⁷ This use of feminized apostrophe distinguishes the Italian historical lament from other European examples in which the poet himself typically speaks.²⁸ The crying city-woman became an expression of political sentiment in Italy as well as of historical fact. A 1509 *Lamento de’ venetiani*, for instance, opens with a “disconsolate” Venice crying out in pain that “France and Spain and the emperor / have completely desolated me!”²⁹ Among Pietro Aretino’s various written responses to the Sack, to give another example, is the lament *Italia afflitta, nuda e miseranda* (originally attributed to Francesco Guicciardini) in which a despoiled Italy calls out for the French king Francis I to intervene through arms to save her peninsula from the German violence and domestic

26 For an overview, see Massimo Rospocher, “Songs of War: Historical and Literary Narratives of the ‘Horrendous Italian Wars’ (1494–1559),” in *Narrating War: Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Marco Mondini and Massimo Rospocher (Bologna: 2013), 79–97; and for a case study, with a brief comparison to Birgitta prophecies, see Jessica Goethals, “Performance, Print, and the Italian Wars: *Poemetti Bellici* and the Case of Eustachio Celebrino,” in *Interactions between Orality and Writing in Early Modern Italian Culture*, ed. Luca Degl’Innocenti, Brian Richardson, and Chiara Sbordoni (New York: 2016), 49–66.

27 A transhistorical overview of these themes is provided by Natalia Costa-Zalesow, “Italy as a Victim: A Historical Appraisal of a Literary Theme,” *Italica* 45, no. 2 (1968): 216–40. On Cola di Rienzo’s imagery, see, for instance, the chapter “Preparing for Apocalypse” in Ronald G. Musto, *Apocalypse in Rome: Cola di Rienzo and the Politics of the New Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: 2003), 104–29. See also Baskins, “Trecento Rome.”

28 Giorgio Varanini, ed., *Lamenti storici pisani* (Pisa: 1968), 15. Also see Vittorio Rossi, *Storia letteraria d’Italia: Il Quattrocento* (Milan: 1973), 238–39. Despite Varanini’s calls for more scholarly attention, studies on *lamenti storici* are still lacking.

29 “Franza e Spagna e Imperatore / m’ano tuta disolata!” *Lamento de’ venetiani*, in Antonio Medin and Ludovico Frati, eds., *Lamenti storici dei secoli XIV, XV, e XVI*, 3 vols. (Bologna: 1887–94), 1:99.

betrayals that have left “my body burdened by its many wounds.”³⁰ Readers of such works were thus accustomed to male-authored texts that decried political-military failures through ventriloquized women’s voices, suggesting that as the wars continued to ravage the Italian peninsula, recognizable female figures long associated with politicized speech – such as Birgitta – also would have been especially appealing and readily interpretable as mouthpieces by which to circulate both ominous warnings and criticisms.

These tribulations could not but cast an apocalyptically-tinged shadow, as many turned to known prophecies to make sense of current events. In other instances, there circulated new *vaticinia ex eventu*: so-called prophecies written after the very events they purported to describe.³¹ Typically works in vernacular verse that were disseminated in cheap prints as well as recited in piazzas by *cantastorie* (much like the *poemi bellici*), these prophecies were in high demand precisely during the Italian Wars, becoming “a homogenous and consistent literary current” that drew audiences ranging from the studied humanist to the curious passerby.³² In addition to numerous anonymous examples, many were apocryphal works that circulated under the name of a coterie of preferred saints, of which Birgitta was one. Ottavia Niccoli notes that Florence was an early and important center for prophetic prints: “Tuscany during the years when Savonarola was preaching and veneration of St. Bridget was well entrenched must have provided a particularly receptive market for this sort of publication.”³³

Indeed, Birgitta increasingly became a recognizable shorthand for prophecy of political disaster and ruin from the 1490s onward. Niccoli memorably begins her study of popular prophecy with the example of the Modenese notary and chronicler Tommaso Lancellotti who, in the days immediately following the Sack of Rome, recorded being shown a copy of a prophecy attributed to Birgitta that “tells of the death in Rome, of the circumstances said to presently befall the pope, who is to find himself persecuted as he presently is by foreigners.”³⁴

30 “Il corpo mio è in tante piaghe oppresso”; Pietro Aretino, *Scritti di Pietro Aretino nel Codice marciano It. XI 66* (= 6730), ed. Danilo Romei (Florence: 1987), 125–37.

31 See, for instance, Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Princeton, NJ: 1990); Massimo Firpo, *Il sacco di Roma del 1527 tra profezia, propaganda politica, e riforma religiosa* (Cagliari: 1990); Marjorie Reeves, “A Note on Prophecy and the Sack of Rome (1527),” in *Prophetic Rome in the High Renaissance Period* (Oxford: 1992), 271–78.

32 Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 5–6.

33 *Ibid.*, 8.

34 “che nara dela mortalità de Roma, del modo che al presente se dice essere fate del Papa che ha a essere perseguitato como è al presente de zente estranee.” Entry for 19 May, 1527,

For Lancellotti, who consulted a variety of similar texts during these years, current affairs directly bridged medieval prophecy to his 'present'.

Popular investment in the elucidative power of Birgitta prophecies is highlighted not only by such instances of historical reading practices but also their percolation into the wells of literary example, including satire. For example, in the 1536 *Ragionamenti* of Aretino (a writer especially prone to allusions to the wars and the Sack of Rome in particular³⁵) the final dialogue features a Midwife who describes her various methods of influence as a procuress. Among her examples is having once filled nuns' ears with gossip and current events in order to distract them as she arranged an erotic encounter between a member of their convent and an outside lover. To these other women she provided assorted local tidbits (pregnancies, rendezvous, marital woes) and political-military news ("I told them what people thought of Milan, and who would become Duke; I told them which faction, the imperial or the French, the Pope supported"), as well as explications of the "inner meaning of the prophecies of Saint Bridget and Fra Giacobone da Pietrapana."³⁶ Aretino thus satirizes the seeming ubiquity of the fatidic works attributed to the historical saint and the weight they received in these years as both entertaining and explanatory through the juxtaposition of Birgitta with salacious rumors, current affairs, and the supposed oeuvre of a fictionalized monk.

These apocryphal texts were not always viewed with Aretino's same satirical eye, particularly by the authoritative bodies at which they might be seen as taking aim. Marino Sanuto recorded in 1509, for instance, that among the various persons detained in Venice for motives ranging from illicit arms possession and suspicion of espionage to slander, there was one man "who was selling prophecies by Saint Birgitta on the mainland [who was seized] since they contained many scandalous statements."³⁷ After being subjected to the strappado, the peddler of these texts ceased to sell them again.

We know, then, that prophecies attributed to Saint Birgitta were circulating and being discussed throughout the peninsula, and in rather different contexts

Tommasino Lancellotti, *Cronaca Modenese*, vol. 2, 12 vols. (Parma: 1862–84) 2:224; partially transcribed and discussed in Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 3.

35 See Nicola Catelli, "Pietro Aretino e il sacco di Roma (1526–1527)," *Campi immaginabili* 32–33 (2005): 22–45.

36 "gli spianava fino a le profezie di santa Brigida e di fra Giacobone da Pietrapana"; Pietro Aretino, *Sei giornate*, ed. Giovanni Aquilecchia (Bari: 1969), 318; *Aretino's Dialogues*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: 1971), 393. Also see the discussions of this passage in the essays in this volume by Brian Richardson (34–55) and Marco Faini (129–154).

37 "uno vendeva profetie di Santa Brizita per la terra, perché in quelle erano poste parole molto scandalose"; Marino Sanuto, *I diarii*, ed. N. Barozzi, vol. VIII (Venice: 1882), VIII:403.

than that with which scholars of the saint are most familiar. Indeed, in a well-placed bit of irony, Birgitta's authority as a visionary during this period was almost entirely divorced from the *Revelations* themselves, and instead included two main texts which, when examined closely, do not even purport to be by her at all. In the following section, we examine the evolving textual history of these "Brigida" prophecies.

The Italian Verse Prophecies of Birgitta

As Brian Richardson expertly outlines in his contribution to the present volume, prophecies attributed to Birgitta had a long history reaching back into the first decades of the Quattrocento and perhaps even the late Trecento.³⁸ Many, though by no means all, of these manuscripts originated in Tuscany. Such was the case of a *Profetia di sancta Brigida*, a *terza rima* frottola with the incipit *Destati o fier leone al mio gran grido*; the explicit of an early copy claims that the text was "translated into vernacular verse by Iacopo [del Pecora] da Montepulciano while he was imprisoned in Florence" between 1390 and 1407 for plotting against the city.³⁹ This poem would go on to become the most frequently copied example of the apocryphal prophecies through the Cinquecento, seeing at least 36 manuscript versions, including a transcription by Suor Cleofe of the Birgittine monastery Santa Maria del Paradiso in Florence following an Italian translation of the *Revelations* in a volume dating to 1495, four months after the French armies of Charles VIII arrived at the city's gates.⁴⁰ Just a decade after the saint's visions were ultimately legitimated by the church, Birgitta's *Revelations* themselves thus became an agent of legitimation for vernacular prophecy. That the now-canonical, Latin writings of a

38 In addition to Richardson's chapter, see especially Michele Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgarizzamenti e riscritture profetiche," *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia* LXXIII, no. 1 (2019): 69–84, 79–84; as well as Domenico Pezzini, "The Italian Reception of Birgittine Writings," in *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into the Medieval European Vernaculars*, ed. Bridget Morris and Veronica O'Mara (Turnhout: 2000), 186–212, 203–4.

39 "Finita la profetia di sancta Brigida la quale tratta di quello à da venire dal 1460 infino al 1470, ridotta in volgare in versi da Iacopo da Montepulciano mentre era nelle carcere del comune di Firenze." *P[ro]f[et]ia di S[an]ta Brigida*, BNCf II. IX. 125, fols. 132r–36v, at 136v. Lodone has located the poem in 36 manuscripts, dating primarily to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but with some additional examples through the seventeenth and eighteenth; Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana," 80–81.

40 *Profetia di S[an]ta Brigida*, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (hereafter BNCf) Palatino 77, fols. 177v–80v.

saint translated into Italian were followed by a vernacular apocryphal prophecy bearing her name in a fine manuscript by the Birgittine Florentine nun, produced at a Birgittine convent, suggests a fluidity in the Renaissance understanding of Birgitta's authorial identity and voice. This vernacular prophecy proved equally popular in print, with editions produced in Rome, Venice, Siena, and especially Florence. This includes some incunabula – as Niccoli observes, prophecies of this sort were among publishers' early favorites; she points to a 1479 *Prophetia di sancta Brigida* (presumably the *Destati o fier leone*) listed in the registers of San Iacopo di Ripoli printers shortly after they opened, and we may also consider a 1486 printing which claims a new author (“per me maestro Francescho Fiorentino”).⁴¹ Known printings of the prophecy ramped up in the last decade of the Quattrocento and through the first four decades of the Cinquecento, with the last known example dating to Siena in 1536.

The aforementioned fluidity in the way the *Destati o fier leone* prophecy was used, particularly during the Italian Wars, is made more strongly apparent by a close reading of the prophecy itself, as well as its variants. After its initial call for Florence (the “fierce lion”) to awaken to the speaker’s “gran grido” (fierce cry), the poem breaks down the terrible events that will befall it if these words are not heeded.⁴² Importantly, the speaker of this prophecy is not Birgitta herself, but an anonymous voice who is urgently crying out a warning to the Tuscan city. This is revealed only toward the end of the prophecy, when the narrator warns that if his words seem too obscure (“se troppo il *mio* parlar paresse obscuro” [lns. 259–60, emphasis is our own]), then the listeners/readers should consult the works of Saint Birgitta herself, “tanta / copia di virtù Brigida sancta” (261–62). In other words, we do not have to take the narrator himself at his word, for he is backed up by the more established authority of the Swedish saint, who earlier warned in her canonical writings about the ills that would befall a city divided. Indeed, this prophecy might be considered less a ventriloquization per se than a kind of “name dropping,” using Birgitta’s broad appeal and established voice as a prophet who warned of discord and carnage in order to bolster the claims of this rather local prophecy.

The text employs a language that will be familiar to the reader of prophetic verse. The warning is dire, and only occasionally specific: if the “great cry” of the prophet is not heeded, there will be “grave periglio” (grave danger) which

41 Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 8; *Prophetia di S. Brigida* (Florence: c.1486), on which see https://data.cerl.org/istc/ib00685500?style=_default. The timing of this publication two years after Sixtus re-legitimized Birgitta’s writings may suggest that there was a new impetus to make claim to the saint.

42 Citations are to the edition *Prophetia di Santa Brigida* (Florence: 1529); we also consulted the c.1500 Roman edition.

will lead to a bloody end thanks, importantly, not to external factors, but to internal discord. “Comincerà nel core”: it will begin in the heart of Florence itself, from a deep-rooted anger that can no longer be contained. Using the common imagery of a ship to describe a threatened state or power, the prophecy suggests that this “rabbia” will lead to the destruction of the vessel that is Florence, with its sails, helm, and tackling all torn asunder.⁴³ The city’s destruction is imagined through a diverse array of imaginative visual descriptions: we are warned of serpents, of plague, of blood, of several different Tuscan cities being destroyed, of the unbridled horse of Apocalypse. He speaks of his predictions occurring in a new century (“secol nuovo”) but cannot be more precise (“ben ch’io non dica il mese”); a city will be sacked (“d’un sacho vien barba malegna”). As is common in such writings, after terrible tragedy a new leader will arise, in a “nuovo tempo” (new time) and a “mondo nuovo” (new world) that comes after the disaster that is sure to befall the “gran puttana” of Tuscany. The narrator equates the internal strife against which he warns with too loose a way of dealing with the outside world. Tuscany, and Florence especially, has allowed in too much outside influence, which has led to a dangerous disharmony at the local level (a complaint that would likely have seemed particularly relevant after Piero de’ Medici allowed the armies of Charles VIII up to the gates of the city unimpeded).

Fear of such a disaster striking the city of Florence, which is so clearly gendered as feminine, is worth considering in the context of why Birgitta might have been linked to such a prophecy, and how that connects to the way gender was deployed in vernacular works around the Italian Wars more broadly. One dire prediction of the prophecy on which it is worth resting a moment: the ominous warning for the women of the city. “... li tuoi ostelli,” we are cautioned, “saran pieni di donne scapigliate / con vedove velate” (your houses will be filled with disheveled women and veiled widows [40–42]). The image of women as the ultimate victims of urban invasion is common, the reference to “ostelli” reminiscent of Dante’s “di dolore ostello” (*Purg.* VI.76). The particularly evocative phrase “donne scapigliate” also comes from Dante, appearing twice in quick succession in *Vita nuova* 23.⁴⁴ It further recalls the role of women as designated mourners stretching back to ancient Greece, wailing while pulling at their hair in performative despair on the streets. This kind of public,

43 In a noteworthy example from Birgitta’s day, Cola di Rienzo had the astounding image on the facade of the Senator’s Palace at the Campidoglio of a ship “foundering, without rudder or sail” on a perilously stormy sea, a widow as passenger, with the inscription “this is Rome.” See Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested*, 103–4.

44 Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, ed. and trans. Dino Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame: 1995).

feminine mourning was generally viewed with deep anxiety; in 13th- and 14th-century Italy laws were enacted to keep women from acting out this traditional practice in public.⁴⁵ The “*donne scapigliate*” of the Birgittine prophecy are an easily legible symbol of urban Italian mourning, a prominent motif in 1390s Italy when the prophecy was most likely first drafted. In *Destati o fier leone* the “*donne scapigliate*” are paired with “*vedove velate*.” These mourning women remind readers of a city in which the norms and social codes meant to protect citizens from civic chaos have been removed, the flood gates opened. We return to the gendered destruction of Florence at the end of the prophecy, when we see the city herself as a woman ruined. Just a few lines before the narrator brings in Birgitta as an outside authority to support his message, he prophesies that Florence will be made a whore along with the rest of Tuscany (“*la gran puttana con tutta altra Thoscana*”). A few lines after he references Birgitta, we see that the abject destruction of Florence is already in motion: the city is great with a child who will be born and bring chaos, “*e già cresciuto il ventre*,” while Florence sleeps feverishly. We thus see the famous refrain that Italy is not “*donna di provincie, ma di bordello*” suggested in Dante’s *Purgatorio* here localized to the Florentine level. *Destati o fier leone* warns of a Florence that is an amalgam of widow, whore, and pregnant woman: vulnerable emotionally, sexually, and physically, and with the ominous arrival of a new and threatening presence in her belly if the narrator’s words, linked to the earlier writings of Saint Birgitta, are not carefully heeded.

Among the variety of other apocryphal prophetic works in both vernacular and Latin that circulated in this period, there was a particular interest in Birgitta in Siena which translated into additional prophetic material. Worthy of note is a 1530 Siennese manuscript containing a *Profezia sopra la città di Siena e di Firenze* (*Ora mi volgho alla città del monte*, which its transcriber claims to be a 1350 document found in the small Tuscan town of San Quirico outside Siena) and another separate *Profezia* attributed to Birgitta (*Svegliati Lupa ormai, e co’ bei gigli d’oro*).⁴⁶ In part of the former, a section which purports to prophesize Florence’s future troubles is also nearly identical to another Siennese product, “a supplement regarding Florence” in a 1536 printed edition of *Destati*

45 See especially Sharon Strocchia, *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: 1992), 10–12.

46 Siena, Biblioteca degli Intronati MS 103 (A.III.28), fols. 66v–70v and 91v–92r, respectively. The manuscript (largely a collection of medieval chronicles, prophecies, and the like) contains an inscription from the compiler, Salimbene di Antonio Ormanni, that bears the date 8 July 1530. A 16th- or 17th-century version of the *Ora mi volgho alla città del monte*, here entitled *Profetia di S.ta Brigida p[er] la città di Siena*, is also available in MS 97 (A.III.22), fols. 184r–85r.

o fier leone.⁴⁷ The supplement largely repackages the manuscript material as a coda to the oft-printed *Destati*. Additions like these were frequently made to pre-existing works in order to more closely tie them to ongoing political-military events, in this case perhaps to further legitimate Siena's place in the pro-imperial camp as a city that in the prophecy will watch Florentine's demise but not suffer the same fate. The narrator closely follows the long-established style of the piece; the addition contains conventional language of coming disaster in vague terms, with a grave opening warning reinforcing the warning of discord in the main body of the prophecy. Florence is identified as a "lion without teeth," an impotent and curtailed beast, incapable of defending herself against foreign invasion. This Siense addendum in print to the most famous and circulated of the prophecies is indicative of the malleability of the texts themselves, which can be massaged and changed to suit the setting and audience of various cities, as well as the prophecy's active afterlife in the first half of the 16th century.⁴⁸

While *Destati o fier leone* enjoyed an especially long and prevalent manuscript history, its visibility in print was shared by another poem that also circulated under the label "Profezia di Santa Brigida." The relationship of this 104-octave text, *Ave Iesu Christo figliol di Maria*, to the saint was a late development.⁴⁹ In its early manuscript forms, it went unattributed or circulated under the names of other prophetic figures such as Joachim of Fiore. It was not until around 1493 – on the eve of the Italian Wars and not long after the 1484 papal restoration of Birgitta's legitimacy – that the poem was claimed for the saint.⁵⁰ This print edition, as well as the following one in c.1500, are attributed to a Venetian *cantimbanco*, Antonio Farina, whose name also appears on the only manuscript version to ascribe the prophecy to Birgitta, likely a transcription from one of the published editions.⁵¹ Four known additional printings, through c.1525, similarly claim this earlier anonymous prophecy for Birgitta, adding to her prophetic oeuvre.

47 *La prophetia di sancta Brigida: con una agionta sopra di Fiorenza* (Siena: 1536). The corresponding section of the earlier manuscript prophecy begins "Ora vi voglio parlar," and stretches from 68v–70v.

48 This most popular of the prophecies also inspired a political sonnet addressed to the city of Florence found in manuscript in BNCf Magl. 727, fols. 94r–95r, with the incipit *Destati, fier lion, che sta' tu a fare?*

49 Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana," 80, 83–84.

50 *Profetia de Santa Brigida, con alcune altre profetie* (Venice: c.1493). We were able to compare this edition to the c.1525 one published by F. Bindoni, also in Venice.

51 Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, 1737, fols. 54r–57v; discussed in Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana," 83.

The poem begins with a supplication to Christ (visually echoed by a small woodcut of a saint kneeling before the crucifixion) to “teach me / to speak with fierce speech (*parlar atroce*), / so that everyone will understand my words” since “great torment awaits the world / and little time is left until the end.”⁵² While the earlier manuscripts declared that the events described would begin in ’61 (of which century is conveniently left unstated), print editions updated this to the 90s; rather than prove outdated, this *terminus post quem* would increase in apparent relevance as the Italian Wars begun in 1494 continued to roil on. The prophecy largely concerns the consequences of a “Roman” schism; it is ironic that a prophecy espousing a pro-Avignon papacy perspective should, over time, be associated with Birgitta. The first known version (c.1411) was lengthened shortly thereafter and its political position reversed; subsequent iterations were based on this revised version.⁵³ As noted above, a handful of octaves were added early on to the first manuscript edition in order to alter the prophetic-political alignment, from imperial to Francophile, creating a second version that serves as the basis of the later print editions. But the published prophecy is similarly not a mere transcription of that revamped version.⁵⁴ The printed text exhibits a number of additions and emendations. For instance, the initial assertion that havoc will be due especially to one city, that “the great snake will sleep with the flower” (*el gran serpente dormirà col fiore*), is here transformed to a serpent who shall sleep “with the lion” (*il gran serpe dormirà con il Leone, v*); the leveled criticism is translated from Florence to Venice, the city where most editions of the poem were published and where authorities punished the *cantimbanco* for peddling Birgitta prophecies. Alongside other changes that revamp the work for a new thematic and geographic focus, most notably an additional octave was tacked on to the end, a narratorial insertion that introduces a Birgittine framework to the preceding passages:

I won't write anything further
Lest it become tedious for the reader.
What I have said is of grave importance,

52 “che me insegni la via / ch'io possa dir con parlar atroce, / ch'ognun intenda la parola mia, / che al peccare non sia sì feroce, / però che 'l mondo aspetta gran tormento, / poco tempo gli è al finimento” (octave 1; unnumbered pages in both consulted editions).

53 Roberto Rusconi, *L'attesa della fine: Crisi della società, profezia ed apocalisse in Italia al tempo del grande scisma d'Occidente (1378–1417)* (Rome: 1979), 159–60; and Lodone, “Santa Brigida in Toscana,” 83. Rusconi hypothesizes that the original date likely refers to the 1370 election of Gregory XI, who ended the Avignon Papacy in 1377.

54 Lodone, “Santa Brigida in Toscana,” 8, traces the movement from first and second editions to the print version but does not discuss the latter's many textual variations.

And if someone should dislike this dictation,
 Forgive me, for I speak it with a pure mind.
 The things of which I tell will come to pass,
 As St. Birgitta had it from the Holy Spirit,
 So more or less it shall be.⁵⁵

Rather than merely having the prophecy reattributed to her, Birgitta is newly brought to bear through this insertion as an authority whose visionary experience validates the poem's prophetic contents. Moreover, this allusion to the saint's voice as ventriloquized or appropriated, rather than engaged in direct speech, cannot but recall its comparable role in the *Destati* poem. The wide circulation of the latter in print and manuscript by the time Birgitta's name was pinned to this particular prophecy makes it quite possible that the earlier work served as its model. In both instances, Birgitta's name shields against the objections of the imagined reader: that the work is too enigmatic, in the *Destati* case, or too taxing, in the *Ave Iesu Christo*. But while in that textual predecessor the particularity of Birgitta's prognostic voice, simultaneously imminent and at a step removed, is introduced midway through the text, for the reader of the *Ave Iesu Christo* (promised a Birgitta prophecy from the pamphlet title), this revelation is saved until the end. And yet at the same time this narrator claims greater authority than did his peer: this work is, he claims, a dictation (*ditato*). The saint who was commanded by Christ to transcribe the *Revelations* she received here dictates them to her new narrator of the 1490s and beyond.

Like so many of the prophecies circulating in these years that offered a hodgepodge of malleable political-military allusions alongside jarring images of pain and suffering, there is much in this poem that readers of the late Quattrocento and Cinquecento could identify with current affairs. The *parlar atroce* sought in the first octave contrasts with the narrator's next request that the text be illuminated with *bel stile* (fine style) so that the coming tribulations are clear. This poem, in other words, should be both terrifying and persuasive. The apocalyptic tenor of the work is foregrounded, both in explicit allusions to the Book of the Apocalypse (VII) and the arrival of the Antichrist (XXXI–XXXIII) and to expectations for the eventual arrival of a Universal Monarch who will usher in a final era of peace before setting down his crown in Jerusalem (LII–LIII). Before that blessed era can arrive, however, evil will first run free, manifesting

55 "Più non me intendo de fare scrittura / accio il lettore non sia attediato / cio ch'io ho ditto è di grande altura / se alcuno non piace questo ditato / perdonami che lo dico con mente pura / cio che dico verà incontrato / si come s. Brigida per spirito santo / cosi convèrà che sia tanto o quanto" (LIV).

in endless war, famine, and especially bloodshed: there will be “a great butchering of human flesh,” Rome will become a cemetery when its citizens will be “diced up like apples,” and others will have “tongues and eyes cut out.”⁵⁶

Like the *Destati* prophecy, this grim narrative begins in Florence and Tuscany; portions of it may be borrowed from other sources, as indicated by the inclusion of an octave on Siena (beginning “The she-wolf will lose her double tale, / her sweet milk will run sour” [XVII]) that appears unattributed in the contemporaneous 1530 Sienese manuscript of medieval prophecies described above and that has elsewhere been attributed to Giovacchino Piccolomini.⁵⁷ It then radiates out to a wider Italian peninsula that can anticipate her destruction at the hands of a German ruler, and to France, Hungary, and Spain. The horrors of these years come with the promise of a future peace on par with that under Octavian, but 100 octaves of destruction are hardly calmed by the mere two promising future tranquility. And as is the case in the *Destati* poem, and so many *lamenti* and prophecies of the period, the Italians’ social-military and salvific fates are figured through a gendered body politic: although in her current state Italy is both a whore (*Italia putta*, xxx) and long a widow (*tanto tempo è stata vedovella*, vi), a future lord may “have beautiful Italy” (*forse ... avrà bella Italia*, vi).

Birgitta also frequently appeared within a prophetic chorus. At times this meant appending other figures to the works attributed to her. In its print forms, the *Ave Iesu Christo* never appears alone. Often it headlined a core set of prophetic works when published as *Prophetia di Santa Brigida con alcune altre profetie*. The two other works that accompany it, the verse *Al vol la mia fantasia* and prose *Prophetia de Santo Severo*, echo its updated chronology (the late Quattrocento), its broad thrust (coming tribulations to be followed by renewed peace), and its ready and appealing parallels to the events of the age: famine, plague, and unparalleled wars between the Italian States, France, and Germany.⁵⁸ Taken together, these continuities are mutually reinforcing and thereby lend credence to the Birgittine “dictation.”

56 “gran macel di carne humana ” (xxxI; also see xxx and I.); “seran tagliati a pezi come poma” (xxxIV); “cavata la lingua e un ochio” (xlviII).

57 “La Lupa perderà la doppia coda / il dolce latte gli tornerà amara”; A.III.28, c.71v.

58 On these works, see Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 8–10; Niccoli, “Profezie in piazza. Note sul profetismo popolare nell’Italia del primo Cinquecento,” *Quaderni storici* 14, 41 (1979): 500–39, 505 and 535–36; Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, 218; Rusconi, *L’attesa della fine*, 147–48; and, by the same author, “Ex Quodam Antiquissimo Libello. La tradizione manoscritta delle profezie nell’Italia tardomedioevale: Dalle collezioni profetiche alle prime edizioni di stampa,” in *The Uses and Abuses of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, ed. Werner Verbeke, Daniel Verhelst, and Andries Welkenhuysen (Leuven: 1988), 451–52.

In other instances, Birgitta was situated within an ensemble of prophetic authorities. In a late 15th-century manuscript, for instance, the *Destati o fier leone* poem appears alongside a variety of other prophetic materials, including a similar poem “drawn from the prophecies of the prophet Daniel, Saint John the Evangelist in the Apocalypse, and Saint Birgitta,” among others, while she is praised as a “savìa” (sage) apocalyptic commentator in the *Prophetia Caroli Imperatoris con altre prophetie di diversi santi huomini*.⁵⁹ Birgitta also appeared among the numerous saints and prophets listed as sources in the *Imminente flagello de Italia* (c.1515–1520). More prominently, she featured in the panorama of saints and prophetic figures in German astrologer Johannes Lichtenberger’s 1488 *Pronosticatio*, including in a woodcut placing her in the company of Ptolemy, Aristotle, the Sibyl, and “Brother Reinhart” (Fig. 6.3). Lichtenberger introduces his volume by stating that there are three means by which man may know future things: through life experience, astrology, and divine revelation. Of the various figures he could select to represent the latter category, he states, he especially points to the ancient Sibyl, who “infallibly predicted many things to the Romans,” and to Birgitta. Taken in this way as representative of revelation – the Sibyl’s near-modern equivalent not merely for her oracular gift but surely also for its Roman focus – Birgitta specifically brings to the mosaic of prophetic tidbits compiled from varied sources a prediction ascribed to her *Revelations* that “under a great eagle [ie, Germany] the church will be crushed.”⁶⁰ Lichtenberger’s “astrological best seller” enjoyed over a dozen Italian editions during the same period of the Italian Wars, surely in part because the publisher of the first translation, in c.1490–92, had added onto the cover page a promise that the prophecy described events dating until 1567, (a dating that subsequent editions would replicate), a period that he could not have predicted would map squarely onto these years of war, and because its jumble of dire social-military predictions could readily be ‘confirmed’ by recent events.⁶¹ This seems especially the case for Birgitta’s chapter, which even in the 1488 original dates the tribulations facing the church to 1496 and “for many years to come.”

59 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana 1258, fols. 58v–65v (*Destati o fier leone* at fols. 54v–58v); *Prophetia Caroli imperatoris con altre prophetie de diversi santi huomini* ([Venice: 1500–1525].

60 “Inde Brigida libro Revelationum Sub aquila grandi [...] conculcabitur ecclesia et vastabitur” (Johannes Lichtenberger, *Pronosticatio* [Strasburg: 1488], sig. Bii v); “Unde sancta Brigida nel libro de le sue revelatio[n]e dice Le giesia de dio serà conculcata sotto l’aquila gra[n]de” (*Pronosticatione overo iudicio vulgare, raro e più non udito, lo quale expone, et dichiara prima alcune prophetie de sancta Brigida e dela Sybilla, et de molti altri sancti homini, e de molti sapienti astrologhi* [Venice: 1511], sig. Biv r). This is one of several Quattrocento Latin “Brigittine oracles” discussed by Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, 338–40.

61 Giancarlo Petrella, *La ‘Pronosticatio’ di Johannes Lichtenberger: Un testo profetico nell’Italia del Rinascimento* (Udine: 2010), 133. Others replicated this dating.



FIGURE 6.3 *Ptolemy, Aristotle, the Sibyl, Birgitta, and Reinhart*, from Johannes Lichtenberger, *Pronosticatio*, woodcut, 1492

RB 104561, THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY, SAN MARINO CA, 104561

The increasingly urban quality of this prediction is underscored by changes in the accompanying woodcuts: while Lichtenberger's first printing shows the saint in a field, a book – plainly intended to be the *Revelations* – in hand, in later versions a city sits behind her, creating the impression that she is reading



FIGURE 6.4 Detail from Johannes Lichtenberger, *Pronosticatione ouero iudicio vulgare* (Venice: 1511), sig. Biv r. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale. With permission of the Ministero della Cultura / Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze. Further reproductions are not permitted.

to it its coming woes (Fig. 6.4). These included the anticipation that Peter (that is, the pope) would have to flee the Eternal City, a prediction that surely would have caught the eye of readers endeavoring to make sense of the 1527 Sack of Rome and Clement VII's escape for Orvieto.

As Richardson also notes, in Italian translations of the *Pronosticatio* Birgitta eventually even overtook the volume's subtitle *Pronosticatione [...] lo quale expone, et dichiara prima alcune prophetie de sancta Brigida e dela Sybilla, et de molti altri sancti homini, e de molti sapienti astrologhi*. Select portions of the *Pronosticatio* were later extracted in the *Profetie cavate d'uno opuscolo stampato già trentanni passati il quale si chiama pronosticatione vera et più non udita* (c.1530). Lichtenberger goes unnamed, but the pamphlet's subtitle explains that the compiler has extracted from his volume "those things that seem to be occurring at the present, such that anyone can satisfy his appetite about this topic without having to buy the book," that is, its seemingly actualized predictions leading up to the Sack of Rome.⁶² A prophetic cheat sheet to help the curious decode the preternatural meaning behind current events, the

62 "ho tratto for a q[ue]lle cose le qual par che occorra al p[re]sente acio che ognun senza comprar el libro possi saciar l'apetito suo circa a q[ue]sta materia"; *Profetie cavate d'uno opuscolo stampato già trentanni passati il quale si chiama pronosticatione vera et più non udita* (n.p., c.1530). Also see Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 176–77.

Profetie begins first and directly with Birgitta, with her message on the German presence in Rome clearly seen as the most salient and verified prediction in the wake of the Sack. The other extracts lend support to this interpretation of Birgitta's eagle, such as Cyril's prediction that, to renew the Church, God will allow a schism caused by the vacancy of the papacy at the hands of the emperor despite the Romans' and Italians' attempts to resist him. Through the process of distilling what he saw as the most pertinent portions of Lichtenberger's *Pronosticatio*, the Italian compiler put Birgitta front and center.

In the same period, Birgitta also received top titular billing in *Flagellum et renovatio mundi, prophetia di santa Brigida & molti altri santi homini*.⁶³ While this prophecy "of Saint Birgitta and many other holy men" seems to again place her at the forefront, her relationship to this slim c.1530 volume is more nuanced. Aside from the title (one likely intended to help catch the eye of potential readers by now familiar with the saint's poetic legacy), Birgitta goes unnamed throughout the poem itself; she is subsumed into the chorus of saints and prophets through whom God announced the coming scourge: "Since the whole world rebels against God, / With his providence He decided / To renew it after a great scourge; / He proclaimed it through the mouths of his saints, / Of which I have read more than thirty true [...]" – most notably "the righteous and immaculate" Savonarola, to whom the narrator makes repeated reference.⁶⁴ But if Birgitta's name does not appear, her apocryphal *Ave Iesu Christo* does. Several passages of the other poem are here replicated (with slight tweaks), from predictions in one octave of screams of pain and blood-red rivers to the anticipation of the Octavian-like peace in another.⁶⁵ The message of the *Flagellum et renovatio mundi* – political-military devastation, largely but not exclusively in Italy, out of which will emerge a universal monarch – makes for a natural incorporation of the pseudo-Birgitta prophecy. However, this poem also reflects mounting concerns about the Ottoman threat

63 *Flagellvm et renouatio mundi. Prophetia di santa Brigida & molti altri santi homini, cioe Ioachim Abbate, Bonauentura, Richardo, Guido de Parisio, Seuero, Anselmo, Vicenzo, Cuglielmo, Lattantio, Bernardino, Tomasuzzo, Hieremia, Sophonia, Amos, Ezechiel Propheta*, (Venice?: 1530?). The New York Public Library holds what appears to be the earliest copy, possibly datable to 1530 but in which the date (likely that of purchase or other acquisition) September 27, 1542 had been inscribed; the NYPL hypothesizes that the volume may have been printed in Venice, but the references to Savonarola, to the Guelphs and Ghibellines, as well as a heavy Florentine focus also suggest that city as a possible provenance.

64 "Essendo il mondo a Dio tutto ribello / Dio con sua providentia ha terminato / de rinouarlo dapo [sic] un gran flagello / per bocca de suoi santi l'ha anuntiato / leto n'ho più de trenta vero"; "Savonarola il giusto immacolato"; *Flagellvm et renouatio mundi* (c.1530), i v.

65 "olditi ... cridi ad alta voce"; "sia il fiume la sua acqua vermiglia"; "... pace et unione / [like that of] Ottaviano"; *ibid.*, ii v, iv v.

from the East. A later 1537 version adds several octaves that build upon pre-existing allusions to the catastrophic Sack of Rome in order to make explicit comparisons with an even more dire torment at the hands of the Turks: “Then all of the Turks [...] will enter Rome / and with their scimitars will lob off the locks / of the cardinals and bishops, / And they’ll bring more ruin than did the Germans.”⁶⁶ Aside from a one-line allusion to a “great Turk” to come, the “original” pseudo-Birgitta poem makes no reference to the Ottomans;⁶⁷ what is more, this later version removes entirely the only full octave borrowed from the *Ave Iesu Christo*, about suffering in Florence. In other words, by 1537 Birgitta still headlined a prophetic poem that had by then taken a step away from the themes central to the original apocryphal texts, fair indication that her name continued to hold a certain interpretive currency that could be applied to the wider crises facing both the Church and the Italian peninsula.

In short, while a pantheon of figures contributed to the prophetic-apocalyptic tenor of these years, Birgitta often rose to the forefront. These works conjoin to form prophetic choruses with common thematic refrains, and contributed to the continued visibility and, by implication, applicability of Birgitta.

Violence, Relics, and Birgitta’s Legacy

Birgitta’s perceived relationship to the Italian Wars would remain stable over time. A textual episode from a century later demonstrates not only the durability of these associations (particularly regarding the Sack of Rome, which held continued symbolic importance into the Counter-Reformation) but also a curious investment in reading them not through the apocryphal prophecies, as was the case before, but through her *Revelations* themselves. Birgitta was made to foresee the Sack and its spiritual reverberations more directly. At several moments in his 1630 *Memorie sacre delle sette chiese di Roma*, the Oratorian priest Giovanni Severano, who was involved with the late 16th-/early 17th-century archaeological study of Rome’s Christian history, alludes to the violence perpetrated against sacred spaces and objects during the Sack. In the

66 “Tutti li esserciti Turcheschi / con superbia e sdegno entreranno in Roma / e troncaranno a cardinali e veschi / con sue simitarre la bella chioma, / più mal faranno che non fer Todeschi”; *Flagellvm et renouatio mundi. Prophetia di santa Brigida & molti altri santi homini, cioe Ioachim Abbate, Bonauentura, Richardo, Guido de Parisio, Seuero, Anselmo, Vincenzo, Guglielmo, Lattantio, Bernardino, Tomasuzzo, la beata Osanna, Hieremia, Sophonia, Amos, Ezechiel Propheta* (n.p.: 1537), Aii v.

67 “un gran turcho [...] serà signore [of Hungary]” (xxvi).

section devoted to the Sancta Sanctorum, he notes that a full rendering of its relics would be impossible to undertake, both because of their sheer quantity and because of the number of them that were lost or stolen during the Sack. Following this acknowledgement, however, he offers something of a counter-example, a relic lost but recovered: Jesus's foreskin, found in the small town of Calcata just a few miles outside of Rome:

In the year 1527, it was brought [to Calcata] by a soldier who had stolen it during the aforementioned Sack of Rome. The soldier, having been seized by the populace of that castle and locked inside a cellar, hid it there. He later disclosed its location when he was taken sick to the Hospital of Santo Spirito in Rome, as testified by [Francisco de] Toledo in [his commentary on the Gospel of] S. Luke, since the Lord did not want such an important relic to go without being honored and venerated; the Blessed Virgin had suffered with St. Birgitta over the meager honor it had once received, as we see in one of her Revelations.⁶⁸

That “later” (poi) in Severano’s description of the relic’s recovery does some heavy lifting, as it gestures towards an immediacy that in reality took thirty years; the location of the foreskin was disclosed in 1557 or 1559. The allusion to Birgitta’s *Revelations* (specified to Rev. VI: 112 in the margin notes) heightens the spiritual significance of the theft and the restoration. In Birgitta’s revelation it is the Virgin Mary, rather than the thieving soldier, who reveals to Birgitta how the (true) holy prepuce came to be preserved during the era of persecutions, buried underground until its location (in Rome) could be safely revealed by an angel – the fleshy manifestation of Birgitta’s emphasis on the Eternal City as the center of faith. The vision concludes with Mary calling upon Birgitta’s contemporaries to revere a relic overlooked but that evidences Christ’s continued physical presence on earth: “O Rome, O Rome, if you only knew, you would surely rejoice, and if you only knew how to weep, you would weep ceaselessly, for you have a treasure that is most dear to me and you do

68 “... dove l’anno 1527 fu portato da un soldato, che l’haveva rubato nel detto Sacco di Roma; il quale soldato essendo stato preso dal popolo di quel castello, e rinchiuso in una cantina, ivi lo nascose; e lo rivelò poi, essendo venuto infermo nell’Hospidale di S. Spirito di Roma, come testifica il Toledo sopra S. Luca. Non havendo voluto il Singore, che resti senza esser honorata e venerata così gran reliquia; del poco honore della quale se ne dolse già la B. Vergine con S. Brigida, come habbiamo in una sua Rivelatione.” Giovanni Severano, *Memorie sacre delle sette chiese di Roma* (Rome: 1630), 575.

not treat it with reverence.”⁶⁹ The revelation, which Birgitta would have had in Rome during the 1350s, perhaps *in situ*, lent important validation to a relic whose authenticity was at times debated.⁷⁰ Severano’s text invites the reader to detect suggestive parallels between Birgitta’s revelation and the events of 1527: the concealment and disclosure, and the reignition of devotion. In such a reading, the sacrilegious act is both predicted and providential.

Severano’s account revises the earlier 1625 revised edition of Ottavio Panciroli’s *I tesori nascosti nell’alma città di Roma*, which also describes the soldier’s plunder – here he takes a small metal chest containing a variety of relics, of which the holy prepuce was one – and associates the renewed attention it received afterward with Birgitta, paraphrasing from the same chapter of the *Revelations* on the ancient fate of the prepuce to which Severano points. Panciroli tells a different, somewhat more pedestrian, story of the relic’s modern journey than does Severano: after the soldier filched it, the foreskin ended up in the possession of the Anguillara family, who kept it in their lands at Calcata.⁷¹ Severano’s later account (a version of which the town still tells today) thus removes reference to all other impacted relics, provides a more thrilling story, and implicitly collapses the chronology of events in order to both heighten the drama and further stress the connection between Birgitta and the relic she had seen and venerated firsthand. While the prepuce is not returned to Rome after its rediscovery, this account does draw the perpetrator back to the scene of his crime and strengthen the relationship between the relic and the Eternal City from which Birgitta originally publicized its importance. Panciroli proffers the same conclusion that Severano would echo: the theft was a divinely sanctioned act, one that historically fulfilled Birgitta’s exhortation that this holy treasure be honored.

Both Panciroli and, later, Severano point us directly to their source text, Spanish Jesuit Francisco de Toledo’s *Commentarii in Sacrosanctum Jesu Christi D.N. Evangelium Secundum Lucam*, published in 1600 in both Rome and Venice. This initial account of the foreskin’s adventures is a much longer and, arguably, engaging narrative: here Maddalena Strozzi discovers the little relic

69 Rev. VI: 112.4: “O Roma, o Roma, si scires, gauderes vtique, ymmo si scires flere, fleres incesanter, quia habes thesaurum michi carissimum et non honoras illum.” In *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Searby, Vol. 3, 175.

70 On the relic’s cult, including its relationship to saints including Catherine of Siena and Agnes Blannebkin, see Robert P. Palazzo, “The Veneration of the Sacred Foreskin(s) of Baby Jesus – A Documented Analysis,” in *Multicultural Europe and Cultural Exchange*, ed. James P. Helfers (Turnhout: 2010), 155–76.

71 Ottavio Panciroli, *I tesori nascosti nell’alma città di Roma* (Rome: 1625 [1st ed. 1600]), 147–48.

chest but is preternaturally hindered from opening it as a result of her blemished soul; only the pure young Lucrezia Orsini is able to unfasten it, after which the relic is identified and returned to the Sancta Sanctorum.⁷² Birgitta is nowhere to be found in this early and Spanish-authored account, even in the subsequent commentary that establishes the prepuce's spiritual value. It appears, then, that despite their acknowledged reliance on Toledo's volume, the subsequent Italian writers substituted out the story of Maddalena and Lucrezia altogether and replaced it with the providential framework suggested by Birgitta's *Revelations*.

At the end of the 17th century, the story of the stolen prepuce would get folded into Birgitta's own biography. Guglielmo Burlamacchi revisited the episode as the sensational conclusion to a chapter on the manner in which the saint used the Jubilee year in Rome to tend to the health of the city's souls and demonstrate her "scorching zeal."⁷³ As Burlamacchi would have it, Birgitta was intent on restoring public devotion to "that bit of flesh cut from the baby Jesus" for which the citizens of Rome had so little regard.⁷⁴ Following a more extensive summary of Rev. VI: 112, Burlamacchi's version of Cinquecento events fuses the accounts of Panciroli and Severano, albeit leaning towards the latter: "This most sacred relic is today found in Calcata, the territory of the Anguillara family twenty miles from Rome, where it was miraculously discovered in October 1557, after it had been hidden many years prior by a soldier who had sacrilegiously stolen it during the Sack of Rome."⁷⁵ Explicitly highlighting the sacrilege and the miracle to which his predecessors had only hinted, Burlamacchi's account complements the overall prophetic slant of his *vita*.⁷⁶

In short, at the distance of a century and more from the Sack, Birgitta continued to provide a fatidic lens with which to (re)interpret the event and the destruction it inflicted on Rome – but now with recourse not to the apocryphal prophecies but instead to the *Revelations* themselves. In this later, Counter-Reformation context, in the case of Italian-authored accounts, Birgitta's discourse with the Virgin notably provided a redeeming rereading of the tragedy,

72 Francisco de Toledo, *Commentarii in Sacrosanctum Jesu Christi D.N. Evangelium Secundum Lucam* (Venice: 1600), 250–53.

73 "cocentissimo zelo"; Guglielmo Burlamacchi, *Vita della serafica madre e gloriosissima vedova S. Brigida di Svetia principessa ii Nericia* (Naples: 1692), 164.

74 "quella particella di carne, che fu tagliata al Bambino Giesù nella circoncisione." *Ibid.*, *Vita*, 170–71.

75 "Conservasi adesso questa sacrosanta reliquia in Calcata Terra de i Signori dell'Anguillara lontana da Roma 20 miglia, dove fu miracolosamente scoperta il 1557 nel mese di Ottobre, essendovi stata nascosta molti anni avanti da un suoldato, che l'aveva nel saccheggiamento di Roma sacrilegamente rapita." *Ibid.*

76 See Richardson's essay in this volume pp. 34–55.

where the violence waged against sacred spaces and objects had, in the case of the holy prepuce, the humanly unintended but divinely planned function of confirming the importance of Catholic relics.

Conclusion

This explicit transformation of the *Revelations* into the stuff of Italian Wars prophecy capped off nearly two centuries of apocalyptic expectations that intertwined the peninsula's tumultuous politico-military woes with Birgitta's voice. The apocryphal Birgitta of this period speaks to a world in which the grim predictions of her *Revelations* might seem to have already taken place to contemporaries grappling with the aftershock. A new, Christian sibyl, as highlighted by her placement in the Ponzetti Chapel in Santa Maria della Pace, during her lifetime she had examined Italy and the Roman Church from the vantage points of a foreigner and a holy widow. Already circulating in Quattrocento manuscripts, the first apocryphal prophecies offered dire warnings that were copied, discussed, updated, transformed, and paired with other works of a comparable tone at a pace that spiked in the period of the 1494 French invasion and that held steady for decades to come. Other previous prophecies were newly ascribed to Birgitta, to disseminate under her the auspices of her supposed authorship from that point forward. Her name was also blazoned across the cover pages of prophetic pamphlets, a clear marketing tool to assure curious would-be readers of their vatic authenticity and veracity, even when the saint's role in the volume was actually marginal at best. Often placed within a chorus of Christian clairvoyants, Birgitta was regularly at the prophetic forefront, ventriloquized to warn of grisly violence, political catastrophe, and moral scourge, but also to promise a future peace and an eventual restoration of a true Catholic unity. It is thus fitting that a firsthand witness and victim of the Sack, Cardinal Ferdinando Ponzetti, should be buried under the altar in which Birgitta is pictured laying a protective hand across his arm.

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The Semantics of Obedience. Birgittine Influences on Paola Antonia Negri's Letters

Eleonora Cappuccilli

Giovan Battista Fontana de Conti, the author of the *vita* of the controversial *Angelica* Paola Antonia Negri (1508–1555), was key to contributing to the fame of Birgitta of Sweden's reputation in Italy at the beginning of the Counter-Reformation. Although it was Fontana who explicitly associated Negri with Birgitta, it is not only in his work that we find a connection between the two prophets. This chapter discusses Birgitta's influence on Negri's ideas of obedience, starting from their common emphasis on the virtue of prudence, their similar thematization of the exemplarity of Mary, and the centrality of humility as a fundamental quality of governors.

A prophet and nun from Castellanza, Negri took vows of chastity in the convent of San Paolo Converso in Milan. The convent, which was founded in 1536, hosted the Paulines, who were divided into a male and female branch and, for a short time, a branch for married couples – the Barnabites, the *Angeliche* and the *maritati* respectively. The Paulines' early history is closely linked with the figure of Negri. Before the papal decree that ordered the enclosure of the *Angeliche*, the Barnabites and the *Angeliche* lived together, inspired by the universalist doctrines of Saint Paul.¹ Although Thomistic philosophy is present in their thinking, they did not identify with a precise theological or philosophical doctrine. They performed spiritual exercises together, held common retreats, and practiced an asceticism based on obedience and control over one's own will more than on corporeal control.² The Barnabites were a solid pillar of the Counter-Reformation,³ as expressed in the three-fold aim stated

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- 1 Samuel Vollenweider, "St. Paul," in *Religion Past & Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Leiden: 2011), vol. 9, 633.
 - 2 Andrea Maria Erba, "Chierici regolari di San Paolo," in *Dizionario degli Istituti di perfezione*, ed. Guerrino Pelliccia and Giancarlo Rocca (Rome: 1974), vol. II, 948–9.
 - 3 Federico Chabod, *Opere:3.1: Il ducato di Milano e l'impero di Carlo V. Lo stato e la vita religiosa a Milano nell'epoca di Carlo V* (Turin: 1971), 264.

in their constitutions: “renunciation of the world, total consecration to God, zeal for the saving of souls.”⁴

Negri carried out charitable works in the hospitals of converted prostitutes in the regions of Veneto and Lombardy. Her charitable travels, ecstasies, and miracles were highly respected, to the point that she was considered an absolute authority over the whole order. Threatened by her extraordinary power as a woman and the growing influence of the Barnabites, the Venetian Council of Ten banned the Barnabites from Veneto. Subsequently the papacy carried out an investigation into her role in the congregation that led to her expulsion from the *Angeliche* and seclusion in the cloistered convent of Santa Chiara in Milan, where she died in 1555.⁵ Negri wrote 133 letters, 70 of which were posthumously published with her *vita* written by Fontana. The *Spiritual Letters*, sent between 1538 and 1551, were ready to go to press in 1563, but their publication was blocked by a group of cardinals. After the deaths of the cardinals, they were finally published in 1576. In the intervening period, Giacomo (or Diego) Láinez, General of the Jesuits, subjected them to careful scrutiny and editing, censoring their most controversial parts. The *Spiritual Letters* primarily addressed Negri’s devotees in Veneto and Lombardy, which included her fellow Paulines, the *convertite* – converted prostitutes who had chosen convent life – as well as eminent people such as Alfonso del Vasto, who was the governor of Milan, the poet Gaspara Stampa, and various clerics, lawyers and merchants. The collection also includes a letter to Pope Julius III on the occasion of his papal election. Like Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena, Negri was humble and modest – for example, admitting her flaws of pride, ignorance, arrogance and presumption – but was at the same time incredibly assertive in prescribing rules of behavior to her recipients, whether devotees and fellows or notable people.

The letters contain not only pastoral messages but also complex theological positions on the universalism of the Church, revealing the impact of Paul’s ecclesiology on the role of the Christian people in the history of salvation and on the conduct of secular and ecclesiastical powers. The letters also demonstrate Negri’s desire to act as a spiritual guide for various groups and figures: for her community who demanded religious reform; for the believers disappointed by clerical corruption and continuous wars; for the pope, distracted

4 “Rinuncia al mondo, consacrazione totale a Dio, zelo per la salvezza delle anime.” Erba, “Chierici regolari,” 947.

5 For a systematic account of the early history of the Barnabites, see Elena Bonora, *I conflitti della Controriforma. Santità e obbedienza nell’esperienza religiosa dei primi barnabiti* (Turin: 1998), and, more recently, Querciolo Mazzonis, *Riforme di vita cristiana nel Cinquecento italiano* (Soveria Mannelli: 2020).

by temporal affairs; and for civil powers such as the governor of Milan, caught between imperial obedience and reverence for the Holy See.⁶ In many of Negri's recommendations, prudence is presented as the primary virtue, considered to be of particular importance to the powerful, but even to women, whom she believed capable of it despite being excluded from positions of power and thus supposedly lacking in leadership qualities. Prudence was also functional to her anti-Protestant critique: as a practical, action-based virtue, it was an antidote to the Lutheran dismissal of good works, epitomized in the *sola fide* doctrine. Prudence is also a relevant component of her interpretation of the legacy of Birgitta,⁷ another powerful woman who also fought for the reformation of the Church but envisaged its future division.

Fontana explicitly compared Negri's destiny to that of Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. Fontana and Negri's devotees found in Birgitta the initiator of a tradition fostered by Catherine of Siena that combined a saintly reputation with the possibility of criticizing ecclesiastical and political institutions. Negri in turn aligned with the prophetic model initiated by Birgitta: she repeatedly used Birgittine images in her letters in order to convey a message focused on obeying God's representatives on earth while retaining one's own capacity to advance alternative models of power and virtue.

The underlying hypothesis of this chapter is that the rhetoric of obedience constitutes an essential albeit understudied aspect of the Birgittine legacy that Negri adopts and reshapes. Italy and Europe in the 16th century were marked by fierce upheavals, including the Protestant Reformation and the division of Christendom, continuous wars and occupations in Italy, and the proliferation of eschatological expectations that foresaw the coming of a Pastor Angelicus who would overthrow all earthly kingdoms.⁸ In this context, both women and men reflected on the meaning of obedience, just as Birgitta had questioned the duty of trusting corrupt ecclesiastical and political powers during the Avignon papacy and the Hundred Years' War.

Negri elaborated a semantics of obedience which, while conforming to the new spiritual discipline of the Counter-Reformation, was fraught with tensions which complicated the concept of obedience itself. This chapter looks at the semantics of obedience, focusing on three elements: positive references to the Virgin Mary as a queen and as a woman; the understanding of prudence as

6 On the ambivalent position of Alfonso del Vasto, see Chabod, *Lo stato e la vita religiosa*, 283 ff.

7 My initial overview of the influence of the Birgittine prophetic model on Negri can be found in Eleonora Cappuccilli, "In the Steps of Birgitta of Sweden: The Reluctant Authority of Paola Antonia Negri (1508–1555)," *Renaissance Studies* 35 (2021), 582–99.

8 For a compelling account of the appropriation of Birgitta's prophetic identity and voice during the Italian Wars see Jessica Goethals and Anna Wainwright's chapter in this volume.

integral to obedience; and the critique of theologians, priests, and Christian philosophers who neglected the value of good works. Reinterpretations of the role of the Virgin Mary, ideas of prudence, and attacks on the vain sciences are the fundamental pillars of Negri's doctrine of obedience, which was inspired by Birgitta. Negri's argument for obedience to God-appointed powers draws on a tradition shaped by St. Augustine and St. Thomas, who based obedience on "the order of natural and Divine law" (*ex ordine iuris naturalis et divini*).⁹ Birgitta renewed this tradition by arguing for the Christian duty of obedience by the governed, but maintained that this did not exempt secular and spiritual governors from demonstrating that they were worthy of obedience.¹⁰ As both the king and the pope had a divine mission, she believed that her duty as a prophet was to instruct them on how to behave in order to fulfill their mission. In the *Treatise to the Highest Pontiffs* and the *Heavenly Emperor's Book to Kings* she reminds the king and pope of the limits of their power and explains how they should behave towards their subjects in order to fulfill their Christian obligations, seeing this as a crucial part of her prophetic task. It is possible that Negri's concept of obedience, which includes ideas not only on how to obey, but also on how to be worthy of obedience, drew on Birgitta's ideas on the subject, as expressed in her instructions to princes and popes. When Birgitta said that the king "should not take pride in his privilege but be humble in consideration of the burden of his office,"¹¹ she meant that royal prerogative did not entitle him to unrestrained power or allow him to escape divine commandments. On the contrary, the ideal king was aware of the limits of his power.¹² Complying to his *officium* was key to the king's legitimate authority, which required obedience to God's superior orders and the execution of his precepts.¹³ Just like Birgitta during the troubled years of the Avignon papacy, Negri transformed obedience into a concept with which to criticize spiritual and secular powers that were unmindful of their mission.

After discussing how Fontana, Negri's hagiographer, fashioned her around the model of Birgitta of Sweden, I will explore Negri's construction of a semantics of obedience through Mariology, prudence, and a critique of the vain

9 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Rome: 1882), II-II, q. 104, a. 1, responsio.

10 Unn Falkeid, "The Political Discourse of Birgitta of Sweden," in *Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Maria H. Oen (Leiden: 2019), especially 97–101.

11 "Portauerit non superbiat ex permissione set humili et se considerando onus officii sui." Rev. VIII: 3.3.

12 Falkeid, "The Political Discourse," 99.

13 On the constitutional relevance of the idea of *officium*, see Pierangelo Schiera, *Il cameratismo e l'assolutismo tedesco* (Milan: 1968), 247 ff.

sciences. My analysis will show that her semantics of obedience was influenced by her reception of the Birgittine prophetic model.

Hagiographic Crystallization of a Fragmentary Legacy

In Negri's *vita* Giovan Battista Fontana compares her destiny to that of "those blessed saints Catherine and Birgitta," observing that, unlike Negri, they were not persecuted for their good works.¹⁴ Furthermore, in constructing Negri's hagiography, it is likely that Fontana adopted the model of *Vita abbreviatae sanctae Birgittae*, published by the Catholic reformer Olaus Magnus in 1553. As Enrico Garavelli notes,¹⁵ Fontana, like his contemporaries, acknowledged that evoking Birgitta in the 16th century meant not only reminding the Pope and the Emperor of their responsibilities, demanding Church renewal, and condemning those who divided rather than reunited it, but also summoning up a prophetic model capable of conferring authority on a highly controversial woman. Indeed, Fontana reports that the Lord was pleased with Birgitta and Catherine as well as with a "Spanish matron" (*una matrona spagnuola*) – most likely St Isabella of Portugal – who all received papal sanction for their preaching (*andar predicando*) and saintly works (*sante opera*). These women, like Negri, were divine "vases and instruments" (*uasi, & instrumenti*) and persecuting them "would mean tying the hands of his divine goodness" (*sarebbe un uolere legar le mani a sua Divina bontà*)¹⁶ Likening Negri to a holy vase, into which God poured his spirit and word, and an instrument through which he realized his will, was part of a strategy for legitimizing her sanctity.

This idea was shared by Negri's devotees, especially Giovanni Paolo Folperto, who collected the material for the hagiography and entrusted it to Fontana. Folperto also wrote the dedication for *Lettere Spirituali*, which has strong echoes of the preface written by Olaus Magnus to *Vita Abbreviata*. The life of Negri, Folperto writes, is a true example of "natural goodness and Christian charity" (*natural bontà, e christiana carità*), and enticed all sorts of people onto the path of being good Christians: "[Negri] drives lay people and regular

14 "Né mi raccordo, che per tali buone operazioni fussero mai perseguitate quelle beate antiche santa Brigida, e santa Caterina da Siena." Giovan Battista Fontana, "Vita" (hereafter *Vita*) in Paola Antonia Negri, *Lettere spirituali della devota religiosa Angelica Paola Antonia de' Negri Milanese. Vita della medesima raccolta da Giovan Battista Fontana de' Conti* (Rome: 1576) (hereafter LS), 104.

15 Enrico Garavelli, "Introduzione," in Ludovico Domenichi, *Vite di Santa Brigida e Santa Caterina di Svezia*, ed. Enrico Garavelli (Rome: 2016), 21.

16 *Vita*, 104.

clerks, male and female, big and small, beginners and experts, lords, middle-sort and lowly people, and – in short – everyone, on the path of increasingly perfecting oneself in the profession of the true Christian.”¹⁷ In his preface to *Vita Abbreviata* Olaus Magnus had attributed to Birgitta the same capacity to guide all people towards religious devotion: “by spreading the perfumes of her virtues Birgitta induced many to the glory of the divine cult and away from errors and vices.”¹⁸

Another sign of Folperto’s imitation of Birgitta’s hagiography is the tactic employed to defend Birgitta’s identity as a prophetic vessel. As Unn Falkeid points out, unlike Catherine of Siena, Birgitta and her confessors and hagiographers played on the “supposed inferiority of the female sex.”¹⁹ Olaus Magnus, drawing on the 16th century opposition between *femina* and *donna*, reverses this conception by distinguishing Birgitta as a *woman* from Birgitta as a member of the female sex:

[God] destined Saint Birgitta, who was not a fragile but a strong woman [...] even though she belonged to the fragile sex, to be a healthy and fruitful plant, endowed with spiritual seed, that was going to benefit many, for the singular ornament and consolation of his militant Church.²⁰

Belonging to the fragile sex does not exclude the possibility of being as strong as a man.²¹ In the dedication for Negri’s hagiography, Folperto clearly replicates this gesture, presenting Negri as having been elected to nourish the “fragile sex,” leaving the stronger sex with no excuses:

Here is she who will bring food for the fragile sex, above all one woman who collected much milk, that is, who converted many into spiritual

17 “Conduce laici, e regolari, maschi, e femmine, grandi, e piccioli, incipienti, e provetti, Signori, mediocri, e bassi, & insomma tutti nel sentiero dell’affinarsi sempre più nella professione di vero christiano.” Giovanni Paolo Folperto, “Dedica,” in *Vita*, s.p.

18 “[Birgitta] plurimos ad divini cultus gloriam ab erroribus & vitis suarum diffusis virtutum aromatibus incitaret.” Olaus Magnus, *Vita Abbreviata* (Rome: 1553), preface, s.p.

19 Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested. An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge: 2017), 153.

20 “Et quamvis sexu de fragili, non tamen fragilem, sed mulierem fortem, sanctam scilicet Birgittam, [...] velut plantulam salubrem, fructiferam femine spirituali multis profuturo, Ecclesiae suae militanti in singulare decus & solatium destinavit.” Magnus, *Vita Abbreviata*, 11.

21 On the reversal of the female fragility *topos* into a possibility for practicing *imitatio Christi* as women, see Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist. Studies in the Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: 1995).

people and gathered them together. Here is she, I say, who will remove all excuses from the stronger sex.²²

Subtly rephrasing Magnus's opposition between the strong woman, i.e. the ideal virago or *femina virilis* who exceeds the limits of her femaleness, and the fragile female sex, Folperto pits the fragile sex against the stronger sex and substitutes the metaphor of the fruitful plant with those of food and milk, which are linked to the woman as mother. In this way, Folperto connects the figure of Negri to that of Birgitta – both of whom were able to prove their strength as women – and reinforces this subtle connection through the symbology of spiritual food, which, as we will see below, was used by both Birgitta and Negri.

Fontana adds to Folperto's effort, interspersing the hagiography with Birgittine motifs. For instance, he readapts the Birgittine image of Mary as a magnet to Negri herself. In Birgitta's *Revelations* Mary says to her: "As a magnet attracts iron to itself, so too I attract hard hearts to God."²³ Fontana uses the same metaphor for Negri, describing her as being like a "magnet" (*magnete*) that attracted even "iron and hardened hearts" (*ogni cuor di ferro e duro*).²⁴ In fashioning Negri around the model of Birgitta and employing Birgittine images and metaphors, Folperto and Fontana were using references that would have been familiar to an Italian Renaissance audience. In this sense Fontana's *vita* constituted an example of a "literary crystallization of a collective conscience."²⁵ However, below we will explore the hypothesis that the Birgittine references in Negri's *vita* were used not only to meet the expectations of the audience but also to reflect Negri's own use of elements of the Birgittine theological and political legacy.

It is clear that Birgitta, the most notable canonized widow, was known to Negri not only from the social and historical context of Renaissance cities like Milan and Venice, in which Birgitta's name was widely known,²⁶ but also from textual fragments scattered throughout Negri's letters. One hidden allusion is contained in the redefinition of the meaning of women's virtues. First, she redefines virginity, so that it no longer refers to the mere integrity of the body,

22 "Ecco chi le vivande porterà per il fragil sesso, massimamente una che pascendo l gregge, latte assai raccolse, cioè spirituali molti fece, e congregò. Ecco, dico, chi potrà al sesso più forte levar ogni iscusazione." Folperto, "Dedica," s.p.

23 "Magnes attrahit sibi ferrum, sic ego dura corda attraho Deo." *Rev.* III: 32.3.

24 *Vita*, 19.

25 Jacques Fontaine, "Introduction," in Sulpice Sever, *Vie de Saint Martin*, ed. Jacques Fontaine (Paris: 1967), vol. I, 188.

26 For a full account of the circulation of Birgittine and pseudo-Birgittine works in Renaissance Italy, see the chapter by Brian Richardson in this volume.

but is seen as an active virtue. Thus, it is not limited to women who never married but can also be applied to widows.

One must be a virgin not only in the body: many other Saints who were not virgins were crowned with the legitimate crown of which they were made worthy, but I speak of virginity as the status of being a virgin after the rebirth of Christ from the darkness of the first errors; that virginity consists in having not only an uncontaminated body, but also an uncontaminated mind.²⁷

True virginity, then, is not only a bodily quality, but also an attribute of the mind. The implication of this statement is two-fold. On the one hand, Negri minimizes the ideal of bodily integrity and in so doing shows devotion not only to eminent virgin saints, such as Catherine of Siena, but also to married and widowed saints, including the renowned widow Birgitta. On the other hand, Negri's extreme redefinition of the idea of virginity removes its usual association with "fragile states" such as purity, chastity, and *clausura*.²⁸ As we shall see below, this is a first sign of Negri's general redefinition of the scale of virtues: it is not virginity that is at the top, but more active virtues such as prudence.

This reformulation of virtue as attached to the intangible part of the self, rather than just its material part, suggests that sin, the contrary of virtue, should also be defeated in the soul (or mind, which Negri uses as a synonym) rather than in the body. Mortifying the body, as Negri makes clear, means mortifying its metaphorical limbs of "foulness, pride, [and] avarice" (*immondizia, Superbia, auarizia*). Invoking the teaching of St Paul, Negri argues that it is dangerous to self-discipline the body alone, as it risks creating "a good opinion of oneself and contempt of others" (*buona opinione di sé stessi, e dispregio degli altri*). In order to foster virtuous conduct, the body should instead "become the servant and subject" (*serva, e stia soggetto*) of "our will and reason" (*volontà nostra e ragione*), and not vice versa.²⁹ Negri is more interested in disciplining the soul than in disciplining the body. This anticipated the prevalent conception of discipline in Italy from the late 16th century onwards – which

27 "Bisogna essere vergini ma non solo di corpo: molti altri Santi non vergini [sono] stati coronati della legittima corona, della qual però so fatti degni, ma parlo di quella verginità, dilla qual si è Vergine doppo il rinascimento Dio dalle tenebre dei primi errori, la qual verginità consiste non solo in non havere il corpo contaminato, ma ne anco la mente." LS IV, parte seconda, 278.

28 Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: 1999), 134.

29 LS X, parte prima, 126–127.

might have been a factor in the posthumous publication of Negri's letters at that time.³⁰

For Negri, then, spiritual improvement is of more value than bodily improvement. It is only God who can provide the possibility for such improvement, expressed by the image – to which we shall later return – of “spiritual food” that will never wholly satisfy your hunger. This is another example of the subtle influence of Birgittine imagery. In the *Revelations*, Birgitta plays with the idea that God provides food for the soul, an idea that has a partially scriptural origin:³¹

O, Lord, how sweet are the words of your mouth! It truly seems to me, as often as I hear the words of your Spirit, that my soul within me swallows them with an indescribably sweet sensation like that from the sweetest food that seems to drop into my heart with great joy and indescribable consolation. It seems wonderful to me that while I listen to your words, I am made both fully satisfied and yet still hungry. I feel satisfied because nothing else pleases me but your words. Yet I feel hungry because my appetite for them keeps increasing.³²

This powerful Birgittine image – God's words as the food that will never completely fill you up – returns in Negri's letter on the Assumption, where she describes Virgin Mary's attendance at the banquet of God.

By following in her footsteps, we will be able to see her triumphant in Heaven and, through imagination, while still being on earth, we will taste the crumbs that fall from that rich table, where she sits, is waited upon, eats, and nourishes herself, and while she is eating, she does not satisfy her hunger.³³

30 Gabriella Zari, “Disciplina regolare e pratica di coscienza: le virtù e i comportamenti sociali in comunità femminili (secc. XVI.XVIII),” in *Disciplina dell'anima, disciplina del corpo, disciplina della società*, ed. Paolo Prodi (Bologna: 1994), 257–78.

31 E.g. Ps. 107:9 and Ezek. 3:3. On the meaning of spiritual food for Medieval mystic women see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: 1987) and Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: 1985).

32 “Videtur vere michi, quociens verba Spiritus tui audio, quod anima mea in se illa deglu-
ciat cum quodam sentimento ineffabilis dulcedinis sicut suauissimum cibum, qui cadere
videtur in corporis mei cum magno gaudio et ineffabili consolacione. Mirabile tamen hoc
esse videtur, quoddum verba tua audio tunc utrumque efficio scilicet saciata et famelica.
Propter hoc autem saciata, quia nichil tunc aliud michi libet nisi illa; propter hoc vero
famelica, quia semper augetur appetitus meus ad illa.” *Rev.* IV: 77.5–6.

33 “Seguitando le uestigia sue, ci potremo assicurar di uederla trionfante in Cielo, e potremo
per imaginazione al meno stando ancora in terra gustar de migolini, che calcano da quella

Given that the image of spiritual food that does not satisfy hunger is framed within a eulogy to the Virgin Mary, it is reasonable to assume that Negri was using one image to reference two Birgittine fragments – spiritual food and the lofty example of Mary.

These fragments suggest that in this letter Negri crafted her pastoral message through mixing together various theological images that she found in Birgitta's work. Fontana, like Negri's devotee Folperto, added a prophetic link by explicitly introducing Birgitta of Sweden's name. However, Birgitta is never named in the Barnabites' constitutions, and, unlike Catherine of Siena, the other woman prophet and canonized saint whom Fontana likens to Negri, she is not listed amongst the authors which the Barnabites and the *Angeliche* were supposed to study.³⁴ Given that Birgittine devotion was not part of the Barnabites' tradition, the peculiarity of the hagiographic reference to Birgitta is particularly striking. This reference could be partly motivated by the hidden references that Negri makes to Birgitta's visions in the *Spiritual Letters*, as well as by similarities in the two women's use of Mariology.

Marian Rewritings

Negri's letters contain a multifaceted and sometimes contradictory conception of Mary. She is a symbol of both obedience and power, the utmost example of virtue but not a unique woman; she is the ultimate role model but can also coexist with the prophetic model of Birgitta of Sweden. Negri's superlative Marian devotion clearly emerges in an unpublished letter, which her devotees left out of the 1563 collection. Negri argues that Christ recognized in the Virgin the highest example of virtue, rather than a grieving – thus passive – subject. "Although he saw his mother so sorrowful, and full of angst and anxieties, Christ did not want to call her mother, but woman, in order not to condescend to affection, but to keep the rigor of virtue."³⁵ It is unclear why Negri's devotees Folperto and Giacomo Rainoldi did not select this letter for publication, but it

ricca mensa, oue ella siede, oue le uiene ministrato, si pasce e si nodrisce, e pascendosi non si sazia." LS XX, parte terza, 462.

34 Antonio Maria Zaccaria, "Costituzioni," in Orazio Premoli, *Le lettere e lo spirito religioso di S. Antonio M. Zaccaria*, ed. Orazio Premoli (Rome: 1909), 70.

35 "Vedendo la madre sua tanto dolorosa, spasimosa e piena di angoscie e ansietadi non dimeno non volse chiamarla per madre, ma per donna, per non condescendere alla tenerezza e tenere il rigore della virtude." Rome, Centro Studi Storici – Archivio Storico dei Barnabiti di Roma (hereafter ASBR), L.b.1.primo, 12, fol. 2r.

could be that they found its depiction of Mary to be too controversial, making her overly godlike and not sufficiently human.³⁶

They probably thought that not publishing that letter would help to reduce the perception of Negri's role in the confraternity, which was the main reason that the Barnabites were investigated by the Inquisition. As Renée Baernstein pointed out, the Barnabites believed that Negri – whom they called “Divine Mother and Teacher” until the Inquisition declared her “mother no more” – was “an intermediary through whom Christ favored their congregation,”³⁷ just as the Virgin Mary was an intermediary of grace for all Christians. As the Barnabites had gone too far with their devotion to Negri – leading to their being banned from Veneto and the seclusion of Negri herself – any exaggeration in the veneration of the Mother of God was probably considered to be alluding too much to the Barnabites' relationship with their Divine Mother. Thus any ambiguous reference to Mary – especially if depicted as active and powerful – had to be eliminated from the letters if they were to be published.

The Marian cult had already been a point of conflict for two centuries, with a longstanding controversy on the nature of the Virgin Mary leading to intense debates between Dominicans and Franciscans.³⁸ However, within the religiosity promoted after the Counter-Reformation, Mary took on the role of the *mediatrix* of all graces.³⁹ In addition, she began to be used as a universal figure meant to unify the local cults of the saints.⁴⁰ By the 1520s and 1530s, the cult of Mary had already spread across the entire Church in Europe and the New World,⁴¹ and after the Council of Trent, Catholic institutions supported the worship of Mary as a universal emblem of the Church Triumphant.⁴²

As Miri Rubin compellingly demonstrates, from the 15th century onwards theologians and reformers understood conjugal obedience to be Mary's highest virtue. Jean Gerson and Martin Luther were prominent interpreters of this

36 On the Renaissance humanization of Mary see Theodore Koehler, “Storia della Mariologia,” in *Nuovo Dizionario di Mariologia*, ed. Stefano De Fiore and Salvatore Maria Meo (Cinisello Balsamo: 2006), 1256.

37 P. Renée Baernstein, *A Convent Tale. A Century of Sisterhood in Spanish Milan* (New York: 2002), 58.

38 Thomas M. Izbicki, “The Immaculate Conception and Ecclesiastical Politics from the Council of Basel to the Council of Trent: The Dominicans and Their Foes,” *Archiv Für Reformationsgeschichte* 96 (2005), 145–70.

39 See Adriana Valerio, *Maria di Nazaret* (Bologna: 2017).

40 Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770* (New York: 2005), 57.

41 Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: 2009), 356 ff.

42 The spatial extension of the Marian cult is an innovation of the Counter-Reformation. Gabriella Zari, “Marian City in the Drawings of Francesco Cavazzoni (1559–1616),” in *Innovation in the Italian Counter-Reformation*, ed. Shannon McHugh and Anna Wainwright (Newark, De.: 2020), 260.

vision of Mary as the perfect wife, who was obedient, meek and resilient,⁴³ and even Girolamo Savonarola, who promoted women's religious reform, privileged this reading over a representation of the Queen of Heaven as more vocal and active.⁴⁴

Immediately after the Council of Trent, the debate over the Virgin Mary acquired new significance, with the question of how to reconcile the cult of Mary – as a woman and mother of God – with the new Tridentine directives on the discipline of women in the Church and society.⁴⁵ Mary had to incarnate a model of virtue that could confirm women's new place in the *ecclesia* as separate and secluded. As convent reform demonstrated,⁴⁶ the ecclesiastical authorities aimed to tame women's unruly behavior in the Church, with all women having to internalize and incarnate the virtue of obedience that Mary exemplified.

For Negri, obedience was not the only Marian virtue, as Mary also represented “a very powerful medium between her son and us.”⁴⁷ Like Birgitta, whose “*imitatio Mariae* authorized her prophetic speech,”⁴⁸ and 16th century women mystics and humanists,⁴⁹ Negri privileges a proactive and powerful image of the Virgin Mary. This representation was uncommon for the Barnabites who initially primarily saw the Madonna as “Our Lady of Sorrows.”⁵⁰ As in the Bible, the Pauline letters – which were the Barnabites' (and so Negri's) main source – are virtually silent on the Virgin Mary, apart from a brief reference in Gal. 4:4. It is thus clear that Negri's theological reflection on Mary does not derive from her Pauline upbringing.

The fact that Negri's conception of and devotion to the Virgin Mary was autonomous from her congregation and its Pauline teachings, raises the question as to whether Birgitta was among those who inspired her. It would not

43 Ibid., 323–4.

44 See in this volume Clara Stella, “A Lineage of Apocalyptic Queens.”

45 Wolfgang Reinhard, “Disciplinamento sociale, confessionalizzazione, modernizzazione: Un discorso storiografico,” in Prodi, *Disciplina dell'anima*, 101–24.

46 Gabriella Zarri, “Gender, Religious Institutions and Social Discipline: The Reform of the Regulars,” in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London: 1998), 193–212.

47 “Un mezzo potentissimo tra suo figliuolo, e noi.” LS XII, parte seconda, 400.

48 Unn Falkeid, “Constructing Female Authority. Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and the Two Marys,” in *Sanctity and Female Authorship in Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (New York: 2020), 58.

49 Robert Fastiggi, “Mariology in the Counter reformation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford: 2019), 466; Vittoria Colonna, Chiara Matraini, and Lucrezia Marinella, *Who is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Susan Haskins (Chicago: 2008).

50 Erba, “Chierici regolari di San Paolo,” 948.

have been the first time that Birgitta was used in this way. She had already been an authoritative source in Marian disputes, as in the case of Pope Sixtus IV, born Francesco della Rovere, who used Birgitta's revelations as a source in his defense of Immaculate Conception.⁵¹ Even adversaries of the Immaculate Conception, such as Cardinal Thomas Cajetan, placed Birgitta among the "*doctores*" (doctors of the Church) who upheld the Immaculist thesis.⁵²

There are some textual correspondences that support the hypothesis that Birgitta's Mariology, which in turn relied upon Franciscan theology, was an influence on Negri. For instance, Negri's 1549 letter on the Advent echoes the fourth revelation of Birgitta's *Liber Quaestionum* concerning the intermingling of humanity and divinity in Mary's womb, in which Christ speaks to his mother:

Your breast was so full of every virtuous charm that there is no good in me that is not in you as well [...] it both pleased my divinity to enter into you and my humanity to live with you and drink the milk from your nipples.⁵³

Negri echoes this dialogue between Mary and her son when she affirms that Christ sucks "the celestial nipples, through which [he] will not only give [his] divinity but will also draw out her humanity from her milk."⁵⁴ The image of the milk as a symbol of humanity "drawn" from the nipples encapsulates the connection between God and humanity enabled by Mary. While Mary's humanity is the condition of Christ's humanity, the Virgin is like no other human being, because she is also the seat of divinity. This bond between humanity and divinity is what gives Mary her superior status.

It returns in the description of Mary as a "mediatrix between her son and us,"⁵⁵ which recalls Birgitta's *Revelations*: "You are the wise mediatrix who makes peace [...] between humankind and God."⁵⁶ The majesty of the Virgin is embedded in her double nature as the queen of heaven and a humble woman. In her 'Letter on the Presentation', Negri invites us to follow the example of the

51 Francesco della Rovere, *L'orazione della Immacolata*, ed. Dino Cortese (Padua: 1985), 72–103.

52 Thomas Cajetan, *Opuscula omnia* (Lugdunum: 1588), vol. 2, Tract. II, 101.

53 "Pectus tuum plenum fuit omni virtutum suavitate in tantum, quod non est bonum in me, quod non sit in te, [...] deitati mee placuit intrare ad te et humanitati mee habitare tecum et bibere lac mamillarum tuarum." Rev. v: 4.16. On the tie between humanity and divinity in Mary, see also Rev. iv: 92.5: "in her was found my divinity along with my humanity" (in ipsa fuit deitas mea cum humanitate).

54 "Le celesti poppe, per le quali non meno manderai dentro della tua divinità, che trarrai fuori del latte della sua umanità." LS II, parte prima, 12.

55 "Tra il figliol suo, e noi mediatrice." LS, XII, parte prima, 148.

56 Extrav. 50.19.

Madonna, “a girl who was small on earth but great in heaven, small in body, but great in spirit.”⁵⁷ In her sex “there are virile spirits, not unlike in many others of our sex, who have been a mirror of force and constancy for the world.”⁵⁸ Mary is the loftiest example, but by no means an exception.

Negri not only shows that a virile spirit is not men’s prerogative but, in describing women as a mirror of force and constancy, associates them with two of the virtues which would prove essential in the formation of the new norms of social intercourse designed to halt religious conflicts.⁵⁹

Furthermore, as the Queen of Queens, Mary is not only the supreme model of force and constancy, but embodies all the virtues:

every beauty, splendor, and glory are confounded when faced with her beauty; the humble become confounded when faced with her humility; when compared to hers, every other clarity, light, and cleanliness appear opaque, obscure, and not properly clean; every patience, chastity, virginity, modesty, prudence, charity, and splendor lose their shine [...] she is that woman clothed with the sun, in which God principally and most abundantly infused his gifts and graces.⁶⁰

Negri employs the apocalyptic language of the Book of Revelation, and in particular the striking apparition of the “woman clothed with the sun,” to support her claim that Mary epitomizes all possible perfections, including prudence, which, as we shall see, constitutes one of the essential attributes of those in

57 “Una fanciulla, dico, picciola in terra, ma grande in cielo; picciola di corpo, ma grande di spirito.” LS XII, parte seconda, 396.

58 “Nel sesso vostro gilè mostrate animi uirili, non meno di tante altre dil sesso nostro, che sono state un specchio di fortezza, e costanza al mondo.” Ibid., 401–2.

59 On Neostoicism and constancy, which, in *De constantia* (1584), Justus Lipsius explored as a paradigm of the new relationship between individual and collective life in modern Europe, see Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Modern State* (Cambridge, Eng.: 2008).

60 “Nell’ cospetto della cui bellezza resta confusa ogni bellezza, ogni splendore, & ogni gloria, nel cospetto della cui humiltà restano confusi gli humil, al paragone della cui chiarezza, e lume, e mondezza, ogni altra ne resta turbida, oscura, e non ben monda, ogni pazienza, ogni castità, ogni virginità, ogni modestia, ogni prudenza, ogni carità, ogni splendore perde l’uso della sua risplendenza [...] ella è quella Donna vestita di Sole, & in chi principalmente e più copiosamente infuse Dio i doni, e grazie sue.” LS XX, parte terza, 459–460. See also the 1548 Letter on the Presentation, where Mary is described in this way: “a girl in the shape of woman has appeared in Heaven clothed with the sun, crowned with stars, standing on the moon” (fanciulla che in forma di donna è apparsa in Cielo vestita di Sole, coronata di stelle, poggiata sopra la Luna) (LS XII, parte seconda, 398). This recalls the Apoc. 12: “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.”

power. Mary personifies *woman-as-fullness* rather than *woman-as-lack*. In this representation, Negri implicitly refers to Birgitta, who, in *Book of Questions*, attributes all the cardinal and theological virtues to Mary:

The walls of your womb, that is, of your faith, were like gleaming gold, and on them the strength of your virtues was recorded, your prudence and justice and temperance along with perfect perseverance, for all your virtues were perfected with divine charity.⁶¹

Faith, prudence, justice, temperance, perseverance, and charity: Mary is endowed with the entire spectrum of virtues. Birgitta also employs this *topos* in *Angel's Speech* ("her sacred body was then adorned with the rewards of all the virtues"),⁶² and specifies that virtues were given "in return for her holy obedience."⁶³ If obedience is the precondition for virtues, what is the precondition for obedience, or, in other words, the necessary quality of those who should be obeyed? Having identified some signs of Negri's debt to Birgittine Mariology, I will now discuss the way in which Negri thematizes prudence as an internal constraint of obedience, thus reviving another part of Birgitta's legacy.

Prudence as the Condition for Obedience

The question of ensuring obedience to the Catholic Church in the aftermath of the Lutheran Reformation lay at the heart of the Tridentine debates. Catholic ministers faced the challenge of striking the correct balance between two conflicting tasks: enforcing religious discipline and revitalizing popular religion.⁶⁴ When the Inquisitions approved the publication of Negri's revised letters, they most likely thought that they could contribute to these dual objectives. Negri's devotees in turn made sure that the revised letters conformed to the Tridentine spirit.⁶⁵

61 "Huius itaque ventris, idest fidei tue, parietes fuerunt quasi aurum fulgentissimum, in quibus notatur fortitudo virtutum tuarum et prudencia tua et iusticia et temperancia cum perfecta perseuerancia, quia ipse omnes virtutes tue perfecte fuerunt diuina caritate." Rev. v: 4.19.

62 "Cuius sacratissimum corpus postea omnium virtutum premiis decorabatur." SA 21.9.

63 "Pro sua divina obediencia." SA 21.8.

64 Kleinberg maintains that authorities could not totally reject charismatic people, because in doing so they would risk "drying up" the emotional sources of religion. Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word. Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2008), 5.

65 Pietro Giulio Riga, "La lettera spirituale. Per una storia dell'epistolografia religiosa," *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* xxxi (2018), 165.

In her letters, Negri raises the issue of obedience as an essential virtue of Christ himself, who did not descend to earth only to “command and dominate” (comandare et dominare) but was “obedient until he died on the cross” (obbediente fino alla morte, e morte di croce). Even though “Christ made the law,” he did not come to earth in order to “undo the law, and not to be subject to it,” but he came “to fulfill the law, observe the law, and die for man in compliance with the law.”⁶⁶ Drawing on St. Paul (2 Cor. 3:17), Negri states that the new law made by Christ is freedom.⁶⁷ This idea of Christ’s law as *lex libertatis* was found in Birgitta too. While she revealed that: “after the law of Moses was given, then it pleased God more that men should live under the law and in accordance with the law rather than according to their own human judgment and understanding,”⁶⁸ she also reported a vision of God who replaces the old law with the new one: “when the clothing of the Old Law was ready to be put aside, I put on the new clothing, that is, the New Law, and gave it to everyone who wanted to have me and my clothing.”⁶⁹ For her, this new law was not a constraint but an avenue for freedom:

This clothing is neither too tight fitting nor difficult to wear but is well adjusted on all sides. It does not command people to fast or work too much nor to kill themselves or to do anything beyond the limits of possibility, but is beneficial for the soul and conducive to the moderation and chastisement of the body.⁷⁰

Like Birgitta, Negri calls on us to respect a law that coincides with the freedom of our souls. Christ himself obeyed the law by dying on the cross. *Imitatio Christi* thus requires that God’s servants obey his law too.

Obeing that highest law, namely the revealed word, that for the prophet includes personal communication with God, is the utmost form of obedience. But even direct revelation must be disciplined. In Birgitta’s *Revelations*,

66 “Forse che sia venuto per isciogliere la legge, e per non esser suddito alla legge, havendo egli fatto la legge? anzi per adempier la legge, osservar la legge, e morir per l’uomo in soddisfazione della legge.” LS III, parte prima, 22–23.

67 “Quella libertà, qual ti ha donata Christo.” LS IX, parte seconda, 362.

68 “Postquam autem data fuit lex Moysi, tunc magis placuit Deo, quod homines viuerent sub lege et secundum legem quam secundum suum proprium arbitrium humanum et intellectum.” *Rev.* VII: 10.7.

69 “Sic ego, complete et deposita veste antique legis, assumpsi nouam vestem, id est legem nouam, et dedi omnibus, qui voluerunt habere vestes mecum.” *Rev.* I: 47.1–2. See also *Rev.* II: 12.

70 “Vestis autem ista non est stricta vel difficilis sed ubique moderata non enim precipit nimisi eiunare vel laborare vel se occidere vel aliquid ultra possibilitatem facere, sed proficua est ad animam et ad corpus moderandum et castigandum apta.” *Rev.* I: 47.

obedience to the law demands trust in the final say of one's superiors. When Christ speaks to Birgitta about the truth of the revealed word, he says that she should have faith in his words, because he never lies. But although the revelations Christ sends to Birgitta are always true, their meaning can vary: "At times I mean what I say in a spiritual sense, and at other times according to the letter of the word."⁷¹ Yet, when she is unsure about the meaning of Christ's instructions, Birgitta must ultimately follow her superior's prescriptions. It is better "to give up your own will out of obedience, even if its object is good, and to follow the will of your director provided it does not go against the salvation of your soul or is otherwise irrational."⁷² Here Birgitta's confessor, Mathias of Linköping, plays a significant role as the ultimate guarantor of the authentic prophetic inspiration of Birgitta and as the symbol of the duty of obedience.

Birgitta's relationship with her confessors, firstly Matthias of Linköping, and then Alfonso Pecha, returns in a vision of St. Francis, a pivotal figure in the *Heavenly Revelations* and prominent in inspiring Birgitta's religiosity. Francis invites Birgitta "to Eat and Drink with Him" and states: "My room is the true obedience [...] I constantly had a priest with me whose every direction I humbly obeyed, and that was my room. You should do likewise, because it pleases God."⁷³ The supervision of a spiritual director guarantees the visions' authenticity because it implies God's approval ("it pleases God"). Consequently, obedience to the spiritual father is consubstantial to every truthful prophetic experience. But the fact that she called her confessors "sons" and assumes the role of a new Moses⁷⁴ make her discourse ambivalent on the relationship between superiors and inferiors. Birgitta's prophetic speech thus questions a univocal idea of spiritual authority while stressing the need for obedience.

In the political, religious, and social turmoil of the 16th century, Negri's stress on obedience to the governors betrays the same ambivalence with respect to obedience that was present in Birgitta's voice. In a 1546 letter, Negri incites her spiritual children to "be obedient; bring your heart to those whom the Lord gave you as governors, without estimating them as men or women."⁷⁵

71 "Quandoque spiritualiter intelligo, que loquor, quandoque sicut tunc ipsa littera sonat." *Rev.* I: 20.8.

72 "Est enim melius propter obedienciam relinquere voluntatem tuam, licet bonam, et sequi voluntatem precipientis, sinon est contra salutem anime vel alias irrationabilis." *Rev.* I: 20.9.

73 "Habui enim mecum continue presbiterum, cui in omnibus preceptis humiliter obediui, et hec fuit camera mea. Tu igitur similiter facias, quia sic placet Deo." *Rev.* VII: 3.4.

74 On Birgitta's association with Moses see Falkeid's chapter in this volume and Claire Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: 2001), 74–77.

75 Siate "obbedienti; portate il cuor in mano a chi vi ha dato il Signore per governo, stimandoli non come huomini, o donne." *LS IX*, parte terza, 551.

By saying that they should obey those in government without thinking about them as men or women, Negri combines Hebrews 13:17 (“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority”) with Gal. 3:28 (“nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”). In this way she introduces a novel element: she takes for granted that the leaders who should be obeyed as God’s representatives on earth could also be women. Unlike Peter, who refers to women only in the role of obedient wives (1 Peter 3), Negri states that women are also among those who must be obeyed, including herself, recognized as the true head of the Barnabites.

In addition to the inclusion of women among the godly appointed governors, Negri makes an indirect intervention in the semantics of obedience by defining the necessary virtues of those in power. In a 1548 letter she asks:

How many get upset as a result of the vivacity of their will because they do not have what they want, and wear a long face when they receive reproach? They ruin their faces in another way, not without some damage: the same holds for the suspicious, for those who have given in to a foolish and proud prudence and pedantry, being light and presumptuous. Aren’t those who pay little reverence to and show little respect for their superiors, equals and inferiors, ruining the face, the beauty, and the decorum of that life to which they tend?⁷⁶

For Negri, true virtuous and Christian life requires authentic prudence and reverence towards your inferiors. Denoting something greater than mere respect, her use of the word “reverence” in relation to one’s inferiors appears to implicitly challenge those very hierarchies that reverence sanctions. Even those who are in power are not exempt from being required to practice these virtues if they want to pursue a Christian life and thus – Negri implicitly argues – to be worthy of obedience. For Birgitta and most late medieval thinkers,⁷⁷ this idea of reverence for one’s inferiors, which coincides with humility, was the main Christian virtue and duty. Negri appropriates this reversal of hierarchies, which

76 “Quanti poi per la vivacità della lor volontà si attristano, perché non hanno quel che vogliono, e fanno il volto lungo nelle riprensioni? questi in altro modo esterminano le lor facce con detrimento non poco: così i sospettosi, e quelli che son dati ad vna stolta, e superba prudenza, e saccenteria, leggieri, e prosuntuosi. Quelli che poca riverenzia, e rispetto portano a superiori, a gl’eguali, et inferiori, non esterminano quelli la faccia la bellezza, il decoro di quella vita, alla qual tendono?” LS XII, parte prima, 133.

77 Kent Dunnington, *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory* (Oxford: 2019). For a discussion of the term “*servus*” in Birgitta, Dante and Petrarch, see Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy*.

is already embedded in Christian political theology, and uses it to polemicize with the spiritual authorities of her time, whose neglect of their duties she saw as responsible for the division of Christianity.

If reverence for one's inferiors is a necessary condition of prudence, so too is disregard for mundane interests. Quoting Matthew 13:24–43, Negri rejoices in seeing “the weeds of human respects, carnal prudence, and honors of the world, sensualities, and comforts, worldly events, and pleasures burning in fire.”⁷⁸ Prudence, then, can also be “carnal” and, as Negri specifies in another letter, “the prudence of the flesh is inimical to God.”⁷⁹ Thus prudence in opposition to divine commandments is necessarily false.

Birgitta of Sweden had listed “feigned prudence” among the sins of the rulers. In a vision on the rights of succession in the Swedish kingdom, God indicates to Birgitta “three incongruities in the electors as well as a fourth that they had in plenty: inordinate love, feigned prudence, the flattery of fools, and lack of confidence in God, and in the common people.”⁸⁰ There is significant continuity between Birgitta of Sweden and Paola Antonia Negri in their juxtaposition of false prudence, the misplacement of love – that “*inordinatus amor*” which Augustine pits against “*ordinata dilectio*,” i.e. the love of God which coincides with love for one's neighbor and oneself⁸¹ – and a ruler's disrespect for their own subjects.

It is no coincidence that both Birgitta's and Negri's list of spoiled virtues and defects give a significant place to prudence. By linking its degeneration (prudence that is “proud” or “carnal” or “feigned”) to a lack of reverence for one's superiors, inferiors, and equals, or to concupiscence for the “honors of the world,” both women indicate what those in power should and should not do in order to comply with the rules of God rather than the rules of man.

Prudence is a virtue with deep political connotations: it was classically attributed to rulers and is a recurring term in the genre of the *specula principum*.⁸² For Aquinas, “regnative prudence” is the most perfect type of

78 “Bruciare con quello fuoco le paglie delli rispetti humani, delle prudenze carnali, e honori del mondo, delle sensualità e commodità, degli intervenimenti, e piaceri mondani.” LS XIII, parte seconda, 406.

79 “La prudenza della carne è nemica a Dio.” LS IX, parte seconda, 351.

80 “In electoribus eorum tria erant inconueniencia et quartum superexcellit: inordinatus amor, prudentia simulata, adulacio stultorum.” *Rev.* IV: 3.25.

81 Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, ed. Joseph Martin (Turnhout: 1962), 1.28. See on the topic Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: 1996) and Remo Bodei, *Ordo Amoris. Conflitti terreni e felicità celeste* (Bologna: 2005).

82 Leopoldo-Eulogio Palacios, *La prudencia política* (Madrid: 1978). Remo Bodei, “Prudenza,” in *Le virtù cardinali. Prudenza, temperanza, fortezza, giustizia*, ed. Remo Bodei, Giulio Giorello, Michela Marzano and Salvatore Veca (Bari: 2017), 3–24. See also Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca: 1985) and Albert Russell

prudence.⁸³ Birgitta followed in Aquinas's footsteps in describing the virtues that a king should have,⁸⁴ but added that a queen should have them too. Referring to Biblical women such as Hester and Jezebel and relating them to the Virgin Mary, Birgitta maintains that "a queen should possess humility of spirit, modesty in her work, prudence in her action, compassion for those who suffer. David was softened by a woman's prudence and did not sin."⁸⁵ Prudence, which prevented David from sinning, is presented as a typical womanly and queenly merit and, what's more, as an antidote to sin. As a practical virtue grounded in experience rather than in moral and formal training, prudence is also available to subjects such as women who are traditionally banned from schooling and theological knowledge.

The association between woman and prudence that Birgitta made was not merely allegorical, as in many medieval representations, but alluded to women's actual political capacity. This association would later have a central role in what Karen Green describes as the "ideological campaign waged in the 15th and 16th century to support women's capacity for political authority,"⁸⁶ and, we should add, for spiritual authority. Birgitta was thus an illustrious initiator of a "prudential" tradition which would then be taken up in the political thought of Christine de Pizan, who, quoting Prov. 31:10 on the prudent wife, upended the Aristotelian idea that women were lacking in all qualities that pertained to rulers, including prudence.

Building upon the Birgittine tradition, Negri continued the battle to assert women's capacity for political and spiritual authority by stressing that true Christian prudence was alien to the lure of worldly things. When addressing the authorities that she wished to advise on behalf of God, she emphasized the need to distance oneself from earthly business. In her letter to Pope Julius III, she encourages him "not to want or seek anything but the honor of Jesus Christ and the benefit of his Church."⁸⁷

Ascoli, "Machiavelli's gift of Counsel," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca: 1993), 219–57.

83 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 50, ad. 1.

84 For example, see Rev. VIII: 2.5; VIII: 16–17.

85 "Propterea ad reginam pertinet humilitas animi, modestia operum, prudentia agendorum, compassio miserorum. Nam prudentia mulieris mitigatus est Daud, ne faceret peccatum, humilitate peruenit Hester ad regnum et perseueravit, set superbia et cupiditate deiecta est Iezabel." Rev. VIII: 5,5–6.

86 See Karen Green, "Phronesis Feminised: Prudence from Christine de Pizan to Elizabeth I," in *Virtue, Liberty and Toleration. Political Ideas of European Women, 1400–1800*, ed. Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green (Dordrecht: 2007), 23–38.

87 "Altro non vogliate, né cerchiate che l'honore di Giesù Christo & l'utilità della Chiesa sua." LS XII, parte terza, 564.

In the same vein, she reminds her eminent devotee Alfonso Del Vasto, commander of the imperial army of Charles v, that “he must love God and true good more than men and transient and vain goods.”⁸⁸ In counseling the prince and the pope, Negri reminds them of their Christian duties and calls their power into question, arguing that being worthy of obedience depends upon compliance with God’s rules. Negri’s emphasis on the constraints on secular power resonated with Birgitta’s prophetic model, in which even a woman could be a channel of God and a critic of the powerful, and in which the latter must above all act as good Christians.⁸⁹

Reactivating the Birgittine model, Negri cast new light on prudence as a necessary limit of power, and thus as a complement to obedience. She also stressed the importance of prudence as a Christian virtue, attributing it to the Virgin Mary, the queen of queens. She demanded that everyone, including those in power, respect and revere their inferiors, and also included women among the superiors. All of this led to her resignification of the question of obedience as conditional upon the Christian use of prudence by princes and popes. Taking Birgitta’s lead, Negri overturned widespread ideas about natural female lasciviousness, weakness, and imprudence, maintaining that prudence was one of the highest feminine virtues – most clearly embodied in the figure of the Virgin Mary – and a tenet of the authority of God’s representatives on earth, both in the Church and in the principedoms.

Critique of the Vain Sciences

If prudence was the most fundamental princely virtue, obedience was the most important virtue of subjects. Following Aquinas, Negri claimed that obedience did not allow for ambiguity. In the Letter on Septuagesima, she states that, in the race for salvation – metaphorically described through the *palio* contest – those who were imperfectly obedient would not be winners: “[A true Christian] is not one who partly obeys and partly does what they will.”⁹⁰

Calling for obedience, however, did not mean that everyone deserved to be obeyed. Power is often corrupted – not least by misplaced prudence – so that the daily battle that every Christian wages against temptations and sin is also a battle against, among other things, depraved worldly princes, i.e. those

88 “Si deve più amar Iddio, & il vero bene, che gl’huomini, & i beni transitori, e vani.” *Ibid.*, 598.

89 Falkeid, “The Political Discourse,” 96, 98.

90 “Uno non è chi in parte obbedisce, e in parte fa il suo volere.” LS x, parte prima, 119.

“princes of darkness” that St. Paul condemns in Eph. 6:12. Negri writes: “A truly magnanimous person is neither defeated by themselves, by others, flesh, blood, principedoms, powers, nor by the rulers of this darkness.”⁹¹

For Negri, the threat to Christendom does not come only from oneself, carnal temptations, and temporal powers, but also from other non-institutionalized powers which are equally harmful: the theologians and philosophers whose conflicting stances led to the breakup of Christianity. In the lead-up to the Council of Trent, Negri wrote a series of epistles to her devotee and future Barnabite, the Venetian lawyer Angelo Michiel, which were completely left out of the printed collection. In a 1544 letter she expressed concern about the recent conduct of their mutual friend Baldassarre Stampa, who was the brother of the poet Gaspara Stampa (another important follower of Negri) and a poet himself. She urged Michiel to encourage his friend Stampa to keep the company of the Paulines, in order to renounce “secular commerce and the vain sciences” (*comerci seculareschi, dalle vane scientie*) and to dedicate himself to “spiritual things” (*cose dil spirito*).⁹² She argued that it was not only secular business but also the vain sciences that constituted the main obstacles to his dedication to spiritual matters. As suggested by Elena Bonora, the vain sciences to which Negri referred were contained in the anonymous treaty *Beneficio di Cristo*,⁹³ which was printed in Venice in 1543 and was distributed throughout the country. *Beneficio* primarily presented the doctrine of *sola fide*, or justification by faith, which was a common object of discussion in the 16th century among *indocti doctique*,⁹⁴ and which was one of the most divisive issues between Catholics and Protestants.⁹⁵ According to Negri, the effects of this doctrine were potentially heretical, and noxious to Christian conduct, as what she called “petty opinions” (*opinioncelle*) on grace could give the false impression that Christ died on the cross to save everyone, even those who did not love God but earthly things, which for Negri was the extreme consequence of *sola fide*.

In a later letter to Michiel, Negri returned to the negative impact of the vain sciences and false doctrines of the theologians, which she argued risked becoming a case of erudite play with the outward appearance of the Sacred

91 “Un vero magnanimo non si lascia vincere ne da se stesso, ne da altri, ne da carne ne da sangue, ne da Principati, ne potestate, ne dalli rethori di queste tenebre.” ASBR, L.b.1.primo, 1, fol. iv.

92 ASBR, L.b.1.primo, 3, fol. ix.

93 Bonora, *I conflitti della Controriforma*, 457–59.

94 Carlo Dionisotti, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin: 1976), 251.

95 Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi, *Giochi di pazienza. Un seminario sul “Beneficio di Cristo”* (Turin: 1975).

Scriptures, instead of an authentic engagement with the truth of science. Negri privileges a particular sort of spirituality which is “learnt through practice, not through literal science only [...] to be learned in the surface layer of letters is of little worth, because there are many who continuously learn and never arrive at the truth of science.”⁹⁶ It is hard to grasp the truth of science for those who cling to the mere letter, eschewing the question of practice and of truly imitating Christ in daily life, such as through charitable actions. Again the emphasis on practice hints at Negri’s criticism of the Lutherans who believed in the sufficiency of faith for salvation, but also of those Catholics who neglected the significance of good works.

Negri was so convinced of the importance of Christian practice and so hostile to theological knowledge, that she used her influence to prevent a priest from Bologna from becoming a member of the Barnabites due to his being “learned in letters” (*dotto in lettere*). As the Chapter Acts of the congregation reported, Negri did not admit such priests or monks into the order because of the “difficulty of bringing them back to the streets,”⁹⁷ that is, of their reluctance to commit to daily devotion to good works and *imitatio Christi* instead of spending all their time engaged in theological studies.

Negri thus polemicised against both the theological and philosophical doctrines that could be divisive for Christianity. Polemics such as hers, which addressed the “crisis of doubt,”⁹⁸ were widespread in the Renaissance, and had a prominent precedent in Birgitta’s *Book of Questions*, in which the Swedish prophet had also addressed doubts and unbelief. The protagonist of the book-long vision was a skeptic monk in dialogue with Christ. As Bridget Morris argues, the monk embodied “Birgitta’s dislike of mere intellectuals who do not accept the limitations of human knowledge,”⁹⁹ a dislike that Birgitta had again borrowed from Franciscan thinking.

For Birgitta, unlike divine intellect, human intellect could be misled, as Christ tells the monk: “Human intellect may be darkened, yet there is no shadow or change in me.”¹⁰⁰ Birgitta not only disapproves of theologians’ pedantry and failure to accept their limits, but also their self-appropriation of knowledge and very unchristian misuse of their reason. Their pride displeases

96 “Per pratica, e non per sola scienza litterale [...] poco valersi essere dotto della scorza delle lettera, perché si trovano pur assai che di continuo imparano e mai pervengono alla verità della scientia.” ASBR, L.b.l.primo, 1, fol. 1v.

97 “Dificultà di reður tal persone in strada.” *Atti capitolari*, quoted in Bonora, *I Conflitti*, 248.

98 Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford: 1992), 239 ff.

99 Bridget Morris, *Introduction to Rev. v*: 263.

100 “Intellectus hominis obscuratus sit, in me tamen non est aliqua obumbratio nec transmutatio.” *Rev. v*: Int. 15.11.

Christ who gave knowledge not as the monopoly of a group of people, but as a gift to humanity:

it is in fact more useful to have less knowledge but a better way of life [...] It is not scholarship that is pleasing to me but a good way of life, it is necessary to correct those who abuse their reasoning faculty, for I, the God and Lord of all, give knowledge to humankind, and I correct both the wise and unwise.¹⁰¹

Nobody is exempt from God's scrutiny, not even the wise. Bad theologians are those who propagate doctrines that are not attuned to the ultimate truth of God, and exclude others – including women prophets like Birgitta – from the circle of the elected interpreters of God's will. As a woman who reinterpreted and gave new life to the Sacred Scriptures in motion by providing “surplus information” exceeding common knowledge,¹⁰² Birgitta disobeyed the priestly monopoly on theological knowledge and stated that no obedience was due where it was contrary to God's providence. In one of Birgitta's visions in 1371, Christ talks to a Franciscan through her, commanding him to “obey his superior in everything he commands him, so long as it is not against God and the friar himself is able to carry it out.”¹⁰³

Unlike Birgitta, Negri did not explicitly say that disobedience in response to faulty doctrines propagated by ministers could be sanctioned by God, but she did write that bad theology, or, in her words, “vain science,” was harmful to Christianity, thus it not only could, but *must* be disavowed, together with those who upheld it. By virtue of their prophetic inspiration that put them in direct communication with God – even though it was only Birgitta who explicitly claimed her charismatic authority – both women felt they were in a position to apply the Thomistic exception to the rule of obedience to superiors, which holds that “it is a greater duty to obey a higher than a lower authority, in sign of which the command of a lower authority is set aside if it be contrary to the

101 “Item, cur aliqui habent maiorem intelligenciam, respondeo: Nichil prodest anime ad eternam salutem, quanta quis habundauerit sapiencia, nisi et fulgeat bona vita; ymmo utilius est habere minorem scienciam et meliorem vitam. [...] Quia litteratura non placet michi sine vita bona, ideo necesse est, vt, qui abutuntur racione, corrigantur, quia ego omnium Deus et Dominus do scienciam hominibus et ego corrigo sapientes et insipientes.” *Rev.* v: Int. 13.30; 41.

102 Anders Piltz, “Birgitta and the Bible,” in *Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 59.

103 “Obediat quoque humiliter suo prelate in omnibus, que preceperit ei, que non sint contra Deum et que ipse frater perficere poterit.” *Rev.* VII: 7.12.

command of a higher authority.”¹⁰⁴ Yet, in an attempt to defend the pope, who was Christ’s representative on earth, Birgitta of Sweden frowned upon those who undermined his authority and that of the divinely ordained priests:

a pope who is without heresy, no matter how much he may be stained by other sins, is never so bad due to those sins and his other bad deeds that there would not be always in him full authority [...] all those priests who are not heretics are true ministers and do truly consecrate the body of Christ.¹⁰⁵

Sinfulness is not a good reason to withdraw one’s obedience from authorities, even though spiritual powers always fall under the scrutiny of the prophet. While prophets must distrust theologians who count on their intellect more than God’s will, they can refuse to obey sinful ministers only if they engage in heresy. Birgitta believed that any disobedience that threatened the integrity of Christianity had to be disciplined. She foresaw what Negri later directly witnessed. Thus, reactivating Birgitta’s critique of popes, princes, priests, and theologians in the troubled years between the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, Negri drew on the Birgittine semantics of obedience as a remedy for the division of God’s people. Negri defended obedience but at the same time criticized any conduct that threatened the unity of Christendom, both from God-appointed authorities – namely the institutionalized authorities of the Church and the state – and from non-institutional authorities such as theologians. Yet she also opened up new spaces for disobedience by claiming the superiority of prophetic power and assuming pastoral power herself. Through the revival of the Birgittine Mary, the eulogy of true prudence and the critique of the vain sciences, Negri built a semantics of obedience with the aim of instructing good Christians on their duties during the tumultuous period of the Italian Wars and the Reformation. On the eve of the Counter-Reformation, Negri witnessed the failures of the popes, who were unable to heal the fractures of the Church, the corruption of the priests, who did not take care of their

104 “Magis est debitum quod homo obediat superiori quam inferiori potestati. Cuius signum est quod praeceptum inferioris praetermittitur si sit praecepto superioris contrarium unde consequens est quod quanto superior est ille qui praecipit, tanto ei inobedientem esse sit gravius.” Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, a. 105, responsio.

105 “Papa, qui est sine heresi, quantumcumque aliis peccatis sit commaculatus, numquam tamen est ita malus ex illis peccatis et ex aliis suis malis operibus, quin semper sit in eo plena auctoritas et perfecta potestas [...] veri presbiteri sunt et vere conficiunt corpus Christi filii mei omnes illi sacerdotes, qui non sunt heretici.” *Rev.* VII: 7.15–17.

flock, and the collapse of the princes, who did not keep their populations safe from wars.

Amid what can be defined as a general crisis of masculine authority, her voice stood out as an attack on the speculative doctrines of philosophers and theologians; a claim to power in competition with that of established ministers; and a reproach of those governors prone to following worldly interests over being prudent, who were thus unworthy of obedience. By echoing the power of the Virgin Mary and the prophetic voice of Birgitta of Sweden, Negri's words resignified obedience by exerting authority in a practical way and by demonstrating how to be worthy of commanding obedience. On the one hand, the governors should prove worthy of their authority and the obedience of their subjects by demonstrating reverence for their inferiors, by sticking to God's ultimate will as revealed in the Scriptures rather than being guided by their intellect, and by cultivating orderly love rather than worldly passions. On the other hand, it is ultimately better to obey one's ecclesiastical and political superiors than to favor the division of the Christian people.

Discourses on the Virgin Mary: Birgitta of Sweden and Chiara Matraini

Eleonora Carinci

Introduction

It is well known that the Virgin Mary was a crucial figure for Birgitta of Sweden's spirituality and theology. The Virgin appears in a large number of Birgitta's *Revelations*, and she is the main subject of the *Sermo angelicus de excellentia beatae Virginis*, the text that Birgittine nuns were expected to read daily during the morning office. What emerges from Birgitta's representation of the Virgin and her interpretation of the most crucial moments of Mary's life is a very close relationship. Birgitta describes Mary as one of the most important figures for Christians, God's most beloved, even before her conception. Mary embodied all human and divine virtues; she was the most humble, pious, and wise of human beings, and is presented as a very powerful and active woman who had prophetic knowledge of Christ's actions and destiny even before his birth, and who *saved* humanity by giving birth to her son.

While most of the characteristics and biographical episodes of the Virgin described by Birgitta belong to the Christian tradition and are identifiable in various sources, the ways in which she represents the Virgin, paying attention to her feelings and emphasizing her incontrovertible authority, make Birgitta's view and relationship with the Virgin outstanding. As Claire Sahlin has pointed out, "in approximately one-third of the revelations, the Virgin occupies an exalted position and acts as Birgitta's instructor, intercessor, comfort, protector and guide", and Birgitta seems to identify herself with Mary on many occasions.¹ Particularly significant in this sense is the crucial vision in which Birgitta describes her "mystical pregnancy", the movements she could feel in her womb, as similar to Christ's movement in Mary's womb, and her association

1 Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: 2001), 79. For a discussion of the importance of Mary for Birgitta and the meaning of her "mystical pregnancy", see *ibid.*, 78–108. For an interesting interpretation of the use of Mary as authorizing figure in Birgitta and other visionary women see also Laura Saetveit Miles, *The Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation* (Cambridge: 2020), 115–74.

of this event with the call she received to become a prophetic channel between God and humans.²

For Birgitta, Mary's wisdom was due to her being pregnant with Christ, and in the moment in which she identifies herself as mystically pregnant, she seems to attribute to herself an "infusion of divine wisdom" and possibly a similar prophetic power to "proclaiming God's will to the world."³ Consequently, as Unn Falkeid has convincingly argued, Birgitta's representation of the Virgin was fundamental in establishing a strong model of female authority, necessary to allow a woman such as Birgitta to challenge the Avignon Papacy.⁴

In the post-Tridentine era, when configured as a model for imitation, the Virgin Mary was often presented by the dominant culture as an example of an obedient, passive, and silent woman, to support the idea that women had to possess these qualities. However, some women writers subverted this idea, using Mary to legitimate their right to speak and write. Therefore, while for Birgitta the Virgin represented a crucial authority to legitimate her prophetic voice and her right to be considered seriously by the Church and powerful men, in post-Tridentine Italy, women who wrote about the Virgin at a time when writing religious literature was a way to make their voices public seem to use the Virgin to legitimate their right to study, write, and teach; express their point of view; and defend the female sex. In light of these aspects, some questions arise. Were Birgitta's writings suitable and available sources for women? Did Birgitta's Mary have any influence on or at least something in common with the versions of Mary represented by women in Counter-Reformation Italy? If so, why?

This chapter aims to consider the possible impact of Birgitta's interpretation of the Virgin Mary on Marian writings by post-Tridentine Italian women, considering in particular Chiara Matraini's *Breve discorso sopra la vita e laude della beatissima Vergine e madre del figliuol di Dio*, printed in Lucca in 1590.⁵ Although, for lack of unquestionable textual evidence, it is unlikely that Matraini had a copy of the *Sermo angelicus* in her hands when she wrote the *Breve discorso*, the two texts have some common elements that suggest that some kind of influence by Birgitta or her legacy may have occurred.

2 Rev. vi:88.

3 Sahlin, *Birgitta*, 97–98.

4 Unn Falkeid, "Constructing Female Authority: Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and the Two Marys," in *Sanctity and Female Authorship: Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (New York: 2020), 54–73.

5 Chiara Matraini, *Breve discorso sopra la vita e laude della Beatiss. Vergine e Madre del Figliuol di Dio* (Lucca: 1590), now published in Chiara Matraini, *Le opere in prosa e altre poesie*, ed. Anna Mario (Perugia: 2017), 543–625.

One of the possible channels which may have favoured Matraini's connections with Birgittine thought is her geographical location. Indeed, in Tuscany the Birgittine cult was very much alive due to the presence of the Paradiso convent in Florence and the circulation of her writings.⁶ Figures such as Domenica Narducci of Paradiso, who had perpetuated Birgitta's message, had a certain resonance.⁷ Later in the 17th century, Leonora Ramirez de Montalvo, author of a life of the Virgin in verse, who founded the order of the Montalve in Florence and dedicated her life to the education of young girls, may have been in part inspired by Birgitta.⁸ Although the centre of the diffusion of Birgittine worship in Tuscany was Florence, it is likely that there was also a Birgittine tradition in Lucca. For instance, a painting by Sano or Ansano di Michele Ciampanti (1474–1532/35), dated around 1495–1500 represents the Virgin and the Child with John the Baptist and Saint Birgitta and two angels.⁹ Moreover, in 1558, a biography of Birgitta and one of her daughter Caterina were translated by Lodovico Domenichi into Italian vernacular as a gift for the contemporary noblewoman Maddalena Acciaiuoli.¹⁰ Although it was never printed

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- 6 On the diffusion of the Birgittine cult in Tuscany, see Michele Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgarizzamenti e riscritture profetiche," *Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia*, LXXIII, 2019: 69–84. An interesting testimony of the circulation of Birgitta's *Revelations* within Florentine convents in the late 16th century is the translation into Italian of six of Birgitta's revelations, "cavate da' libri de le sue [Birgitta's] revelazioni", by Sister Fiammetta Frescobaldi from the convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli. The translations are included in the 1581 manuscript containing some translations from Latin of a number of lives of Franciscan saints, entitled *La vita del serafico San Francesco, Istitutore et Patriarca dell'ordine de' frati minori, vulgare, con tutte le vite degli altri santi canonizzati del prefato ordine*, private collection, 133–36; 355–58.
- 7 See Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta of Sweden in Tuscan Art and Sermons," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and Her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Maria H. Oen (Leiden: 2019), 223–46 (243).
- 8 On Montalvo, see Jennifer Haraguchi, "Vita di Eleonora: A Unique Example of Autobiographical Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 17.2 (2014): 369–97 and the editions of her writings, Ven. Leonora Ramirez de Montalvo, *Gloria alla Santissima Trinità*, ed. Angelo Pellegrini and Suore Montalve, 3 vols (Florence: 2016–2019). In *Montalvo's Life of the Virgin*, according to Pellegrini, there are some elements which could come from Birgitta.
- 9 "La Vierge et l'Enfant en trone entre saint Jean l'Évangéliste et sainte Brigitte di Suède avec deux anges." The painting belongs to the Musée du Louvre, but it was lent to the Musée du Petit Palais at Avignon. I would like to thank Elissa Weaver for informing me about this painting.
- 10 See Lodovico Domenichi, *Vite di santa Brigida e di santa Caterina di Svezia*, ed. Enrico Garavelli (Manziana: 2016). Interestingly, in the 14th century, the Acciaiuoli family had a significant role in spreading the cult of Birgitta, as Lapa Acciaiuoli was a very good friend of hers, and it is possible that for this reason, Maddalena Acciaiuoli had asked Domenichi

and did not have any known circulation, Domenichi's translation of Birgitta's life addressed to Acciaiuoli confirms that women in Tuscany were interested in the figure of Birgitta during the 16th century. Moreover, as we will see, Chiara Matraini was in contact with Domenichi in the same period, and could have been aware of his translation.

Matraini's "encounter" with Birgitta or her cult could also have happened in Genoa, where Matraini spent some years in the early 1560s. Virtually nothing is known about this period of her life, and it is therefore worth considering whether she had any contact with the Birgittine nuns at the convent of *Scala Coeli* during her time in Genoa. The convent of *Scala Coeli*, the fourth Birgittine convent established in Europe, was founded by the Birgittine nuns in 1403, in the area of Genoa that today is called, significantly, *Santa Brigida*, and was suppressed and confiscated at the end of the 18th century for Napoleonic rules, as were many other religious institutions.¹¹ When Matraini was in Genoa, the monastery still had its original double-sex structure as prescribed by the Birgittine rule. The double-sex monastery was abolished and transformed into a female-only one in 1605 by the local religious authorities.¹² If Matraini had some contact with the convent, and had the chance to hear the *Sermo angelicus* directly from the nuns or even had the opportunity to read it, this could have in some way inspired her to write her *Breve discorso*, which she actually published several years later. Further research will be conducted in this direction, but it is certainly a suggestive hypothesis that could explain some similarities between the two texts.

In any case, whether or not Matraini read or used Birgitta's writings for her *Breve discorso*, it is likely that, consciously or unconsciously, she was influenced by some aspects of Birgittine worship, which possibly had become normalized for women writers during the Counter Reformation. A comparison of the two writings and the analysis of the possible channels of transmission of

to make a translation of Birgitta's life. For the connection between the family and Birgitta, see Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta of Sweden," 225–26.

11 On the history of the monastery, see Hans Cnatingius, *Studies in the Order of St. Bridget of Sweden. 1: The crisis in 1420s* (Cambridge: 1963) and <https://wallinapp.com/walloutmagazine/pilloledarte-santa-brigida-il-recupero-della-storia-e-il-fascino-attuale/>, last visited on 21/10/2021.

12 According to the Birgittine rule, Birgittine convents, ruled by an Abbess, were inhabited by nuns and friars in two separate cloisters. At the beginning of the 17th century, probably for the increasing restrictions regarding convents after the Council of Trent, the religious authorities decided to remove the friars of the order of Savior from the convent of *Scala Coeli*. See Francesco Maria Accinelli, *Liguria Sacra* cited in <https://wallinapp.com/walloutmagazine/pilloledarte-santa-brigida-il-recupero-della-storia-e-il-fascino-attuale/>, last visited on 21/10/2021.

Birgitta's thought to Matraini can therefore offer interesting research insights into how and why some aspects of Birgitta's Mariology could have influenced post-Tridentine Italian women, despite the cultural and historical differences.

The Virgin Mary in Counter-Reformation Italy

The Virgin Mary has always had a crucial role for Christianity as well as being a very important female symbol, object of devotion, and model for imitation in Catholic culture. Mary is the crucial centre of all the contradictions of the construction of the idea of womanhood in human history. In 1976, Marina Warner, in her pivotal study on the history of the myth and cult of the Virgin in Western culture, pioneeringly recognized that the figure of Mary, despite her unique powerful role within the Catholic Church, had been over the centuries exploited to promote a perfect, submissive, chaste, and silent model of womanhood.¹³ This is certainly true, if we consider the cultural results of the position and definition of women in society over time. However, Warner does not consider women's attempts, taking place in different historical moments and connected with religious changes and women's role in society, to recognize and present the Virgin Mary as an empowering role model.

Miri Rubin's fascinating *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* offered an overview of the meaning of the figure of Mary in Western culture and society, considering, if briefly, her importance for women and men.¹⁴ According to Rubin, only men used Mary as a powerful model of wisdom and knowledge (for men) and inspiring object of literary works, while for women she was merely a model of piety for virgins and mothers and an object of devotion.¹⁵ However, Birgitta of Sweden and her legacy of visionary women, as well as a number of early-modern Italian women writers, contradict this idea, proposing a different way to imitate Mary, transforming her obedient relationship with God into a powerful tool. They use Mary's knowledge, wisdom, and ability to speak and teach, traditionally denied to women, to legitimate their voice and their own potential for publicly expressing their perspective and to challenge male power.

When Birgitta of Sweden became a public figure as God's spokesperson with her *Revelations*, the Virgin was represented in art and literature as a very

13 Marina Warner, *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: 1976).

14 Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: 2009).

15 *Ibid.*, 256–82.

powerful figure, different from any other woman, but not imitable by women for this power.¹⁶ Birgitta reinterpreted Mary's power and found her way – not obvious for a woman – into the public sphere, despite the difficulties and the compromises that women had to make in order to be recognized and heard by a skeptical male-dominated culture and Church. For Birgitta, Marian piety was therefore crucial to legitimate her voice and her right to preach in the very critical period of the Avignon Papacy. The same authority of the Virgin was used as an authorizing figure by visionary women and reformers, such as Domenica da Paradiso (as Clara Stella in this volume points out), but also by laywomen such as Vittoria Colonna, involved in the reform movement in the first half of the 16th century.¹⁷ Moreover, Birgitta's description of Mary in her *Revelations* transformed the iconography of the Virgin, probably increasing the idea that she could be used by women as an empowering model.¹⁸

After the Protestant Reformation, the Virgin became a controversial figure, as well as the centre of a theological debate concerning her role in human redemption and her human or divine nature. In order to react to the reformed image of Mary, in fact crucial, but totally human, the Catholic Church underlined Mary's divine nature, emphasizing the cult of Mary within Christianity. After the Council of Trent, the need to reaffirm her role in Catholic worship became urgent; a large and varied body of Marian writings was produced in Italy by various authors, men and women, clergy and lay, in Latin and in the vernacular, from both theological and devotional perspectives and targets. Between 1570 and 1630, numerous vernacular lives of the Virgin, mostly addressed to a general public, were printed in different parts of Italy, as well as other kinds of newly written or reprinted devotional and meditative Marian writings, meditations, books for the Rosary both in prose and in verse.¹⁹ In

16 A good description of the powerful representation of Mary in the Middle Ages is described in Klaus Schreiner, *Vergine, madre, regina. I volti di Maria nell'universo cristiano* (Rome: 1995) (original German: *Maria. Jungfrau, Mutter, Herrscherin*, 1994).

17 See Unn Falkeid, "Magistra apostolorum: The Virgin Mary in Birgitta of Sweden and Vittoria Colonna," in *Vittoria Colonna: Poetry, Religion, Art, Impact*, ed. Virginia Cox and Shannon McHugh (Amsterdam: 2021), 75–94.

18 On the influence of Birgitta's *Revelations* on Marian iconography see Maria H. Oen, "The Iconography of *Liber celestis revelacionum*," in *A Companion to Birgitta*, 186–222 and Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta".

19 For an idea of the diffusion of this genre, see the bibliographical repertory in *Donna, disciplina e creanza cristiana dal xv al xvii secolo. Studi e testi a stampa*, ed. Gabriella Zari (Rome: 1996), 407–705. For an overview, see Maria Pia Paoli, "Nell'Italia delle 'Vergini belle': A proposito di Chiara Matraini e di pietà Mariana nella Lucca di fine Cinquecento," in *Religione, cultura e politica nell'Europa dell'età moderna: Studi offerti a Mario Rosa dagli*

these copious texts, the figure of the Virgin was reshaped and transformed into something different from the late-medieval one.

The gap between the divine and powerful Mary and the human Mary became larger. In this period, when Mary is offered as an exemplar for women, in most cases, especially by male authors, Mary is described as a passive, silent, and obedient woman, a perfect model for lay and religious women.²⁰ In such works, her power concerns only her divine position and has nothing to do with powerful women. Women can be devout to Mary, can imitate some of her characteristics and virtues, but not those who make her a powerful, authoritative, and learned woman. An example for all in this regard is the book of meditations on the life of the Virgin by the Jesuit Luca Pinelli (1542–1607), printed for the first time in 1593.²¹

Pinelli's book was clearly addressed to a large audience of Christians, especially pious women, and was probably quite successful considering that it was reprinted more than once in the subsequent years.²² According to Pinelli, Mary was an ideal model for women in all their possible – acceptable – statuses. Indeed, Pinelli argued, between the age of three and thirteen years, when she lived in the temple, Mary was a perfect example for virgins and nuns; later, until the age of forty-five, she was a model for mothers and married women, obedient to her husband and taking care of the house. Finally, in the last part of her earthy life, she had become an example for widows, because “as Saint Bridget states”, she lived secluded and completely dedicated to God.²³

amici, ed. Carlo Ossola, Marcello Verga, and Maria Antonietta Visceglia (Florence: 2003), 521–45.

20 Eleonora Carinci, “Lives of the Virgin Mary by Women in Post-Tridentine Italy” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2009). The representations of the Virgin made in works by Vittoria Colonna, Chiara Matraini, Maddalena Campiglia, Lucrezia Marinella, and Arcangela Tarabotti seem to reflect this tendency.

21 Luca Pinelli, *Libretto d'imagini e brevi meditationi sopra la vita della Sacratissima Vergine Maria Madre di Dio. Con la historia della sua vita, cavata fedelmente da gli antichi e Santi Padri* (Naples: 1593).

22 The booklet was reprinted in Naples in 1594, and then, with the title *Meditationi devotissime sopra la vita della Santissima Vergine Maria*, in Milan in 1599, in Brescia in 1600, and in Venice in 1611.

23 “Stette Maria da i tre anni fino ai quattordici con le Vergini nel Tempio di Gierusalem, dove con l'abhorrire le vanità del mondo, con il suo pronto obedire alli Superiori di quel luogo, con la diligentia dell'orationi, e divotioni, con la sua modestia, & humiltà insegnò, come si debbono portare tanto le Vergini, come le Religiose, ciascuna nel suo stato. Dopo fino alli quarantacinque anni in circa fu Maestra delle maritate, e madri di famiglia, che se bene ella era Regina degli Angeli e Madre di Dio, piena d'ogni gratia e sapienza, nondimeno obediva, honorava, e riveriva il suo sposo Gioseppo, col quale conservò sempre la pace, & unione. Nella cura poi della casa, & in allevare Christo suo Figliuolo, era diligentissima,

Pinelli mentions Birgitta to support the idea that widows should have followed Mary's perfect widowhood. When narrating Mary's life, he documents the story, quoting various Church Fathers and referencing his sources rigorously. Within them, he also includes Birgitta, choosing *ad hoc* passages from her *Revelations* to describe episodes of Mary's life and some of her characteristics. Interestingly, when Pinelli discusses Mary's life after the Resurrection, he mentions that Mary confirmed several Christians and converted many Jews and Gentiles to Christianity, in fact contradicting himself about the lack of activity in the final years of Mary's life.²⁴ Pinelli's work is an important testimony of the fact that Birgitta was well known in Italy, that her writings circulated in the late 16th century, and were treated as authoritative for works about the Virgin Mary likely read by women, even though these texts were meant to represent a quite passive image of Mary.

In such a context, Italian women who wanted to write about the Virgin were probably in search of alternative authorities to build up a more active and powerful Mary, more suitable for them as an authoritative figure and more similar to the one represented by Birgitta. Indeed, by the end of the century, many women had entered the literary system and were looking for strong female models to legitimate themselves in a patriarchal culture. Like Birgitta, these women wanted to be recognized as authoritative voices in a world in which women were increasingly becoming too visible in the public space, and hence considered dangerous, criticized, and gradually silenced.²⁵ It is therefore worthwhile to wonder if Birgitta had a role in the construction of Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Marys (and women), especially after the Council of Trent, when the attention paid to the figure of Mary and her life had such a revival in Italy.

Between the 16th and 17th centuries, the very popular lives of the Virgin were mainly based on medieval sources such as Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* or those works dependent on it, and the works of the Church Fathers.

impercioche si bene distribuiva il tempo, che i servitij della casa non impedivano le sue orationi, ne queste impedivano i negotij di casa che a lei appartenevano. Nel resto della Vita, che secondo la comune opinione fu sino alli sessantatre anni, fu essemplio, e Maestra alle Vedove, e Povere, poiché nello stato vedovile, dice Santa Brigida, che Maria come morta al mondo visse tutta a Dio, e data alle contemplationi celesti, fece vita più divina, che humana; il suo vitto era parco, e di persone povere." (Pinelli, *Libretto d'imagini*, "Letter to the reader", no pagination).

24 Ibid., 41: "Dice S. Brigida che Maria non solo confermò questi novelli cristiani, ma che convertì innumerabili Giudei e Gentili alla fede".

25 For a pivotal overview and analysis of the evolution of the activity and perception of women's writing in early-modern Italy, see Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy: 1400–1650* (Baltimore, MD: 2008).

Some authors, including Bartolomeo Meduna (second half of 16th and early 17th century), in part Maddalena Campiglia (1553–1595), and Lucrezia Marinella (1579–1653), used as a main source for their Marian writings the controversial *Vita di Maria Vergine* by Pietro Aretino, first printed in 1539.²⁶ However, it is likely that Birgitta was also used, as Pinelli's work demonstrates.²⁷

Recent studies have revealed how the cult and the writings of Birgitta – both authentic and spurious, as Brian Richardson and Marco Faini show in this volume – were diffused in Italy and Europe from the late Middle Ages.²⁸ The database produced within the research project, *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden*, shows that a large number of manuscripts of Birgitta's writings were circulated in Italy, and that the complete *Revelations*, including the *Sermo angelicus*, were printed in Italy in Latin in 1556, 1557, and 1606. The *Sermo angelicus* also had an independent circulation, at least within Birgittine monasteries, and the figure of the saint had great notoriety, especially in Tuscany, where the worship of Birgitta was very diffused, her writings were circulated and she was the object of artistic representations.

In 1590, Chiara Matraini published in Lucca her *Breve discorso sopra la vita et laude della beatissima Vergine Maria*, which will be compared in this chapter with Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus*. Although the two writings are in fact very different in terms of period, intentions, style, and to some extent, content, the *Breve discorso* has some structural and contextual characteristics which recall Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus* and which are yet uncharted.

Chiara Matraini

Chiara Matraini belonged to a family of wealthy weavers in Lucca who were involved in the 1531 *Rivolta degli straccioni*, a rebellion of rich families without

26 See Eleonora Carinci, "The Imitation of Pietro Aretino's *Vita di Maria Vergine* and *Umanità di Cristo* in Italy after the Council of Trent," in *A Companion to Pietro Aretino*, ed. Marco Faini and Paola Ugolini (Leiden: 2021), 409–32.

27 See, for instance, Domenico Pezzini, "Una *Vita beatae Mariae* tratta dalle *Revelaciones* di Santa Brigida di Svezia," *Hagiografica*, 16, 2009: 167–230.

28 See, for instance, *Santa Brigida, Napoli, l'Italia. Atti del convegno Italo-svedese Santa Maria Capua Vetere 10–11 maggio 2006*, ed. Olle Ferm, Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese, and Marcello Rotili (Naples: 2009). *Sanctity and Female Authorship*, ed. Oen and Falkeid; Domenico Pezzini, "The Italian Reception of Birgittine Writings," in *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into the Medieval Vernaculars*, ed. Veronica O'Mara and Bridget Morris (Turnhout: 2000), 186–212. For further (and additional) references, see *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, and its bibliography.

noble origins, who tried, unsuccessfully, to gain access to public office.²⁹ She married Vincenzo Cantarini in 1530 and her son Federigo was born in 1533. In 1542, at the age of twenty-seven, she was already a widow. After the great success of Vittoria Colonna's *Rime*, in the 1550s she emerged as a writer of lyric poetry. Her *Rime e prose* appeared for the first time as a book in Lucca in 1555 and unabridged in an anthology compiled by Lodovico Dolce the following year.³⁰ In 1556, she also published the translation of Isocrates' oration, *To Demonicus*, thanks to Lodovico Domenichi, who promoted her work with the printer Torrentino.³¹

Between 1560 and 1576, information on Matraini's life is vague. She certainly left Lucca for a certain amount of time, possibly for moral, religious, or economic reasons, and in the 1560s, she spent time in Genoa, as attested by a number of letters. Matraini was again in Lucca in 1576, when an altar was erected in the church of Santa Maria Forisportam, with a painting representing herself as the Sybil who predicted the arrival of Christ to Augustus.³² In the last years of her life, between 1581 and 1602, she published four religious prose writings, in part conceived and drafted earlier, the *Meditazioni spirituali* (1581), the *Considerazione sopra i sette salmi della penitenza di David* (1586), the *Breve discorso*, and the *Dialoghi spirituali* (1602), as well as two new editions of her *Rime*.

On the one hand, these works reflect the trend of promoting devotional literature, especially addressed to women, which was typical of the post-Tridentine period. On the other, they seem to show new attention being paid by Matraini to spiritual and theological questions, which included the

29 On Chiara Matraini's life and works, see Giovanna Rabitti, "Linee per il ritratto di Chiara Matraini," *Studi e Problemi di critica testuale*, 22, 1981: 141–65; Daniela Marcheschi, *Chiara Matraini. Poetessa lucchese e la letteratura delle donne nei nuovi fermenti letterari del '500* (Lucca: 2008); and Anna Mario's introductions to the volume and Matraini's works in Matraini, *Le opere in prosa e altre poesie*.

30 Lodovico Dolce, *Rime di diversi signori napoletani e d'altri* (Venice: 1556).

31 See Anna Mario, "L'Orazione d'Isocrate. Introduzione," in Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 57–69; Eleonora Carinci, "Chiara Matraini traduttrice: L'Orazione d'Isocrate a Demonicus e altri scritti," in *Women and Translation in the Italian Tradition*, ed. Helena Sanson (Paris: 2022), 105–28.

32 The painting is currently on display at the Museum of Villa Guinigi in Lucca, entitled "La Sibilla Cumana predice a Cesare Augusto la venuta del Salvatore". Despite the title, the Sybil who traditionally predicted the arrival of Christ to Augustus was in fact the Tiburtine Sybil. The portrait was finished by Francesco Cellini around 1576, but it had probably been originally commissioned for, and started by, Alessandro Ardeni several years earlier, when the painter was active in Lucca. See Irma B. Jaffe, "Chiara Matraini (1515–1604). The Poet as Sybil," in *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of the Italian Renaissance Women Poets* (New York: 2002), 105–37.

possibility for women of teaching and which could have some Birgittine echo. The abovementioned self-identification of Matraini with the Sybil seems to create a connection between Matraini's renewed religiosity and the spirituality of some visionary women, like Birgitta, despite the fact that Matraini was not a visionary woman and had no prophetic aspirations. However, Birgitta was often associated with the image of the Sybil, and it is not unlikely that Matraini knew this, considering that she was from Tuscany, where the devotion to Birgitta was strong, and had direct experience of the Italian political, cultural, and religious situation of the first half of the 16th century.³³ Therefore, her choosing to be represented in the features of the Sybil, is an indication that Matraini recognized in the Sybil a symbol of the female power of speech, a power also attributed to Birgitta.

During her long life, Matraini experienced the enormous and crucial cultural, political, and religious changes which took place in Italy during the 16th century. It is likely that she had some contacts within reform circles, like nearly every educated person during that time, especially in Lucca, which was called "la città infetta" after the great number of heretics who were active there in the first half of the century.³⁴ She was linked culturally to many well-known *literati* of her time, including Ludovico Dolce, Ludovico Domenichi, and Benedetto Varchi, all involved in the promotion of women writers. We do not know anything about the circumstances of her education, but certainly she had a good knowledge of Latin, as she translated *To Demonicus*, read Boethius in Latin, and translated the *Penitential Psalms* into Italian, and was literarily active in the 1550s, when the first printed editions of Birgitta's *Revelations* appeared in Italy.

Matraini's work and life well represent the parabola of the phenomenon of women writers who were active in the 16th century in Italy described and analysed by Virginia Cox. The great success and promotion of lyric poetry by women in the 1540s and 1550s was followed by a phase of semi-silence in the 1560s and 1570s. Then, a period of great creativity and production of women's

33 For Birgitta's identification as a Christian Sybil, see for instance Alfonso de Jaén's prologue to Book VIII of the *Revelations*, where Birgitta's visions are connected to the spirit of prophecy of Old Testament prophetesses and of the Tiburtine and Erythrean Sybils. For the impact of Birgitta's political charisma and the diffusion of her image as prophetess during the Wars of Italy, see Jessica Goethals' and Anna Wainwright's chapter in this volume.

34 See Marcheschi, *Chiara Matraini*; Eleonora Carinci, "L'inquieta lucchese": tracce di evangelismo nelle opere religiose di Chiara Matraini," *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 23.1 (2017), 145–60.

writings took place between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, favoured by the Counter Reformation.³⁵

If we consider the figure of Matraini, she ostensibly did not have very much in common with Birgitta. While she was a widow who never remarried, at least for the first part of her life, she had a very different profile compared to other well-known widows, such as Birgitta, Vittoria Colonna, and Francesca Turina Bufalina, known for their piety and devotion. In an anonymous life of Gherardo Sergiusti, father-in-law of Matraini's lover Bartolomeo Graziani, Matraini is defined as a "luxurious woman from Matraini, who was a poet" ("disonesta donna de' Matraini che faceva la poetessa") or "wicked widow" ("scelerata vedova").³⁶

This writing certainly represents the point of view of someone who meant to criticize the affair between Graziani and Matraini, but it is also a clear sign that Matraini had a controversial reputation in Lucca and was not famous for being a pious and devout widow. It is, however, likely she did not deserve this reputation, as since her first poetic production, her consideration of figures such as Vittoria Colonna was evident.³⁷ Moreover, despite the attempts of her family to gain access to political privileges reserved for aristocracy, Matraini was not a noblewoman. She was conscious of it, and in a letter to an unidentified M.L., perhaps, as Giovanna Rabitti suggested, Messer Lodovico [Domenichi] or Messer [Ortensio] Lando, published in the 1555 edition of her *Rime et Prose*, she defends herself as a woman without noble origins, but still virtuous and from a good family who wanted to dedicate herself to literature and philosophy.³⁸

Finally, unlike Birgitta and Vittoria Colonna, Matraini was not actively involved in contemporary political and religious questions. However, she had in common with them the determination to express her voice and to follow her aspirations, and the need to be recognized as an authoritative voice. Like them, she was a laywoman who married and was widowed before developing an interest in writing, and who decided to write about the Virgin Mary, recognizing in her an authoritative role model. In the last part of her life, she clearly tried to promote a new image of herself, as a pious widow, author of religious literature, similar to her predecessors. She promoted the possibility of women teaching and discussing religious topics. Her writings, indeed, include

35 Virginia Cox, *The Prodigious Muse: Women's Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Baltimore: 2011).

36 See the Appendix in Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 791–807 *passim*.

37 See Anna Wainwright, "Outdoing Colonna: Widowhood Poetry in the Late Cinquecento," in *Vittoria Colonna*, ed. Cox and McHugh, 95–114.

38 Cited in Rabitti, *Linee per il ritratto*, 142.

not only devotional books for pious women but also literary works in which she expresses her view on a number of theological and philosophical issues.

Breve discorso sopra la vita e laude della beatissima Vergine

Although the *Breve discorso* can certainly be considered within the boundaries of the genre of the Life of the Virgin, it includes some anomalies in relation to other contemporary similar works which require attention.

The *Breve discorso*, dedicated to Matraini's cousin Iuditta Matraini, abbess in the Cistercian convent of San Bernardo in Pisa, begins with a *Proemio*, followed by a poem that invites women to imitate Mary, and a prayer to the Virgin. The work is divided into potentially independent narrative sections, separated by poems, and includes prayers in prose or verse. Such poems are based on the most notable episodes of Mary's and Christ's lives and are related to the following prose sections of the text. This can be compared to the structure of medieval *prosimetra*, texts in which prose alternates with poetry, such as Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, which was in fact an important model for Matraini's *Meditazioni spirituali* and Dante's *Vita Nova*.

The widespread insertion of spiritual poetry is, however, unusual in the context of post-Tridentine Lives of the Virgin. The narrative sections tell the story of Mary's life from her birth to her Assumption into Heaven, but more than a narration, Matraini offers an interpretation of these events and Mary's reactions.³⁹ Matraini focuses on some of Mary's characteristics more than others, paying particular attention to Mary's feelings and emphasizing her central role in Christianity and unique relationship with God. All the attention is concentrated on the figure of the Virgin, as a unique, exceptional, blessed, and elect woman, who, humbly, brought about the salvation of humanity by giving birth to Jesus Christ. Perhaps these peculiarities can explain the inclusion of fourteen annotations by Giuseppe Mozzagrugno, canonico regolare in the Church of S. Salvatore in Naples, who clarifies documents and sometimes contradicts unclear or controversial statements, in order, perhaps, to guarantee the orthodoxy of the text.⁴⁰

Unlike other women authors of her time, in her published works, Matraini did not write specifically and explicitly about the condition of women. However, it is evident that she had clearly in mind what it meant to be a woman

39 Erminia Ardissino, *Donne interpreti della Bibbia nell'Italia della prima età moderna. Comunità ermeneutiche e riscritture* (Turnhout: 2020), 310.

40 For a description of Mozzagrugno's annotations, see Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 535–42.

and a writer at that time, and this emerges in all of her writings, including the *Breve discorso*. In a letter to Cesare Coccopani, frequently cited in studies on Matraini, she complains about the lack of recognition for women's literary ability, in a similar manner to other contemporary women writers.⁴¹ Moreover, alongside her desire to be an independent woman, Matraini was conscious of her literary ability, as is demonstrated by her frequent allusion in her poems to the accretion of honour and fame, and by her letters, in which she declares her total devotion to studying and writing. Thus, it is unsurprising that her Virgin Mary looks different to the one proposed as the model of women's submission to men described by some male authors.

Like other contemporary authors of Lives of the Virgin, Matraini proposes the Virgin as a role model, but the idea of Mary as a model for imitation by all women is not stressed, at least as a model for everyday life. Rather Mary is held up as a model for women on account of their relationship with God, and she is to be imitated for her excellence in all the cardinal and theological virtues, in particular for her faith and humble acceptance of God's decisions.

A remarkable aspect of Matraini's presentation of her subject is that the most important virtue possessed by Mary is humility. This is an entirely traditional idea, but within the economy of the *Breve discorso*, the stress on this characteristic becomes particularly meaningful. Mary's humility as praised in the *Breve discorso* is not the same humility that a woman was supposed to possess in order to demonstrate honesty and decorum, as was generally proposed in other Lives of the Virgin of the period, in accordance with contemporary conduct literature for women, and it is uncontaminated by the idea of submission of women to men. Rather, it is the humility that each Christian must have in his or her relationship with God, a quality that God loves most. As Eleonora Cappuccilli superbly demonstrates in this volume, Mary's humility and obedience were crucial to Birgitta and other women who came after her. As mentioned above, her obedience to Christ and the Virgin in many cases was used by Birgitta as a powerful tool to justify her "mission" before powerful people. Matraini does something similar. In her sonnet, "all'obedientissima Vergine", for instance, which refers to the episode of the purification of the Virgin, Mary is "[...] obediente/al suo gran padre, e figlio onnipotente";⁴² there

41 'Non è come alcuni hanno detto o dicono [...] che la Donna sia di cotanta imperfezione che non sia capace di ciascuna scienza e arte [...] e quello che in tali esercizi non fanno è solo perché non s'è dato loro occasione essendo sempre rinchiuse e occupate in bassi esercizi, osando gli uomini dirci che quella Donna solamente merita d'esser lodata, i cui fatti e le cui lodi non escono dalle mura della sua casa' (cited in Rabitti, "Linee per il ritratto", 152).

42 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 579.

is no mention of the need for obedience of a woman to her husband, often mentioned by authors of other Lives of the Virgin. Mary must be obedient and accountable only to her divine Father and Son. Like Birgitta, Matraini stresses the obedience of the Virgin as an example of good spiritual practice but not as a desirable domestic arrangement.

What is particularly interesting and even surprising about Matraini's work is the total absence of the very traditional quality of Mary's silence: in the *Breve discorso*, Mary speaks. In several passages, Matraini stresses her exceptional ability in the deployment of her intelligence and knowledge, and she refers to her as *sapientissima* several times. Those who really desire to reach divine knowledge are invited to follow Mary, who participates in, and is testament to, her son's knowledge.⁴³ This "de-silencing" of Mary is particularly meaningful, both because it illustrates the careful attention given by these women writers to the role of women in society, and because it reflects a desire to make Mary a powerful and alternative role model for women. It becomes even more important in the study of Birgitta's influence on Italian women, if one considers that Birgitta received her prophetic power directly from Mary, who gave her authorization for her "spiritual motherhood", enabling her "to write, instruct and speak on behalf of God".⁴⁴ She defines Mary as *Magistra apostolorum* and highlights in several passages her knowledge and speaking ability.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Vittoria Colonna, in her letters to her cousin, had proposed a Mary who used language to teach other women.⁴⁶ Birgitta and Colonna had offered new interpretations of the Virgin in moments when political and religious changes in Italy were considered possible. Matraini proposes a model which seems to belong to previous generations, at a time when the failure of such hopes for reform was clear, and the success of women writers was beginning to decline.

The idea of a woman who is able to teach matters of faith is also present in other religious works by Matraini. In her *Dialoghi spirituali*, for instance, she represents Teofila teaching Filocrito how to be a good Christian, emphasizing

43 In the poem included in the *Breve discorso*, "Ai molto desiderosi della divina sapienza," Matraini writes: "Chi dal gran maestro eterno / ch'oggi picciol fanciullo a noi si mostra / vuol aver alta e vera intelligenza, / col chiaro lume interno / seguiti della nostra / scorta i passi Maria Vergine immensa / ch'il troverà nel tempio, in fra' dottori / a disputare e vincere i maggiori / d'etade, e d'ogni umana esperienza," Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 585.

44 See Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden*, 107.

45 SA, XIX: 12: "magistra apostolorum, confortatrix martyrum, doctrix confessorum, clarissimum speculum virginum, consolatrix viduarum, in coniugio viuencium saluberrima monitrix atque omnium in fide catholica perfectissima roboratrix".

46 See Abigail Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation* (Aldershot: 2008), 46–53.

the importance of the study of philosophy and theology in order to reach a perfect love of God. Moreover, the structure of the *Meditazioni* is dialogic and didactic: Matraini's intellectual soul teaches her sensitive soul to follow the inner part of herself, which is able to look towards the light of Christ and reject the material world. In the *Considerazioni*, Matraini interprets her biblical text in order to render it understandable and accessible to a wide readership. The fact that Matraini, a woman, takes on the role of teacher is particularly relevant, considering that Saint Paul (and the Catholic Church) had denied women the opportunity to teach.⁴⁷

Concerning Mary's role as a teacher, in the *Breve discorso* Matraini points out that on the day of Pentecost, when all the Apostles and Mary were secluded in the cenacle, Mary shared with the Apostles the Holy Spirit, which enabled them to speak different languages and teach the Christian message. The presence of the Virgin and other women in the cenacle is in the Acts of the Apostles, but subsequently women are mentioned no more.⁴⁸ Matraini, on the contrary, emphasizes Mary's presence throughout, as well as the fact that she received the Holy Spirit twice:

Through His love, she was worthy that He [God] not only concealed and impregnated her (in taking flesh from her) with the holy and divine Spirit, but also that (after His marvelous Ascension, on the day of Pentecost) she received the Holy Spirit, as well as all the other marvelous comforts she had obtained from Heaven, together with the other Apostles.⁴⁹

Matraini does not in fact explicitly discuss the question of Mary's teaching, but by remarking on the fact that she shared the Holy Spirit with the Apostles, she seems to allude to it.

Although proposed as a model for imitation, Matraini's Virgin Mary is a different kind of role model: the all-powerful, "imperatrice dell'universo",

47 See 1 Timothy 2:11.

48 See Acts 1:14. When the Holy Spirit arrives, there is no mention of women (Acts 2:1–2). The Camaldolite Silvano Razzi, in his *Vita di Maria Vergine* (Venice: 1590), 133–34, after mentioning the presence of women when the Holy Spirit came, justifies the disappearance of women from the book's narrative, stating that it was no longer necessary to mention them because they were not supposed to preach alongside the Apostles. However, he accepts the possibility of their teaching privately.

49 "Per il cui amore ella fu degna, ch'egli [Dio] non solo l'adombrasse, e riempisse (nel prender di lei carne) del santo e divino spirito, ma anco (di poi la sua mirabile ascensione nel giorno della Pentecoste) ricevesse (oltre all'altre meravigliose consolazioni che avea ricevute dal cielo) lo Spirito Santo, insieme con gl'altri Apostoli, per il qual venne a sentire inestimabile contento, sopra di ciascun'altro" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 595).

superior to all human beings, almost participating directly in giving grace and in redeeming humanity, as mother of Jesus Christ. This is a traditional interpretation, but it assumes a new meaning when a woman writer proposes Mary in this powerful role as a model for other women. Matraini, like Birgitta, seems to create a sort of identification of this incredibly powerful Mary with herself, an identification which authorizes her words and aims to make them influential. Even as she professes humility, she asserts her own status as a writer: she aspires to poetic fame and puts herself forward as a teacher and interpreter of the Holy Scriptures. This identification emerges in particular in her poems. For example, in the paratext of the *Breve discorso*, when replying to an encomiastic sonnet by Mozzagrugno, she identifies herself with the moon (“Cinthia”) and thanks Mozzagrugno for his praise and for having made possible the “alta impresa e gloriosa” (high and glorious venture) of writing the life of the Virgin.⁵⁰

The same identification of the author with Cinthia appears in a sonnet *A' lettori* introducing the *Dialoghi spirituali*, which Matraini explains in the following note, *A' benigni lettori curiosi*, comparing herself to the moon when it comes out from the clouds and receives again the light of the sun, just as she came back to life after an illness.⁵¹ As Rabitti has pointed out in her reading of Matraini's *Rime*, Matraini constantly plays with the imagery of light and of the sun and the moon.⁵²

Her name, “Chiara”, was particularly well-suited to this kind of wordplay. In Petrarchan poetry by women, the sun commonly represents the beloved or Jesus Christ/God.⁵³ In some cases, the author identified herself with the moon, taking advantage of the respective male and female symbolism of the two celestial bodies. Vittoria Colonna identified the Virgin Mary with the moon, and Matraini also identified her with metaphors of light. This creates a direct

50 “Come dal sommo Sol, dallo splendore / di Dio, provvede nella eterna mente / di voi, chiaro del ciel spirito ardente, / quel lume ond'arde del suo sant'amore; / così, come dal Sol nasce l'albore / di Cinthia, il nome mio chiaro, e lucente / è da voi fatto, ond'all'umana gente / Chiar'hoggi andrà, dalla sua notte fuore. / E da noi sol, con più splendida luce / del vostr'alto saper mostrata chiara / l'istoria sia della divina sposa. / Per voi'l popol di Dio, sacrato duce / ode oggi il suon d'eccelsa tromba e rara / che desta ad alta impresa e gloriosa” (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 546).

51 See Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 665.

52 For Matraini's metaphors of light, see Giovanna Rabitti, “La metafora e l'esistenza nella poesia di Chiara Matraini”, *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, 27 (1983), 122–145.

53 Vittoria Colonna first created a lexicon for a new female poetic voice by adapting Petrarchan language. For bibliographical references, see *L'una et l'altra chiave. Figure e momenti del petrarchismo femminile europeo*, ed. Tatiana Crivelli (Rome: Salerno, 2005). On Colonna's poetry, see Maria Serena Sapegno, “La costruzione di un Io lirico al femminile nella poesia di Vittoria Colonna,” *Versants*, 46 (2003): 15–48.

identification of the author with the Virgin. In Matraini's poetry, Mary is often represented as a star, from the tradition of Mary as *stella maris*, guide of sinners, but also as the sun, as object of poetry. In the prose, moreover, when Matraini describes the amazement of the angels at seeing the Virgin's Assumption, and "quanto lume e splendore ella spargeva" (how much light and splendour she spread), Matraini states "assomigliandola alcuni per la luce sua all'Aurora, alla Luna, & al Sole" (some authors used to assimilate her to the dawn, the moon, and the sun). Thus, Matraini, when identifying herself as the moon, and more generally associating herself with the light, creates a connection between herself and the Virgin: she receives the light from the Virgin in order to obtain salvation, but also so as to write poetry.

In another poem, "Prego alla gloriosa Vergine", Matraini asks the Virgin to give her "dolce suono e scelte voci e chiare parole" (sweet sound and elected voices and clear words) to enable her voice to praise her by revealing Mary's "glorie immense and sempiterni honori" (immense glories and eternal honours), which the author no doubt also hoped to obtain herself through writing about such a subject.⁵⁴

The connection with the Virgin appears again in "Prego allo Spirito Santo", where the Holy Spirit who had touched Mary will also touch Matraini herself:

Spirto ch'ovunque vuoi, sempremai spiri,
 deh, spira un dolce fuoco
 Nel vivo nido della mia Fenice,
 tal ch'ogni suo mortale a poco a poco
 ardendo mora, e di sua morte elice
 nov'angel che, volando, al Ciel aspiri.
 Ecco ch'apprendo l'ale
 Cerca, nel fin di sé, farsi immortale.⁵⁵

O Holy Spirit, you who go everywhere, do you never breathe? Please breathe a sweet flame into the living nest of my phoenix [soul], so that little by little every mortal part of it may die by burning, and from its death could send forth a bird that, flying in the sky, aims towards Heaven. Behold, opening its wings, it seeks in its breast to make itself immortal.

There appears to be an identification here between the grace of God, represented by the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the possibility of writing poetry.

54 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 556–57.

55 *Ibid.*, 593.

The image of the phoenix, as a mythological figure of immortality, is traditionally connected both with poetic glory and with the Resurrection, appearing frequently in Petrarchan poetry. Like other women authors of the period, Matraini identifies herself with the phoenix in some of her *Rime*, not only in a spiritual context.⁵⁶ However, the image of the phoenix is also used by Birgitta. In a revelation, Christ compares her with a phoenix and she will resurrect like a phoenix.⁵⁷ In more than one poem, Matraini attributes the condition of the phoenix to the Virgin, at the moment of the Assumption:

Sali dunque davanti
 al tuo bel Sole, eterna alma Fenice,
 con le lucide, pure e candide ali,
 al tuo Sole, a' suoi dì, chiari, immortali.⁵⁸

Rise therefore before your beautiful Sun, eternal, divine phoenix, with shining, pure, and chaste wings, to your Sun, to His brilliant and immortal aeons.

These associations establish a connection between the author, the Virgin, and perhaps Birgitta. The glory obtained in Heaven by the Virgin is compared, through the use of similarly allusive language, to the poetic glory that the poet hopes to gain. This arguably confirms the idea that Matraini identifies herself with the Virgin – and hopes to obtain immortal glory. This attitude hints at the hopes of Matraini for salvation and poetic glory and might explain the emphasis on the imitation of Mary and on the exaltation of Mary's power, knowledge, and teaching abilities.

Therefore, the figure of the Virgin depicted by Matraini represents a reaction to the contemporary tendency to use the Virgin as an example of submissive womanhood. Emphasizing Mary's traditional but central human role in the salvation of humanity, her knowledge and her humility and obedience only in relation to God and not to men, Matraini offers contemporary women an alternative, more powerful and authoritative role model. If, on the one hand, the Virgin is described as a humble model of Christianity, who represents the perfect example of piety and intimacy with God, on the other hand, as a woman,

56 See for instance C 46 (B 33): "Deh, perché a me della tua chiara luce / non lece ornarmi e da quest'atro inferno / salire al tuo bel regno alto e felice? / Ché, qual teco già vissi, anco in eterno / chiara vivrei e col tuo chiaro duce, / quasi nova del Cielo alma Fenice" (Chiara Matraini, *Rime e lettere*, ed. Giovanna Rabitti (Bologna: 1989), 249, ll. 9–14).

57 *Rev.* 11:18.

58 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 597.

she embodies a model of a learned and strong figure, imitable and capable of empowering women. This is an attitude common to many Italian women who, in different ways, wrote about the Virgin Mary, and could have its roots in Birgitta's Mariology. Indeed, in Birgitta's most powerful visions, in which she corrects and criticizes the pope and the Church, denouncing the corruption of the Roman Church and blaming the Avignon Papacy for causing this, she does it on the command of Mary, gaining through obedience an unforeseen power and authority.⁵⁹

Discourses on the Virgin

In her recent important edition of Matraini's prose writings, Anna Mario has convincingly demonstrated that, in addition to the canonical gospels, Matraini's main sources for the *Breve discorso* were Jacopo da Voragine's *Legenda aurea* and Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi*, probably in an Italian translation.⁶⁰ However, although these texts were undoubtedly important sources for Matraini for filling in details about Mary's biography and for the descriptions of specific episodes, the *Breve discorso* is something very different, both structurally and for the way in which Mary is represented. This suggests that it had other inputs and sources of inspiration. In particular, the *Breve discorso* seems to have some similarities with Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus*, which need to be analysed.

According to its prologue, the *Sermo angelicus* was revealed to Birgitta for being read during the Office of the Order of the Saviour that Christ had told Birgitta to establish. It was dictated by an angel when she was in Rome, in the house of Cardinal Hugues Roger, looking toward the church of San Lorenzo in Damaso.⁶¹ The *Sermo* is divided into twenty-one *lectiones*, three for each day of the week from Sunday to Saturday, and they all cover the excellence of the Virgin and her crucial role for Christianity. Each *lectio* is introduced by a brief invocation to the Virgin and focuses on specific aspects and moments of the Virgin's life, characteristics, and roles. The first readings focus on the backstory of Mary's birth, the fall of the angels, and the creation of men, and Birgitta insists that Mary was part of God's project even before the creation

59 For a discussion of Birgitta's political role against the Avignon Papacy, see Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested: An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge, MA/London: 2017), 121–45.

60 Matraini, *Le opera in prosa*, 512–34.

61 SA, Prologue:1.

of the world and was the one whom he loved more and above all creatures. It proceeds with some references to the prophecies preannouncing Mary's birth and destiny, her immaculate conception, the Annunciation, the purification, and then her emotional response and behaviour during the Passion and the Resurrection. The *Sermo* concludes with her life after the Resurrection, when she preached to and benefitted many persons, and finally, her Assumption. Although the chronological order is followed, the *Sermo* is not a linear account of the life of the Virgin. It is praise of the Virgin and a reflection on her pivotal and exceptional role in Christianity, which considers some crucial moments of her life. The language brings to mind a meditation more than a narrative, and in some passages there is great physicality in the descriptions and at the same time introspection in relation to the feelings of Mary and her extraordinary circumstances.

A first obvious similarity between the two writings is the title. Matraini entitles her life of the Virgin *Breve discorso*, unlike the typical hagiographic title of "Life of ...", and Birgitta's writing is a *Sermo*, namely a discourse. Both titles imply someone who speaks. In one case, the speaker is Matraini, who identifies herself as the author of the text. She prays to the Virgin to give her the inspiration and the ability to find the right words to describe her life, but she assumes the responsibility of what she writes. In the other case, the one who speaks is an angel, who dictated to Birgitta what she wrote. Such an authority provided Birgitta with a sort of freedom that was impossible for Matraini. The unusualness of Matraini's title was probably also evident to her publishers, as the 17th-century editions of the texts, printed after her death, were normalized with the more canonical title of *Vita della beatissima Vergine Maria madre, e sposa del figliuol di Dio*.⁶² In these editions, the concept of discourse is moved to the subtitle *Descritta in un discorso brevemente*. The *Proemio* and the poem to women following it, disappear along with Mozzagrugno's annotations, and some images were added, probably in order to normalize the text and make it more similar to standardized lives of the Virgin.

Concerning the structure, both the *Breve discorso* and the *Sermo Angelicus* include respectively a prologue, written by Alfonso of Jaén, and a *Proemio*. Moreover, both discourses are divided into narrative sections covering different aspects of the life and role of the Virgin Mary. Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus* is divided into 21 readings, three for each day, each of them introduced with an

62 For a description of the subsequent editions of the *Breve discorso*, printed between 1599 and 1675, see Alan Bullock and Gabriella Palange, *Per un'edizione critica delle opere di Chiara Matraini*, in *Studi in onore di Raffaele Spongano*, ed. Emilio Pasquini (Bologna: 1980), 235–62 (255–60).

invocation to the Virgin and sometimes concluded with a prayer; Matraini's *Breve discorso* is divided into 17 sections, separated by one or more poems addressed to the Virgin, and sometimes a prayer. Interestingly, the poems included in the *Breve discorso*, if we also count the poem addressed to women following the *Proemio* and the final one, addressed to the readers, are 21, like Birgitta's *lectiones*. Moreover, each poem is introduced with an appeal to the Virgin mentioning one of her qualities, which in some way resembles the invocation to the Virgin which introduces each of Birgitta's *lectiones*. For instance, we find poems addressed to the "potentissima Vergine" ("the most powerful Virgin"), the "eccellentissima regina di tutte le vergini" ("the most excellent queen of all the virgins"), the "purissima vergine regina di tutti i re del mondo" ("the most chaste virgin, queen of all the kings of the world"), the "obedientissima vergine" ("the most obedient virgin"), the "amorosa genitrice del figliuolo di Dio" ("the loving mother of the son of God"); the "abbondantissima fontana delle divine grazie" ("the most plenteous fountain of divine grace"), the "pietossissima consolatrice dei tribolati" ("the most merciful consoler of the afflicted"), the "immortale e beatissima Vergine" ("the immortal and most blessed Virgin"), the "benigna stella e fidatissima guida di tutti li naviganti" ("the gracious star and most faithful guide of all the sailors"). Birgitta's invocations define Mary as the one with "whom the Holy Trinity is most pleased", who "brought joy to a world in tears", who "became God's home"; "the angels' Queen"; "God's mother", "our ready protector, the Queen with virtues crowned", "loving Virgin", "mother of the true charity", "wisdom's mother", "star of the sea", "Virgin of virgins", "glorious Maid". Certainly, the common definitions are so traditional that it is difficult to establish any intertextual connection, but the presence of these powerful epithets of the Virgin, likely with a liturgical origin, introducing each section of the two texts, are interesting and may be connected.

However, these are not the only signs of the possible influence of the *Sermo angelicus* on Matraini's work. The two texts have some themes and images in common that, although they belong to a shared tradition, are quite peculiar and require some attention, as they show a similar perception of the Virgin. In her *Proemio*, Matraini lists most of the traditional biblical prophecies of the Virgin Mary as mother of God, such as the flowering of Aaron's rod (Is. 7), the star of Jacob (Gen. 49:10), and Ezekiel's closed door (Ez. 44:1-2). Anna Mario has pointed out that Matraini refers to Ludolph of Saxony and Jacopo de Voragine when reporting most of these prophecies.⁶³ However, the first prophecy mentioned by Matraini – Noah's Ark – is missing in both her main

63 Anna Mario, "Vita di Maria. Introduzione," in Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 512-34.

sources, while the second *lectio* of the *Sermo* is nearly entirely dedicated to the Noah's Ark as a prefiguration of the Virgin.⁶⁴ It is likely that Matraini used a different source, as she added details absent in Birgitta. However, the image of Noah's Ark is pivotal for Birgitta, as she spent an entire lecture on the connections between Mary and the Ark. Therefore, the fact that Birgitta also mentions some of these prophecies throughout the *Sermo* and often mentions Mary's prophetic knowledge, might explain why Matraini opens her book with a special attention to prophecies, choosing Noah's Ark as a first example, and why she frequently mentions them throughout her work. This attention to prophecy could be related to Matraini's possible "encounter" with Birgitta or her legacy and with to their common attention they both paid to women's prophecy as a form of female power.

The final lines of Matraini's *Proemio* are as follows:

Let us then place before ourselves her beautiful and holy example, distinguished in every virtue, and looking at it as if in a bright mirror, let us consider with what rich and very precious adornments of rare virtues she was adorned to please her dearly beloved husband, and let us seek to imitate her with every desire of ours (insofar as it is possible), to please our eternal and most benign God.⁶⁵

Similar concepts are reformulated in a poem added immediately after the *Proemio*, in which Matraini invites women to imitate Mary, in order to know God:

Questo, donne, è lo specchio in cui dovete,
co' begli occhi dell'alma, intento e fiso,
mirar; se voi volete
veder sempre più bello il nostro viso.
E s'a lui, d'hora in or rivolgerete
il Chiaro sguardo interno,
sempre, l'estate e'l verno,
più belle, e grate, al nostro vero amante
Sarete, e'n terra e'n Ciel lodate et sante.⁶⁶

64 SA, II.

65 "Poniamoci adunque davanti il suo santo e bellissimo essemplio, d'ogni virtù singolare, et in quello, come in lucido specchio, guardando, consideriamo di quai ricchi e preciosissimi adornamenti di rare virtù si adornasse per piacere al suo diletissimo sposo, e cerchiamo con ogni nostro studio, per quanto a noi sia possibile, di imitarla per piacere al nostro eterno e benignissimo Dio" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 549).

66 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 550.

This, women, is the mirror in which you must gaze / Intently and fixedly, with the beautiful eyes of the soul / And if you wish / To see our face ever more beautiful; / And if to Him, from time to time you will turn / The clear gaze within, / Always, in summer and in winter, / You will be more beautiful and pleasant for our true lover, / And in earth and heaven you will be praised, and holy.⁶⁷

Thus, Matraini's direction to imitate Mary, as shown above, seems very different from those given by contemporary authors such as Pinelli, and, in a certain way, it recalls Birgitta's view.⁶⁸ Interestingly, the prologue of the *Sermo angelicus* also ends with an appeal to women, namely to the nuns of the Order of the Saviour:

Open your ears to hear the new, sublime and never before heard praise of the most Blessed Virgin Mary. With humble minds, ponder her excellence from eternity as described here. Swallow it with the loving throat of meditation; consume its sweet delights with an appetite for contemplation. Then lift up your hands and hearts with all your affection in the presence of God to render humble and devout acts of thanksgiving to him for the great kindness that he has so singularly shown to you.⁶⁹

The two messages are different and reflect different times, sensibilities, and intentions. For instance, the *Sermo's* prologue involves the senses of hearing, taste, and touch, while Matraini only focuses on sight, albeit an inner one which involves contemplation and meditation. The *Sermo*, meant to be heard, focuses on the emotion activated by hearing of the excellence of the Virgin. The imitation mainly concerns the act of being humble and devout (like the Virgin) to thank God for creating her. Matraini's appeal, included in a text meant to be read, is more canonical, even though she focuses on the imitation of the Virgin by women for her relation to God, a message, in fact, not too different from Birgitta's, and certainly very different from Pinelli's, for instance. In both cases, the Marys described in the main texts are praised for their humility and obedience to God, but also for their wisdom, knowledge, and power. Moreover, in terms of structure, the fact that both prologues are concluded with addresses

67 Chiara Matraini, *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Elaine MacLachlan, intro. by Giovanna Rabitti (Chicago, IL: 2008), 130.

68 The idea to exhort other women to imitate Mary's faith is also present in Colonna's Marian works. See Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna*, 153.

69 SA, Prologue:15–16.

to women could be a further sign of a possible relationship between the texts. The image of the mirror used by Matraini is very topical and traditional, but Birgitta in the *Sermo angelicus* also uses it when she defines Mary as “speculum virginorum” (“mirror of the virgins”).⁷⁰

The prayer to the Virgin that follows Matraini’s *Proemio*, in which the author asks the Virgin to allow her to make her words adequate to praise her, synthesizes the most important characteristics of the Virgin Mary. Matraini defines Mary as “Empress of the Angels”, “advocate of all sinners”, and as the one who sits on the higher throne, close to God, and who had been chosen by the Trinity before the beginning of time to be always virgin and mother of God, superior to every creature and gifted with all possible perfect qualities. The fact that God loved Mary above all his other creatures and that she was predestined before the beginning of the world to undertake a crucial role for the salvation of humanity, mentioned by Matraini here and in other passages, is certainly a broader idea, but also a *leitmotiv* of Birgitta.⁷¹

The first narrative section of the *Breve discorso*, entitled “Le supreme e singularissime grazie di Maria Vergine” (“The supreme and unique graces of the Virgin Mary”), is a sort of introduction in which Matraini describes the backstory of Mary’s birth and her extraordinary qualities and gifts. This section of the *Breve discorso* is particularly remarkable for this survey, as it contains some elements described in the first five days (16 *lectiones*) of the *Sermo*. Certainly, Matraini is more synthetic, but she touches on several themes crucial for Birgitta and not particularly common in contemporary lives of the Virgin, such as the description and significance of what happened before Mary’s birth. Matraini begins her account with the creation and fall of Lucifer. God, “unconquerable love, beginning without beginning, and end without end of all things, wished to share His priceless boundless blessings with others”, created the angels “perfect by nature, endowed with every beauty, and replete with wisdom”.

As he knows that Christ would have come, becoming superior to angels, Lucifer “decided to make for himself another kingdom” and was banished from Heaven. God then created humankind “in His image and likeness, so that it might know His supreme and infinite love, and once knowing it, it might love God, and loving God, it might possess Him, and possessing Him, might finally be made blessed by Him”.⁷²

70 See n. 45 above.

71 This idea appears in Eccl. 24:9; 1 Cor. 2:7.

72 Unless indicated otherwise, the translations of passages from the *Breve discorso* are from Vittoria Colonna, Chiara Matraini, and Lucrezia Marinella, *Who is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. and trans. Susan Haskins (Chicago, IL: 2008), 74–118. See Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 552–53.

As Anna Mario has pointed out, Ludolph of Saxony also introduces his chapter “Dell’incarnazione e del rimedio per la salvazione del genere umano” with the fall of Lucifer.⁷³ However, he does not supply the details added by Matraini (and Birgitta), such as the prophetic gift of the angels and God’s desire to share his joy and love with others. He simply mentions the episode of the fall of Lucifer as the cause of the creation of humanity and moves quickly to the account of original sin.⁷⁴ On the same topic, Birgitta had written something similar, emphasizing that the only reason for creation was “his fervent love and his desire to share his unutterable joy with others”. In her account, some angels “of their own free will began ungratefully to abuse the gracious gift of freedom and maliciously to envy their Creator”.⁷⁵

Birgitta also notes that God was “without beginning and without end”, and that angels had been made so wise through his wisdom that they could clearly see all the future within the limits of God’s permission.⁷⁶ With her own style, she stresses that God had done everything just for sharing his love and underlines the angelic gift of knowing the future, and that they could be joyful for Mary’s birth since their creation. Matraini is more generic, but she focuses on the same aspects. She says that the angels were aware of the advent of Christ, and of human beings who would have been superior to them, and this implies that they also knew about Mary. A few pages later in the same section, when Matraini writes about the relationship between Mary and the angels, she states that Mary “was superior to the angels”.⁷⁷ Mozzagrugno considers it appropriate to add an annotation here, specifying that it was difficult to believe and, indeed, was impossible, at least during her earthly life.⁷⁸ However, Birgitta had no doubts that Mary was superior to angels. When rejoicing for Mary’s future advent, the angels were perfectly aware that Mary would have been “even

73 See Mario, “Vita di Maria”, 518.

74 See Ludolph of Saxony, *Vita di Giesù Christo* (Venice: 1589), 3r: “Essendo nel principio creato Lucifero, si levò contra Dio suo creatore e incontanente fu gittato di Cielo nell’Inferno. E per questa cagione Iddio deliberò di creare il genere umano, per riparar col suo mezzo al caso di Lucifero e dei suoi seguaci”.

75 SA, IV: 4.

76 SA, IV: 1–8.

77 “Questa è stata nella sua purità via più eccellente che Adamo, avanti ch’egli peccasse. E nella confermazione della grazia *superiore a gl’Angeli*, i quali non possono accrescere né menomare il loro premio sostanziale, dove che la Beata Vergine gl’ha sempre potuti accrescere, senza che mai mancassero” (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 554).

78 “che [la Vergine] sia stata superiore agli angeli, a prima fronte pare difficile a crederlo” (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 606).

closer to God than they, and they knew that an even greater love and an even greater delight were reserved for [her] than they themselves enjoyed".⁷⁹

After mentioning the fall of Lucifer and original sin, Matraini underlines Mary's crucial role in the salvation of humanity, describing her as the one who was able to eliminate original sin by giving birth to Christ:

For she was then that so very prudent Virgin, and most powerful lady, who was able, and knew how, through divine grace, to overcome pride and infernal Lucifer's power over the human race with the holy foot of her profound humility.⁸⁰

Matraini alludes to the tradition of Mary who crushes the snake, based on Genesis.⁸¹ This is particularly interesting considering that this episode represents the female retrieval of Eve, often used to justify the idea of women's inferiority to men and that women were the cause of original sin and its consequences. Once again, Matraini underlines the power of humility, crucial for Birgitta. In the *Sermo angelicus*, Birgitta compares Eve and Mary:

Eve's words sadly excluded her and her husband from glory and closed the gates of heaven to her and her descendants. Your blessed words, Mother of Wisdom, led you to great joy and opened the gates of heaven to all those wanting to enter.⁸²

Birgitta's position is certainly more innovative. She focuses on Mary's words and her wisdom, something that Matraini does not mention, remaining in the safer tradition. However, both Matraini and Birgitta stress Mary's powerful and crucial role in salvation.

Birgitta strongly affirms her belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, namely the fact that unlike all other human beings, since her conception, Mary was free of original sin. The question of the Immaculate Conception was the centre of a long theological debate, and was only officially recognized as dogma in 1854. In the 16th century, however, the dispute was less controversial than in the Middle Ages, and in fact commonly accepted. Birgitta's attention

79 SA, IV: 14.

80 "Però che essa è stata poi quella così prudente Vergine e potentissima donna che ha potuto e saputo vincere per la divina grazia, col piede santo della sua profonda umiltà, la superbia e potestà di Lucifero infernale contra l'umana generazione" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 554).

81 Gen. 3:15.

82 SA, VII: 20.

to Mary's purity can be read again as a way to distinguish Mary from Eve, and all that she represents for the idea of women in the Western tradition. Like Birgitta, Matraini declares that Mary "alone, from within her mother's womb, saint above all saints, was always without the slightest stain of sin" ("fu sempre, fin dentro al ventre della sua genitrice, senza macula alcuna di peccato e santa sopra ogni santo"), and defines her as "Immaculate".⁸³

Matraini says that Mary "surpassed the use of reason of any person whomever in this world (except for Jesus Christ, her Son)".⁸⁴ For Birgitta, "Mary attained sensibility and understanding after her birth at a younger age than other children" and in another passage she states that Mary "excelled each living thing in the world in the beauty of virtues and purity, with the one exception of her own blessed Son".⁸⁵ For both of them, therefore, Mary's wisdom is crucial and placed her above any other human beings, but at the same time, she represents an authoritative, wise model for women.

Matraini continues by describing all Mary's qualities, mentioning the – very topical – fact that the exceptional virtues of Mary's soul correspond to the incredible beauty of her body, and the same concept is also in Birgitta.⁸⁶ This is a very topical aspect, also largely used in secular writings about love and beauty of women, and that associate implicitly, once again, the Virgin with women. If Mary's beauty reflects her virtues, and this is true for actual women too, presumably her wisdom and reasoning also belong to women.

Matraini compares Mary to the garden of delights, presenting Mary as the crucial fruitful garden which produced the fruit that saved humanity. She writes that at the centre of Mary's garden there was "the tree of supreme Wisdom, whose roots spread greatly in the soil of her deep humility".⁸⁷ The garden is described, like the biblical Eden, as a topical *locus amoenus*, full of beautiful plants and singing birds. For Birgitta, Mary is like a fruitful earth, "the whole earth itself"; who fed humanity with her fruit.⁸⁸ Her words are assimilated to songs of birds and are listened to with joy by God.

83 "Nacque adunque questa bellissima e *immacolata* Vergine, nobilissima sopra tutte le creature della terra e del Cielo, con grand'allegrezza de gli Angeli e di tutta l'umana generazione" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 555).

84 "Nell'infanzia sua superò l'uso della ragione di qualsivoglia persona di questo mondo (salvo che di Gesù Cristo suo figliuolo)" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 555).

85 SA, XVI: 20.

86 SA, XIII: 21.

87 "Era nel mezzo di questo terrestre e tanto delizioso Paradiso di Maria Vergine l'arbore della suprema sapienza le cui radici grandemente si dilatavano nel terreno della sua profonda umiltà" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 555).

88 SA, V: 14.

While Matraini, when comparing Mary to the garden of delights, proceeds metaphorically, Birgitta uses similes, but the concepts they express are similar. Mary is the perfect synthesis of everything. She is the origin of every joy in the world, the creature, who is also creator, who gives life and knowledge, and she is a woman. Despite the traditional assimilation of Mary to the garden of delights, what emerges from Matraini and Birgitta's writings is nonetheless a human being who, thanks to her humility, saved humanity through her body and her wisdom.

Matraini continues her account of Mary's life, and as Birgitta does, in several passages mentions the complicated relationship between the joy for being the mother of the Saviour and the sorrow for knowing the destiny of her son. This is absolutely part of the tradition, but both interpretations emphasize Mary's feelings, stressing that her joy and sorrow were higher than any other mother's in the world. For instance, Matraini notes that Mary "felt the most excessive and inexpressible sorrow that ever a mother or creature of this world could experience".⁸⁹ Similarly, Birgitta had written that "she was also the most sorrowful of mothers, because of her foreknowledge of his most painful sufferings".⁹⁰

For Birgitta, there was no doubt that, "even before she knew that she was to be [Christ's] mother, [Mary] understood from the prophecies in the bible that God willed to become man and that he would suffer painful torment in his incarnate flesh".⁹¹ Matraini is more careful to affirm this. She mentions Mary's understanding of the Bible and prophecies and her prophetic knowledge, yet without focusing much on her knowledge of Christ's destiny since the very beginning. However, she stresses Mary's physical pain during Christ's circumcision as a prefiguration of her pain during Christ's Passion, and, like Birgitta, refers to Simeon's prophecy about the Passion of Christ.⁹²

Both Birgitta and Matraini refer to Mary's indescribable pain when she witnessed the Passion, already prefigured by Simeon's prophecy. For Birgitta, every offence to Christ was like a sword in Mary's heart: "that painful sword pierced the surface of the Virgin's heart and forcefully passed through her soul, inflicting grievous pain on her whole body".⁹³ Similarly, Matraini describes the pain of the Virgin when looking at her son during the Passion: "These were

89 "Venne a sentire il più eccessivo e inesplicabile dolore che mai alcuna madre o creatura di questo mondo potesse portare" (Matraini, *Opere in prosa*, 589).

90 SA, XVII: 20–21.

91 SA, XVI: 8.

92 Luke 2:35: "a sword will pierce your own soul". See SA, XVII: 18 and Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 574–75.

93 SA, XVIII: 2.

those knives that pierced (alas) her soul" ("Questi erano quei coltelli che gli trapassavano, ohimé, l'anima").⁹⁴ The attention they pay to the pain of Mary as a mother becomes particularly interesting when one considers that the accounts were written by two women who both experienced motherhood.

On the Resurrection, both Matraini and Birgitta report, as already mentioned by Jacobus after the Apocryphal gospels, that Mary was the first witness.⁹⁵ Interestingly, both mention that the Holy Scriptures do not report this episode and that other witnesses were mentioned in the Bible because they were more trustworthy than a mother, but both had no doubt that the one who would have most rejoiced at the Resurrection was the first to see him alive. Mozzagugno justifies Matraini's choice by pointing out that Saint Augustine had also said that Mary was the first to see Christ after the Resurrection, but it is possible that Matraini was inspired by Birgitta.⁹⁶

To conclude this survey, we can say certainly that both Matraini and Birgitta wanted to focus on the centrality of Mary and highlight her importance as an authority. Birgitta is more audacious, explicitly underlining Mary's crucial role as *Magistra apostolorum* and a powerful model; although Matraini only alludes to it, like Birgitta, she describes Mary's Assumption, the joy of angels and saints, and her unique place at the right of God and her crucial and active role for the salvation of humanity. Moreover, the structural and thematic similarities between the two texts allow us to draw parallels.

Conclusion

This survey attempted to show what Matraini's *Breve discorso* has in common with Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus*. Despite the lack of clear direct quotations, and the fact that both writers refer to established traditional stories and interpretations, there are some elements that allow us to speculate that Matraini had some contact with Birgittine Mariology. Matraini's interest in the Virgin, indeed, seems to surpass the simple gratitude for some local miracles who had inspired the cult of the Virgin in Lucca.⁹⁷ If this aspect could have been a promotional excuse to publish the book, it does not fully explain the profound attention given by Matraini to the human and divine figure of the Virgin. The structure of the text, the special attention devoted to Mary's feelings, her

94 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 590.

95 See Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 591–92 and SA, XIX: 9–10.

96 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 621.

97 Paoli, "Nell'Italia delle 'Vergini belle'".

words, her centrality as a powerful woman and loving mother, the closeness and close identification of the author with Mary which emerges in some passages, and the emphasis on some very Birgittine aspects of Mary could be in part the fruit of some encounter with Birgitta or her legacy.

Certainly, in the mid-16th century, Matraini's life was quite different in terms of experience and culture to Birgitta's. In Lucca, Matraini had gained a bad reputation because of the affair with Bartolomeo Graziani. However, she soon started to develop a new image of herself. The portrait of herself as the Sybil who announced to Augustus the imminent birth of Christ and the attention to prophecies in the *Breve discorso* are particularly interesting if we think of Birgitta. Therefore, the figure of Birgitta could have inspired Matraini to offer a new image of herself as a wise, learned, and pious widow who wrote about the Virgin Mary.

There are significant differences between the two women and their writings, in terms of not only their different circumstances and historical moments but also their positions as authors. Matraini names herself as author of Mary's life and as a sinner, and prays for Mary to give her the inspiration to write about such a serious topic, while Birgitta declares that she has written what the angel has told her to write.⁹⁸ This is a crucial difference. Birgitta introduces herself as the medium of the truth, and for this reason she did not need any form of doubt, or any justification or responsibility; she was just, consciously or unconsciously, the *scriba* of God, and this gave her a sort of freedom, despite the ever-present control and supervision of her confessors and editors. On the other hand, Matraini is a laywoman who takes responsibility for her writing, in a historical moment in which authors had to take into account censorship, and who introduces herself in that writing as an author and a pious woman. Moreover, Matraini published her work under her own name, while Birgitta wrote for religious and political reasons, and although her writings were copied – and later printed – and made a fortune, they were not written for personal literary recognition.

However, it is possible that Matraini received, interiorized, and in part used Birgitta's message to develop her *Breve discorso*. Whether she actually read or was inspired by Birgitta or shared with her a view of the Virgin, which, through the centuries from Birgitta onward, had become part of women's culture, Matraini represents an interesting example of the way in which Birgitta's Mariology could have been used and considered by a post-Tridentine woman

98 For a comprehensive discussion on the role of Birgitta as an author, see F. Thomas Luongo, "God's Words, or Birgitta's? Birgitta of Sweden as Author," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 25–52.

to build up her representation of the Virgin and legitimate her own voice and identity as a learned woman.

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“Consenti, o pia, ch’in lagrimosi carmi ...:” Birgitta in the Verse, Thought, and Artistic Commissions of Angelo Grillo

Virginia Cox

Birgitta as Holy Muse

A verse collection published in Venice in 1607 by the Benedictine intellectual and poet Angelo Grillo (1557–1629), *Christo flagellato et le sue essequie* (*The Flagellation and the Exequies of Christ*) opens with a bold metaliterary prefatory sequence outlining the author’s spiritual poetics.¹ Grillo presents his verse as richly embodied and affective, crafted from the corporeal materials of Christ’s passion and the Virgin’s sorrow – a confection of sinews, blood, and tears, designed to wreak powerful empathetic effects on the most obdurate sinner’s heart. Grillo’s conceits in the sequence are as arresting as those of his Baroque contemporaries – or, better, his Baroque followers, in that his religious verse of the 1590s is now increasingly recognized as formative for the Baroque poetic turn.² In the first sonnet, weeping over Christ’s flagellation, the poet defines himself a “Siren of tears on a sea of blood.”³ In the second, he is a

1 Angelo Grillo, *Christo flagellato et le sue essequie, celebrate co ’l Pianto di Maria Vergine* (Venice: 1607), 1–3 (Sonnets 1–111). The two works are presented separately, with their own title pages. I will refer to them henceforth by the short titles *Christo flagellato* and *Le essequie di Christo*. Both sequences were republished in later collections of Grillo’s religious verse, entitled *Pietosi affetti*, and they can be found in the modern edition by Myriam Chiarla (Lecce: 2013). For critical discussion of the two works, see Francesco Ferretti, *Le muse del Calvario: Angelo Grillo e la poesia dei benedettini cassinesi* (Bologna: 2012), 333–40.

2 Influential early studies of Grillo as religious poet were Giulia Raboni, “Il madrigalista genovese Livio Celiano e il benedettino Angelo Grillo. In margine a una recente monografia,” *Studi secenteschi* 32 (1991), 137–88, and Marc Föcking, *Rime sacre und die Genese des barocken Stils. Untersuchungen zur Stilgeschichte geistlicher Lyrik in Italien, 1536–1614* (Stuttgart: 1994), 156–250. More recent scholarship takes its cue from Ferretti, *Le muse del Calvario*, and the work of Myriam Chiarla (see, for example, “I *Pietosi affetti* d’Angelo Grillo: prime investigazioni sulle fonti patristiche, teologiche, e spirituali,” *Sacra doctrina*, 56/2 (2011), 93–118). Further bibliography is cited in the notes to this chapter.

3 (“Sol Sirena di pianto in mar di sangue.”) Grillo, *Christo flagellato*, [1] (Sonnet 1); cfr. *Pietosi affetti*, ed. Chiarla, 471 (no. 731, III.1). On siren imagery in Grillo, see Shannon McHugh, “Devotion, Desire, and Masculinity in the Spiritual Verse of Angelo Grillo,” in *Innovation in*

new spiritual Hercules, erector not of pillars to waymark mortal journeys, but rather of the salvific column of Christ.

In these first two poems, mythological references apart, the personae of the sonnets are reduced to the most essential: Christ and his tormentors, the Virgin, the poet, the reader. In the third sonnet, however, a new figure unexpectedly presents herself: none other than Saint Birgitta, presented in a privileged role as poetic and theological muse.

You who, as you emended your soul in the mirror
of the great suffering blood, received high counsels,
venerable Brigida; you who saw reflected there,
as His mother herself once saw, Christ pierced,
and the cruel assaults and the terrible strife,
and the wounds and the deaths and the piteous trophies
you witnessed through the tears of Mary
and wrote them with your own tears on eternal pages –
consent, O pious one, that in weeping lays,
your bountiful cares and revealed light
I may piously gather up and reverently adore,
that I may learn from your lofty and famous volume
to rise up to Heaven on your holy wings,
and honor my weaving with your threads.⁴

Although the sonnet is characteristically complex in its syntax and imagery, Grillo’s message is clear. Birgitta’s great volume, identified in the caption of the sonnet as her *Revelations*, will serve the poet in the same way as the “mirror of Christ’s blood” served Birgitta herself. Just as Birgitta saw in the mirror of contemplation, aided by grace, the piteous spectacle of Christ’s Passion that Mary herself had witnessed, so too the poet, reading Birgitta, and using her text as a prompt for his own meditations, will empathetically envision and recreate

Counter-Reformation Culture, ed. Shannon McHugh and Anna Wainwright (Newark, DE: 2020), 158–59.

4 (“Tu ch’a lo specchio del gran sangue afflito, / l’alma emendendo alti consigli havesti, / Brigida veneranda; e ’n lui vedesti, / come la Madre già Christo trafitto: / e gli aspri assalti, e l’horrido conflitto / et le piaghe, e le morti, e i trofei mesti, / nel pianto di Maria presenti havesti, / et co’l tuo proprio in carte eterne hai scritto. / Consenti, o pia, ch’in lagrimosi carmi / l’alme tue cure, e ’l rivelato lume / pietoso accolga, e riverente adori, / et con l’ali tue sante al Cielo alzarmi, / impari dal tuo chiaro alto volume, / e di tue fila lo mio stame honori.”) Grillo, *Christo flagellato*, 3 (Sonnet III); cfr. *Pietosi affetti*, ed. Chiarla, 472 (no. 734, III. 3). All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

these same scenes in his verse. Birgitta's inspiration will empower him both as poet, and, more importantly, as believer. He will weave with her threads and learn from her writings to fly to Heaven on her wings.

Grillo's sonnet constitutes an exceptional tribute to Birgitta's *Revelations*, of special interest when we consider that the poem appeared in print only a year after the first published edition of the *Revelations* for over half a century: that of Consalvo Durante, a learned protégé of Cardinal Odoardo Farnese, the dedicatee of the work.⁵ The caption that heads the poem in Grillo's *Christo flagellato* defines the status of the *Revelations* as Grillo sees them. (Although the captions in Grillo's religious works are mainly attributed to his collaborator Pietro Colelli, there are reasons to consider this one Grillo's own.)⁶

To the blessed Santa Brigida, with the thought that, as with all the other mysteries of the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary, so too in this [the poet will] draw on her most holy Revelations, which, even if they do not have the authority of the Gospels, have papal ratification and confirmation by [Church] councils, and marvelous piety [*pietà maravigliosa*].⁷

The language here is worth noting. The *Revelations* possess *pietà*; Birgitta herself, in the sonnet, is *pia*; the poet – again in the sonnet – is *pietoso*. Grillo's religious verse was published under the title *Pietosi affetti* (*Pious affects*) from 1595 onwards, and the formula became a kind of trademark; the editor of *Christo flagellato* augurs that the empathetic *pietà* with which Grillo has envisaged the Passion will awaken the reader's *affetti* in equal part.⁸ The words *pietà* / *pietoso* fold together piety and pity, devotion and compassion: a very precise

5 *Revelationes Sanctae Brigittae ... a Consalvo Durante a Sancto Angelo in Vado presbytero et sacrae theologiae professore notis illustratae* (Rome: 1606). The previous edition was that of Olaus Magnus in 1557, like Durante's edition, published in Birgitta's house in Palazzo Farnese. For details of both see the *Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden* database <https://birgitta.hf.uio.no/printedbooks/15/> (consulted 29 November 2022). On Durante and his edition, see also Gian Ludovico Masetti Zannini, "Il vescovo di Montefeltro Consalvo Durante (1567–1643) e le edizioni delle opere di Santa Brigida di Svezia," *Studi montefeltrani* 21 (2001), 106–09, 114–17.

6 See Ferretti, *Le muse del Cavario*, 201–5, for discussion of the likelihood of Grillo's input in certain of the captions.

7 ("Alla beata Santa Brigida: pensando così in questo, come in tutti gli altri misteri della vita di Christo, & di Maria Vergine, valersi delle sue santissime rivelationi, le quali, se ben non hanno autorità evangelica, han però testimonizana pontificia, & fermezza di concilij, & pietà maravigliosa.") Grillo, *Christo flagellato*, 3.

8 Pietro Petracci, letter to the reader in Grillo, *Christo flagellato* (unnumbered). See also Petracci's dedicatory letter to Grillo, *Le essequie di Christo*, which describes the two works as a *pietosa lettura* ("pious reading matter").

encapsulation of the type of deeply affective religiosity, rooted in pitying meditation on Christ’s and the Virgin’s suffering, that finds expression in Grillo’s verse.⁹ Sonnet 3 of the *Christo flagellato* sequence identifies Birgitta as the matrix of this spiritual *habitus*.¹⁰

Theologies Soft and Dry

A key document for understanding the context and import of Grillo’s sonnet to Birgitta is a published letter of his, addressed to his maternal uncle Nicolò Spinola, which appeared in print in 1608 (and subsequently in 1612 and 1616). As literary historians now recognize, Grillo was an important and innovative epistolographer as well as a poet. His witty, polished letters, published manual-style under thematic headings (consolation, congratulation, news, admonishment, advice, etc.) offer a striking panorama of religious and cultural life in Italy in the early 17th century, framed through an attractively mercurial and distinctive authorial voice.¹¹ Like many early modern letter collections, Grillo’s letters are presented as rhetorical models more than as historical record (dates are omitted, for example, leaving indications of place as the principal means of dating the texts). The Spinola letter is written “from Praglia” – i.e. from the great abbey of Santa Maria di Praglia, near Padua, one of the foundational sites of Grillo’s congregation, the Cassinesi. This allows us to date the letter

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- 9 The Crusca dictionary of 1612 defines *pietoso* as signifying purely “compassionate,” “pitying,” but Tasso’s use of the adjective in the first line of the *Gersusalemme liberata* in the sense of “religious” or “pious” helped consolidate this alternative sense of the word. John Florio’s less prescriptive 1611 *World of Words* records both senses for *pietà* (“pietie, devotion, godly affection, righteousness, true zeale. Also ... pittie, mercie, ruth, compassion, or compunction of anothers harme.”) On the significance of the term *affetti* in Grillo’s title, see Chiarla, “I *Pietosi affetti*,” 99–102.
- 10 Birgitta’s importance as a source for Grillo has not previously been the object of sustained discussion, though see Ferretti, *Le muse del Calvario*, 335–36; Raboni, “Il madrigalista,” 171–72; Chiarla, “I *Pietosi affetti*,” 115–16 for brief remarks.
- 11 The thematic organization (“per capi”) is an innovation of the 1608 edition (Grillo’s letters had previously been published in 1602, 1603, and 1604). A recent study of Grillo as epistolographer is Myriam Chiarla, “L’epistolario di Angelo Grillo nel dialogo culturale cinque-secentesco e primi raffronti con le lettere manoscritte,” in *Per uno studio delle corrispondenze letterarie di età moderna*, ed. Clizia Carminati, Paolo Procaccioli, Emilio Russo, and Corrado Viola (Verona: 2016), 321–32. For further bibliography, see Francesco Rossini, “Corrispondenti strozziani (Magliabechiano VIII, 1399): le lettere di Angelo Grillo,” in “*Testimoni dell’ingegno. Reti epistolari e libri di lettere nel Cinquecento e nel Seicento*,” ed. Clizia Carminati (Sarnico (BG): 2019), 198n21. On the editorial history of the letters, see Chiarla, “L’epistolario,” 322–24.

to a period of around a year in 1607–08. It hence coincides closely with the period of composition and publication of *Christo flagellato* and *Le essequie di Christo*, the dedicatory letters to which are respectively dated December and November 1607.¹² The collection of *Lettere* in which the Spinola letter was published may be dated by its dedication to around April of the following year.¹³

Grillo's letter to Spinola presents itself as written in response to an anonymous critic who had questioned the orthodoxy of seven passages in *Christo flagellato*. This may be the truth; certainly, there are instances in this period of printed works being denounced in this way, and of writers presenting defenses, either in manuscript or print.¹⁴ It is also possible, however, that this very long and closely reasoned letter was composed as a justification of Grillo's religious poetics more generally and that the tale of the anonymous denunciation is a pretext. Grillo all but admits to this at the end of the letter, when he concedes that the letter might be described as a *discorso*, rather than a *difesa*, and presents it as a pre-emptive response to potential criticisms that might be levelled at his *Pietosi affetti* more generally.¹⁵ Grillo's genre definition in the letter is reinforced by the work's placement in the volume, in the sub-section of letters defined as "[di] discorso."

Grillo's letter to Spinola deserves close study as a whole, as a statement of post-Tridentine religious poetics.¹⁶ I will concentrate here, however, on a specific passage, in which Grillo defends details in *Christo flagellato* not found in the Gospels (which mention the scourging of Christ while giving no descriptive detail whatsoever – "very drily" in Grillo's own words).¹⁷ The extra-evangelical details Grillo points to in the letter – very graphic ones – are those of Christ's

12 Grillo's movements may be traced using Elio Durante and Anna Martellotti's excellent biography, *Don Angelo Grillo, o. s. b., alias Livio Celiano, poeta per musica* (Florence: 1989). See 225–34 generally on his time in Praglia and 230–31 on the immediate context of *Christo flagellato* and *Le essequie di Christo*.

13 Durante and Martellotti, *Don Angelo Grillo*, 231.

14 A well-known instance is that of Sperone Speroni, whose *Apologia de' dialoghi* (*Apologia for his Dialogues*) was written in response to a reader's report (*avvertimento*) dating to the early 1570s, which probably led to his dialogues being included in the Index of Prohibited Books in the following decade. See Jennifer Helm, *Poetry and Censorship in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Leiden: 2015), 292–98. In Speroni's case, the complaint related to works first published much earlier, in the 1530s, but there are cases of works being denounced prior to publication or immediately following it. See, for example, Clara Stella, "La dichiarazione di Cristoforo Bronzini in difesa del *Dialogo della dignità e nobiltà delle donne* (1622)," *LaborHistorico*, 8.3 (2022): 237–56.

15 *Delle Lettere del Reverendo Padre Abate D. Angelo Grillo*, 2 vols (Venice: 1616), Vol. 1, 554.

16 See the discussions in Chiarla, "I *Pietosi affetti*," 112–18; Morando and Chiarla, "La Bibbia," 73–74; Ferretti, *Le muse del Calvario*, 157–61.

17 ("assai seccamente.") Grillo, *Lettere*, 1.549.



FIGURE 9.1 Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Christ after the Flagellation*, after 1665. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow Fund
 PHOTOGRAPH © 2022 MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

groping around for his clothes following the scourging, and the bloody traces (or footprints – *vestigia*) that he leaves as he does so. These are details we find occasionally in Spanish 17th-century painting, for example in Murillo’s *Christ after the Flagellation* (post-1665), in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.¹⁸ The passage to which Grillo represents his “opponent” (*opponitore*) as objecting, specifically, is a stanza in a long narrative canzone, or canzonetta, placed immediately after the three initial framing sonnets (incipit, “Occhi de l’alma mia”), so that it constitutes a kind of *narratio*, following the *exordium*, to use rhetorical terms. The stanza describes Christ, cut free of his bonds, “treading his blood, / as he went seeking for his scattered garments.” The following stanza speaks of “his bleeding feet” leaving “bleeding traces” wherever they go.¹⁹

18 For discussion, see John F. Moffit, “The Meaning of ‘Christ After the Flagellation’ in Siglo de Oro Sevillian Painting,” *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, 53 (1992), 139–54.

19 (“E’ l suo sangue calcando /sue sparse spoglie andò Giesù cercando.” // “Vestigi sanguinosi / ovunque ei move il piè sanguigno imprime.”) Grillo, *Christo flagellato*, 18.

While Grillo freely admits that these narrative particulars do not derive from the Bible, he defends himself by showing that they do derive from respectable and ratified sources – from Birgitta’s *Revelations* in the case of the bloody footprints, and from Saint Pedro de Alcántara (1499–1562) in the case of Christ searching for his clothes. Where Birgitta is concerned, Grillo cites Durante’s recent edition, mentioning that it appeared under the patronage of Pope Paul v (Camillo Borghese). He also names a work by Daniele Mallonio, dedicated to Pope Paul, which cites Birgitta as an authority in its chapter on the flagellation. The title Grillo gives, *Jesu Christi crucifixi stigmata*, allows us to identify the work cited as a 1606 Latin edition of a treatise by Alfonso Paleotti, Archbishop of Bologna, on the Turin Shroud, which had been first published in the vernacular in 1598. Mallonio, a Hieronymite and professor of theology at Bologna University, contributed copious annotations to the Latin edition of Paleotti’s work, in which he cites Birgitta extensively on the subject of the flagellation, including the detail cited by Grillo.²⁰

Grillo’s most immediate point in this passage is that he is using recognized authorities for his Passion narrative. He is not inventing things from his own “capriccio,” as he says at the end of the letter; nor is he drawing them from “the naivety of the people” or “the tender nonsense and foolishness of gossiping women.”²¹ Rather, he is drawing on sources that other contemporary clerics have validated as respectable, explicitly or implicitly: Durante, Birgitta’s recent editor, a bishop by the time of Grillo’s writing; Daniele Mallonio, an academic theologian; and ultimately, in both cases, the current pope.²² Grillo’s strategy in the letter is a pared-down version of that of Durante’s edition of the *Revelations*, which, like other printed editions, prefaces the text with an impressive series of paratexts documenting the key stages in Birgitta’s legitimation as religious authority (the defense written by Birgitta’s confessor Matthias of Linköping; Boniface IX’s canonization bull of 1391; Cardinal Juan de Torquemada’s defense of the *Revelations*, written for the Council of Basel in

20 *Jesu Christi crucifixi stigmata Sacrae Sindoni impressa, ab Alphonsi Paleotti ... explicata* (Venice: 1606). Mallonio’s notes on the Flagellation are found at 59–71. The discussion of Christ’s bloody footprints, from Rev. 1: 10.19, is found at 70. Mallonio’s treatise was known in Spain and may be the source for this motif in Spanish painting: see Moffit, “The Meaning of ‘Christ After the Flagellation’”, 152, n. 3. Birgitta’s direct and indirect influence on scenes of the Flagellation in European art is briefly discussed in Émile Mâle, *L’art religieux après le Concile de Trente. Étude sur l’iconographie de la fin du XVI^e siècle, du XVII^e, du XVIII^e siècle: Italie – France – Espagne – Flandres* (Paris: 1932), 265–67.

21 (“la semplicità della plebe;” “le tenere sciocchezze, ò ... li idiotismi delle donniciuole.”) Grillo, *Lettere*, 1. 548. The allusion to the author’s “capriccio” is at 550.

22 Durante was created bishop of Montefeltro, in the Marche, in February 1607 (Masetti Zannini, “Il vescovo di Montefeltro,” 109–10).

the 1430s), along with a page of clerical testimonials, reaching down to a contemporary like the Jesuit Martin Delrio (1551–1608). Grillo implicitly refers to this apparatus in his formula that Birgitta’s revelations have “papal ratification and confirmation by councils,” as well as “marvelous piety” (a passage in the letter to Spinola uses exactly the phraseology we saw earlier in the caption to Grillo’s sonnet on Birgitta).²³

Grillo’s more general point in this argument, which he draws from Mallonio, is that, despite their rightly exalted status, the Gospels may not be taken as the sole legitimate record of Christ’s life and passion. They give only the barest details of these events, perhaps because the evangelists were so close to the events described that they could not bear to revisit their cruel details.²⁴ In later ages, God has supplemented this sparse record by granting revelations to chosen pious subjects like Birgitta and Pedro de Alcántara. These revelations flesh out the gospel narrative, enabling the faithful to envisage it more completely. They are ratified by the Holy Church, and “not only do they not repugn the Gospel history, but they help elucidate it.”²⁵ The verb I have translated as “elucidate” is *dichiarare* – to make clear or manifest. It was often used in the 16th century in the sense of “to comment on,” as a commentary may expand on and make more accessible a cryptic or allusive original text.

Although Grillo isolates a sole borrowing from Birgitta in his letter to Spinola, he is being somewhat evasive in so doing. The canzonetta “Occhi de l’alma mia”, and indeed the whole sequence of *Cristo flagellato*, are saturated with reminiscences of Birgitta’s account of the Passion: not merely the details of Christ’s bloody footprints, but also important particulars such as Christ’s nakedness, emphasized both in the canzone and in the sonnet that follows.²⁶ The “bleeding footprints” stanza of the opening canzonetta, to which Grillo’s anonymous *opponitore* is said to have objected, also contains the concluding lines of an entire micro-episode not found in the Gospels but present in the *Revelations*. This shows Christ’s scourging interrupted by “someone” (*unus*) speaking up, “aroused in his spirit,” and demanding of Christ’s tormentors

23 Grillo, *Lettere*, 1.548.

24 Grillo intriguingly compares the suppression of pathetic details by the “grieving evangelists” to a famous anecdote concerning the ancient Greek painter Timanthes, who represented Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia with the onlookers showing strong emotion, but Agamemnon himself with his face veiled. Grillo’s source is Mallonio’s commentary on Paleotti, *Jesu Christi crucifixi stigmata*, 10b, which attributes the comparison to the religious writer and Lateran Canon Cesare Calderari (d. 1588).

25 (“non solo non repugnano all’Historia Evangelica, ma la dichiarano.”) Grillo, *Lettere*, 1.549.

26 On Christ’s nakedness in Birgitta, see Corine Schlieff, “Christ Bared. Problems of Viewing and Powers of Exposing,” in *The Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*, ed. Sherry C.M. Lindquist (Farnham: 2012), 263–64.

“are you going to kill him thus without sentence?”²⁷ This mysterious figure is then said to have cut Christ free from his bonds (*et statim secuit vincula eius*).²⁸ Grillo’s version of the episode dramatically expands the unnamed agent’s speech, while remarking that he seems motivated “by justice far more than *pietate*.”²⁹ The episode hence serves to underline the difference between pagan and Christian attitudes to the “atrocious spectacle” of Christ’s torment: the former concerned with human justice, the latter with the deeper providential justice of redemption.³⁰ In keeping with this point, Birgitta’s chain-cutting figure was identified as a Roman soldier in Pilate’s service by preachers of the time who cited the episode.³¹

This detail in Grillo is of interest not least in light of the Venetian publication context of *Christo flagellato*. Representations of this episode in Birgitta’s *Revelations* are found in a painting by Domenico Tintoretto in the Capitoline museums probably dating to the early 1590s, and in another by the same artist which sold at Sotheby’s in New York in May 2022.³² Tintoretto was, of course, Venetian, the son and collaborator of the famous Jacopo Tintoretto, and the context of the commissions was presumably also Venetian, even if the Capitoline painting was first recorded in Rome, in an inventory of 1689. It is striking that two images of this rarely depicted scene should have coincided so closely in its geographical and temporal context with Grillo’s rare poetic reimagining of the scene in *Christo flagellato*.³³ Both Tintoretto paintings have inscriptions identifying the source of their iconography as Birgitta’s *Revelations*, suggesting that the images may initially have perplexed viewers unfamiliar with the text.

It is possible that investigation of Grillo’s Venetian connections might yield hints of potential patronage contexts for the two Tintoretto images. Prior to his

27 Rev. 1: 10. *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Denis Searby, with an introduction and notes by Bridget Morris, 4 vols. (Oxford: 2006–15), Vol. 1, 68. Cfr. *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 18a (*Nunquid interficietis eum sic iniudicatum?*) The episode is also found in Rev. IV: 70.5 (*Revelations*, trans. Searby, Vol. 2, 126), where the man is identified as one of Christ’s enemies: cfr. *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 309a (“*unus inimicorum eius*”).

28 *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 18a.

29 (di giustizia vie più, che di pietate). Grillo, *Christo flagellato*, 18.

30 (l’atroce / spettacolo). Ibid.

31 Francesco Saracino, “Domenico Tintoretto e una visione di Brigida di Svezia,” *Venezia Cinquecento*, 42. 2 (2011), 141–42.

32 On the Capitoline painting, see Francesco Saracino, “Domenico Tintoretto.” For the Sotheby’s painting, see <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2022/master-paintings/the-vision-of-saint-bridget> (consulted on 21 November 2022).

33 Saracino, “Domenico Tintoretto,” 139, remarks on the coincidence, but he does not explore it.

sojourn in Praglia in 1607–08, Grillo had made several visits to Venice, including a six-month stay at the Cassinese monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in 1598, when he seems to have engaged enthusiastically with Venetian literary and musical circles. The same sojourn must have familiarized him with the works that Jacopo and Domenico Tintoretto had painted at San Giorgio in the earlier 1590s, the *Last Supper*, *Gathering of Manna*, and *Entombment of Christ*.³⁴ Either at this time or during his later stay at Praglia, Grillo made the acquaintance of the dedicatee of *Christo flagellato*, Luigi Veniero (1542–1617), whom the writer of the dedicatory letter, Grillo’s long-term collaborator Pietro Petracci, describes as a “close friend” (*stretto amico*) of Grillo’s and an admirer of his work.³⁵ It seems likely that Veniero, a nephew of the poet Domenico Veniero was Grillo’s choice as dedicatee, rather than Petracci’s, and we might further conjecture that he was someone whom Grillo felt would be in sympathy with the work’s distinctive, Birgittine-inflected spirituality. It is easy to imagine that one or both of Domenico Tintoretto’s representations of the *Revelations* episode may have been painted for individuals or institutions, such as *scuole*, within Veniero’s circle. Veniero and Tintoretto shared at least one acquaintance: the poet Celio Magno, whose portrait Tintoretto painted in 1597.³⁶ Another possibility is offered by patrons with connections to San Giorgio Maggiore: a monastery much frequented by clerical and lay visitors, including the doge and his retinue, who visited each year for the vigil and feast of Saint Stephen.³⁷ The Cassinesi had particular links with the cult of Birgitta, for reasons explored later in this essay.

The most striking passage in Grillo’s letter-apologia to Spinola is one that follows his justification of the detail of Christ groping for his clothes. His

34 Durante and Martellotti, *Don Angelo Grillo*, 178–80. On Jacopo and Domenico’s work at San Giorgio Maggiore, see Tom Nichols, *Tintoretto: Tradition and Identity*, 2nd edition (London: 2015), 289–95.

35 Petracci describes the friendship between Grillo and Veniero as having blossomed “in a short time” (*brieve tempo*), perhaps suggesting that the two only met during Grillo’s time at Praglia. See Petracci, dedicatory letter (unnumbered) in Grillo, *Christo flagellato*.

36 See Barbara Mazza Boccazzi, “*Ut pictura poesis*: Domenico Tintoretto for Celio Magno,” *Venezia Cinquecento* 11 (2001), 167–75. For Veniero’s acquaintance with Magno, see the unnumbered dedicatory letter of *Edipo tiranno di Sofocle tragedia in lingua volgare ridotta dal clariss[imo] Signor Orsatto Giustiniano* (Venice: 1585).

37 On sociability at San Giorgio Maggiore, see Tracey E. Cooper, “Un modo per la riforma cattolica: la scelta di Paolo Veronese per il refettorio di San Giorgio Maggiore,” in *Crisi e rinnovamenti nell’autunno del Rinascimento a Venezia*, ed. Vittore Branca and Carlo Ossola (Venice: 1991), 280–81, 290. On the doge’s visit, see eadem, “*Locus meditandi et orandi*: Architecture, Liturgy, and Identity at San Giorgio Maggiore,” in *Musica, scienza, e idee nella Serenissima durante il Seicento*, ed. Francesco Passadore and Franco Rossi (Venice: 1996), 87–88.

source here, as noted, is the Discalced Franciscan Pedro de Alcántara, and specifically Pedro's *Tratado de la oración y meditación*. The passage Grillo cites – in Italian – comes from Pedro's meditation for Wednesdays: "Consider that, as soon as the scourging was over, the Redeemer of the World had to go through that Praetorium seeking his clothes, in the presence of those cruel torturers."³⁸ Following this quotation, Grillo embarks on an affectionate paean to "little books" (*piccioli libretti*) like that of the Spanish mystic ("little," perhaps, in a literal sense, in that the Venetian editions of Alcántara are small popular prints in duodecimo or sextodecimo).³⁹ The passage deserves to be quoted in full:

These little books, *Signor mio*, are as effective in inflaming the will of the devout Christian as big books are in nurturing the intellect of the subtle speculative; and perhaps, since they swell us less, and keep us lower, in a state of humility, they make it easier for us to enter *per angustam portam, quae ducit ad vitam* [through that narrow gate that leads to [eternal] life; Matthew 7:13–14, abridged].⁴⁰

It is this type of "humble" devotional thinking and imagining that Grillo captures with his term *pío* (we have already heard of Birgitta's *pietà maravigliosa*, and Alcántara is also defined as *piùssimo Theologo*). In a passage following that just cited, he describes this model of religious thought as "softened theology" ("Theologia rammorbidita"), by contrast with dry, intellectualizing "pulverized" – or "ground" – "Theology" ("Theologia polverizzata in herba") – presumably, the theology of the Schools. In the closing lines of the letter, Grillo characterizes potential critics of his work as "pure and simple speculative scholastics," who "know better how to subtly dispute than how to piously [*pietosamente*] love our eternal, passionate love, Jesus Christ, and his Most

38 ("Considera incontinente doppo l'esser finite queste battiture, come il Redentor del Mondo doveva gir per tutto quel Pretorio cercando i suoi panni, in presenza di quei crudeli Carnefici.") Grillo, *Lettere*, 1.550.

39 Similarly diminutive (duodecimo) is the 1600 Rome edition, which frames the work with more ambitious paratexts and presented itself as edited by the Carmelite Fra Angelo Minicucci. The version of the text cited suggests, however, that Grillo used one of the Venetian editions: see, for example, *Trattato dell'oratione e meditatione composto per il R.P.F. Pietro di Alcantara, Frate Minore dell'ordine di S. Francesco* (Venice: 1588), 48r.

40 ("Questi piccioli libretti, Sig. mio, accendono altrettanto la volontà del divoto Christiano, quanto que' grandi pascono l'intelletto del sottile speculativo; e forse gonfiandone meno, e tenendone più bassi nell'humiltà, ne fanno più facili ad entrare *per angustam portam, quae ducit ad vitam*.") Grillo, *Lettere*, 1.550.

Holy Mother.”⁴¹ Summarizing, Grillo’s letter counterposes a desiccated, intellectualistic, potentially swollen-headed scholastic theology with an affective, pious, “softened,” humble, low theology. In addition to Birgitta and Pedro de Alcántara, Grillo names as exponents of the latter school Saints Bernard, Bonaventure, and Augustine, and “many other contemplatives and devout Theologians.”⁴² (*Divoto* is a further key term in Grillo’s approved spiritual lexicon.) It is on the authority of such thinkers that “the frail [or weak] poems of the *Pietosi affetti* are founded.”⁴³

Although Grillo’s letter to Spinola is careful to attribute extra-evangelical details in his account of the Passion to recognized and ratified sources (Birgitta, Saint Bernard), there is a hint in the letter that others – even simple present-day readers with no claim to visionary insight – may lay claim to the same licence in reimagining the Gospel story. In his defence of the details of Christ’s bleeding footprints and his groping for his clothes, Grillo cites, or half-cites, a passage from a religious work by the German Carthusian Johannes Justus Lanspergius (1489–1539), which asserts the right of the pious reader to imagine Christ’s Passion in any way he chooses, within reason. Lanspergius, like Grillo, notes the brevity with which the Gospels narrate the Passion, and he speculates that God provided the faithful only with this austere account in order to offer them an opportunity, or a spur, to imaginative meditation (*occasio meditandi*).⁴⁴ He then continues to specify – in a phrase that Grillo recalls

41 (“puri, e semplici scolastici speculativi ... sanno più sottilmente quistionare, che pietosamente amare l’eterno, & sviscerato Amor nostro Giesù Christo, e la sua Santissima Madre.”) Grillo, *Lettere*, 1.554.

42 (“Theologia rammorbida con le tenerezze de’ Santi Dottori, Bernardo, Bonaventura, Agostino, e di molti altri contemplativi; e divoti Theologi.”) Grillo, *Lettere*, 588. Further on Bernard’s and Augustine’s place within Grillo’s spiritual pantheon, see Myriam Chiarla, “Son talhor con le Muse, et spesso co’ Padri antichi.” Intrecci biblici, patristici, e devozionali nei *Pietosi affetti* di Angelo Grillo’, in *Benedettini in Europa. Cultura e committenze, restauri e nuove funzioni*, ed. Sonia Cavicchioli and Vincenzo Vandelli (Modena: 2017), 17, 20.

43 (“sopra l’autorità de’ quali son fondate le deboli Poesie de’ Pietosi Affetti.”) Grillo, *Lettere*, 1.550. The captions of *Christo flagellato* are consistent with the letter to Spinola, in that the only non-biblical authorities they cite, in addition to Birgitta, are Saint Bernard (36) and “some devout contemplatives” (*alcuni devoti contemplativi*) (70). A sonnet to Saint Thomas Aquinas at the end of the *Essequie di Christo* seems not to have been part of the original sequence; see Durante and Martellotti, *Don Angelo Grillo*, 230, n. 128.

44 Grillo’s likely source is Mallonio’s commentary on Paleotti, *Jesu Christi crucifixi stigmata*, 10b, the same passage from which he drew Calderari’s comparison of the Evangelists to Timanthes, cited above in n. 24. The original passage of Lanspergius’s may be found in *D. Ioannis Justi Lanspergii Cartusiani opera omnia*, 5 vols (Monsterolli: 1888–90), 3.282a.

without quoting it, only as “and what follows” (*e quel che segue*) [282a] – that, regarding details not found in Scripture, when there is nothing in Scripture to contradict them and the Church has not pronounced an opinion, it is permissible “without danger” (*absque periculo*) to imagine whatever can enhance a reader’s compassion or devotion. Grillo himself takes this licence in recounting the episode of Christ feeling for his clothes following the flagellation, when he has the poetic “I” of “Occhi de l’alma mia” – perhaps best read not as the poet himself, but a penitent everyman – speculate that Mary herself may have intervened to help her shattered Son perform this pitiful task.⁴⁵

Contexts: Gender, Censorship, the Cassinese Tradition

One point about Grillo’s “softened theology” that deserves to be underlined in the present context concerns gender. Grillo’s “soft” authorities are one female, Birgitta, and one male, the future saint Pedro d’Alcántara.⁴⁶ Alcántara’s qualifications, however, as presented by Grillo, prominently include his mentorship of the figure whom Grillo warmly refers to as “my own blessed Mother Theresa [of Ávila], founder of the Discalced Carmelites, whose canonization is now going forward in Rome.”⁴⁷ One striking difference between Grillo’s “soft” theology and his “dry” scholastic theology is that, where the latter is strictly male, the former embraces both female and male authorities: Birgitta and Teresa of Ávila on the one hand, Pedro de Alcántara and Saint Bernard on the other. This is consistent with the sympathetic interest in women’s intellectuality and spirituality that Grillo manifests more generally in his verse and letters. Of special relevance here is his poetic and epistolary correspondence with the Luchese poet and dramatist Leonora Bernardi (1559–1616), who spent the final decade or so of her life in religious retirement. Grillo hailed Bernardi in a sonnet of the late 1580s for her Marian poetry, characterized in terms very close to those we have been seeing; her words are “devout” (*devote*), her praying to the Virgin is “pious” (*pio*), and she herself is “more impassioned and pure” (*affettuosa e pura*) than any other woman.⁴⁸ In a letter to a mutual friend on hearing of Leonora’s spiritual retreat, Grillo exclaims “What have women not done in the

45 Grillo, *Christo flagellato*, 18 (“Forse Maria v’accorse / el [= e ’l] flagellato suo mesta soccorse.”).

46 Alcántara was beatified in 1622 and canonized in 1669.

47 (“la mia beata Madre Teresa, fondatrice degli Scalzi Carmelitani, [la] cui canonizzazione hoggi si tratta in Roma.”) Grillo, *Lettere*, 588. Teresa was canonized in 1622.

48 The text of the sonnet and of Bernardi’s reply may be found in Section 3.1 of *Poetry, Drama, and Music in Late-Renaissance Italy: the Life and Works of Leonora Bernardi*, ed.

way of the spirit? There is no reading that moves me more than that of holy women, who have left a path behind them for us to follow.”⁴⁹ This perception of “holy women” as embodying an exemplary model of piety is certainly of relevance to Grillo’s choice of Birgitta as theological muse to the poetry of *Christo flagellato*, and it should perhaps be seen as more generally relevant to Birgitta’s fortunes and reputation in this era.⁵⁰

Further contexts may also be fruitfully considered for Grillo’s attention to Birgitta in his writings. One, the more general, regards the history of literature and censorship in this period. From 1559 onwards, the Church had exerted a strict control on translations of the bible, and, to a lesser extent, vernacular reworkings of biblical texts and narratives. The Clementine Index of 1596 represented a kind of high-water mark of that censorship, although it was mitigated somewhat in 1605.⁵¹ Grillo insists in his letter to Spinola that he is confident in his orthodoxy and happy to submit his work for approval by the censors, but he is clearly interested in trying to open a safe space for pious literature on the fringes of biblical narrative. Hence his interest, as poet, in episodes in the life and passion of Christ that owed more to subsequent elaboration than to the Gospels themselves (aside from the flagellation and Mary’s lament over the dead Christ, the subject of *Le essequie di Christo*, he also authored sequences on the nativity and the circumcision of the Christ Child). It is here that a figure like Birgitta could be invaluable as a source, in that her revelations might lay claim to a quasi-evangelical status, without being subject to the protective strictures that affected the Gospels themselves at this time.

Another context we might profitably consider is the history of Grillo’s congregation, the Cassinesi, and their distinctive traditions of cultural production. This highly intellectual, reformed Benedictine order, founded in 1408 as the Congregation of Santa Giustina, had a very interesting, bisected history in the 16th century. For the first two thirds of the century, down to the late 1560s, Cassinesi monks were at the forefront of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew biblical

Virginia Cox and Lisa Sampson (London: 2023). On Grillo’s relationship with Bernardi, see Section 1 of the same volume.

49 (“Che non hanno fatto le Donne per la via dello spirito? Io non leggo letione, che mi muova più, che quella delle sante Donne, che dopo di loro han lasciata la via di seguirle.”) Grillo, *Lettere*, 2.288.

50 Further on the model of Counter-Reformation “pro-feminist” culture that Grillo embodies, see Virginia Cox, *The Prodigious Muse: Women’s Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Baltimore: 2011), 21–30; McHugh, “Devotion, Desire,” 155–60.

51 On the 1596 ban and its subsequent retraction, see Gigliola Fragnito, *La bibbia al rogo: La censura ecclesiastica e i volgarizzamenti della Scrittura (1471–1605)* (Bologna: 1997), 204–10, 302–03; eadem, *Proibito capire: La Chiesa e il volgare nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: 2005), 117–31.

scholarship, and they were notable for the boldness of their theological speculations, especially regarding soteriology.⁵² As is well known, they elaborated a theological position not dissimilar from the Protestant position on salvation *sola fide*, and they were close in many ways to the thinking of the so-called *spirituali*. Their list of cardinal protectors in the first half of the 16th century constitutes a virtual “who’s who” of the Catholic Reform movement (Gasparo Contarini, Pietro Bembo, Reginald Pole, Giovanni Morone).

As the post-Tridentine Church tightened its mechanisms of control, the Cassinesi fell more and more under suspicion, and in the late 1560s, they were investigated by the Inquisition for allowing heretical texts to circulate in their monasteries (and specifically the writings of the Cassinese Giorgio Siculo, who had been executed for heresy in 1551).⁵³ The ancient Cassinese privilege of exercising internal discipline within their own monasteries was revoked, and the Inquisition was given oversight. The decades that followed this saw a relative marginalization of the Cassinesi, at least in institutional terms (for example, in terms of appointments to the College of Cardinals and to important offices within the Church). At the same time, however, in the last decades of the 16th century, Cassinese authors played a key role in the formation of a new, sophisticated and influential model of vernacular religious imaginative literature, both narrative and lyric, very different in character from their earlier production. In addition to Grillo, important figures in this tradition are the narrative poets Felice Passero and Lucillo Martinengo, and the lyric and narrative poet Benedetto Dell’Uva.⁵⁴

Grillo’s letter to Spinola and the manifesto it contains may be usefully located in this context. In its retreat from the “pulverized” world of speculative theology into the softer and humbler – and safer – world of pietistic pathos, it may be seen as recapitulating, and rationalizing, the recent history of the Cassinese Congregation. In that sense, it might be seen as an admission of defeat. Less pessimistically, however, it is also possible to point to continuities with the earlier Cassinese tradition, in Grillo’s cautious defense of a theological

52 I am following here the authoritative reconstruction in Massimo Zaggia, *Tra Mantova e la Sicilia nel Cinquecento* (Florence: 2003), 399–701 (“La congregazione benedettina cassinese nel Cinquecento.”) See also, on Cassinese theology and its relation to Reformation thought, Barry Collett, *Italian Benedictine Scholars and the Reformation* (Oxford: 1985).

53 Adriano Prosperi, *L’eresia del libro grande. Storia di Giorgio Siculo e della sua setta* (Milan: 2011).

54 On Cassinese literature of the later 16th century, see Ferretti, *Le muse del Calvario*; Marco Cavarzere, “Percorsi della letteratura benedettina nel Cinquecento,” in *Cinquecento monastico italiano. Atti del XI Convegno di studi storici sull’Italia benedettina*, ed. Giovanni Spinelli (Cesena: 2013), 197–209.

tradition not based on institutionalized intellectual labor (the scholastic tradition), but on an alternative theology of revelations granted to individuals, lay and clerical, male and female, on the basis of their piety. We are hardly back here in the world of salvation *sola fide*, but Grillo’s “softened theology” of piety certainly allows for – and perhaps even privileges – the unmediated communication of the individual worshipper with God. The diffidence that Grillo manifests in the face of “speculative scholastics” also has long roots within the Cassinese tradition, which had characteristically rejected scholasticism in favor of patristic and biblical sources.⁵⁵ Scholarship on Grillo’s religious verse has also emphasized the formative importance for Cassinese spirituality of northern European influences developing out of the 14th-century *devotio moderna*, such as Lanspergius, who, as we have seen, emphasized practices of private devotional meditation and imaginative engagement with Scripture.⁵⁶ It seems appropriate to recall at this point that one of the 16th century’s most exuberant and free expansions on Scripture, Paolo Veronese’s *Marriage Feast at Cana* (1562–63), now in the Louvre, was painted for the Cassinese monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, and was praised in verse by the monk-poet Benedetto Guidi (d. 1590), a beloved mentor of Grillo’s and an important bridge between the two phases of Cassinese history noted above.⁵⁷

In any case, it would be misleading to represent Grillo’s *Pietosi affetti* as lacking theological engagement, even if his concerns are not those of his more audacious Cassinese forebears. One thing that may have attracted him to Birgitta’s *Revelations* is her “fervent attachment” to the Virgin Mary, and her bold presentation of Mary as coredemptrix alongside Christ.⁵⁸ This notion is powerfully expressed in the first book of the *Revelations*, in words attributed to Mary herself: “Just as Adam and Eve sold the world for one single apple, you might say that my Son and I bought the world back with a single heart”

55 Zaggia, *Tra Mantova*, 413, 479–80; Prosperi, “L’eresia,” 29.

56 On Grillo’s devotional influences, see Ferretti, *Le muse del Calvario*, 149–63, summarizing earlier work on this by Raboni and Föcking.

57 On Guidi’s poems on Veronese’s painting, see Cooper, “Un modo per la riforma,” 277–79. On Grillo’s friendship with him, see Durante and Martellotti, *Don Angelo Grillo*, 84–5, 90, 151n. 57 bis, 154. Guidi had played a role in the Giorgio Siculo scandal in the 1560s; see Prosperi, *L’eresia*, 377.

58 The phrase “fervent attachment” is found in Claire L. Sahlin, “His Heart Was My Heart: Birgitta of Sweden’s Devotion to the Heart of Mary,” in *Heliga Birgitta – budskapet och förebilden*, ed. Alf Härdelin and Mereth Lindgren (Stockholm: 1993), 213. On Mary as coredemptrix in Birgitta, see Kari Elisabeth Børresen, “Scripture in Birgitta’s *Revelations*,” in *The High Middle Ages* (“Bible and Women,” 6), ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (Atlanta, GA: 2015), 261.

(Rev. 1: 35.7).⁵⁹ A late madrigal of Grillo's, first published in 1620, "Come per un sol pomo", offers an exact poetic paraphrase of the first of these passages: "Just as for a single apple / the first woman and the first man / blindly sold the world / to the cruel King of deep Tartarus / so my son and I / you might say with a single heart / bought it back from eternal horror."⁶⁰ The caption to the poem concisely summarises its content and points to its source: "The Virgin Mary companion to Christ in the redemption of the world, drawn from the *Revelations* of Saint Birgitta."⁶¹

It is instructive to observe the caution with which Consalvo Durante, in his commentary on the *Revelations*, approaches this same phrase of Birgitta's. He attaches a spiritual "health warning" to the passage, clearly thinking this necessary even for the type of learned, Latin-literate readership at which the edition is pitched. "From these words," he counsels, "note that in no wise is it to be concluded that Mary redeemed the world properly speaking and satisfied the rigor of justice, as we can say of Christ."⁶² Mary, he goes on to explain, may at most be said to have been a "cooperator" (*cooperatrix*) in redemption, in that she gave birth to the Redeemer ("remote cooperation," in modern theological terms), and perhaps "even" (*etiam*) in that her maternal love for Christ led her to experience his suffering as her own ("immediate cooperation").⁶³ It is noteworthy that, by contrast, Grillo presents the madrigal "Come per un sol pomo" with no such careful framing, within a volume of verse in the vernacular that defines its target readership as "simple, devout souls" (*semplici devoti*).⁶⁴

Christo flagellato contains no explicit reference to Mary's role as coredemp-
trix, but it does include narrative details that could raise theological red flags.

59 *Revelations*, trans. Searby, Vol. 1, 112. For the Latin, see *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 56b: "Sicut enim Adam, et Eva venderunt mundum pro uno pomo, sic filius meus et ego redimimus mundum quasi cum uno corde." See also Extrav.: 35, in *Revelations*, trans. Searby, Vol. 4, 232 and Durante, *Revelationes*, 804a, for a revelation containing a restatement of this notion in the voice of Christ.

60 (Come per un sol pomo / e la donna primiera, e 'l primier'uomo / ciechi vendero il mondo / al crudo Re di Tartaro profondo, / così il mio figlio ed io, quasi con un sol core / il ricomprammo dal eterno orrore.) Grillo, *Pietosi affetti*, ed. Chiarla, 613–14 (no. 947).

61 (Maria Vergine compagna di Christo nella redentione del mondo, cavato dalle rivelationi di santa Brigida). Ibid.

62 *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 57a ("Ex verba praesentis nota nullatenus est colligendum Mariam Verginem proprie mundum redimisse, ac de rigore iustitia satisfacisse, sicut de Christo dicimus.")

63 For these terms, see Robert Fastiggi, "Mary in the Work of Redemption," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford: 2019), 303.

64 *Pietosi affetti*, ed. Chiarla, 88. The context is a note to the reader by a supposed fellow Cassinese of Grillo's, Andrea Borelli, in fact a pseudonym for Grillo himself (Ferretti, *Le muse del Calvario*, 136).

One such detail is Birgitta’s mention of the Virgin fainting when she witnesses Christ first struck during the flagellation (“I was standing nearby and, at the first lash, I fell down as if I were dead.”)⁶⁵ Grillo includes this episode in the canzonetta “Occhi de l’alma mia,” where he has the Virgin “fall” with the first “falling” of the “hoar” of Christ’s blood, struck as if by a lightning bolt of supreme sorrow.⁶⁶ This first swoon of the Virgin duplicates the later swoon, or *spasimo*, that many late-medieval Passion narratives represent the Virgin as having suffered at the foot of the Cross, and which became a symbolic encapsulation of the way in which Mary shared in Christ’s suffering though her own empathetic *compassio* and hence engaged with him in the work of redemption.⁶⁷ The *spasimo* had become a controversial element within Catholic culture by the later 16th century, since it had no Gospel authority. Indeed, it seemed to contradict John 19.25–26, which speaks of Mary “standing” by the Cross. The notion of Mary fainting was also perceived by some theologians as inappropriate, in that it detracted from the dignity of the mother of God to speak of her losing rational control of her senses as she witnessed the great redemptive mystery of Christ’s sacrifice, however powerful her grief. Durante’s commentary on the *Revelations* carefully rehearses the case against the *spasimo* made by the Dominican theologian and future cardinal Tommaso di Vio (Cajetan) in the early 16th century, which he presents as having gained the consensus of “almost all modern theologians” (*fere omnes theologos recentiores*).⁶⁸ He concludes, however, by making the case for Mary’s swoon on the basis of other thinkers, including Grillo’s prime medieval exponents of “softened theology,” Saints Bonaventure and Bernard, and one of his modern sources, Daniele Mallonio.⁶⁹

65 Rev. I: 10.17, in *Revelations*, trans. Searby, Vol. I, 67; cfr. *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 18a (“Ad primum igitur ictum, ego quae astabam propinquius cecidi quasi mortua.”).

66 Grillo, *Christo flagellato*, 12: “Del primo colpo al suono, / Lassa, per render fù lo spiro estremo:/colpo a l’orecchie tuono / fulmine à l’alma di dolor supremo. / Fulmine, onde meschina / cade al cader de la sanguigna brina.”

67 Otto von Simson, “*Compassio* and *co-redemptio* in Rogier van der Weyden’s *Descent from the Cross*,” *The Art Bulletin* 35.1 (1953), 9–16; Harvey E. Hamburg, “The Problem of *Lo Spasimo* in Cinquecento Paintings of the Descent from the Cross,” in *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 12.4 (1981), 45–75. I am grateful to Carlotta Moro for having shared with me a paper on the grieving Virgin in Moderata Fonte which alerted me to the theological complexities of the *spasimo* theme.

68 *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 310b–311a, glossing Birgitta’s second mention of her faint during Christ’s flagellation (Rev. IV: 70.4). The first mention, in Rev. I: 10.17, is glossed by a cross-reference to this note. On Cajetan’s contribution to the debate, see Hamburg, “The Problem,” 45–7.

69 *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 312b.

Once we become aware of the theological stakes of what can seem, at first sight, a simple pietistic poetic narrative, we can better appreciate the force and necessity of Grillo's self-defence in his letter to Spinola. The first passage in *Christo flagellato* to which Grillo's *opponentore* is said to have objected is a line in "Occhi de l'alma mia" that speaks of Mary, as she awakens from her faint at the flagellation, "comprehending the incomprehensible" as she watches her Son's silent suffering. For the *opponentore* this phrase implies that Mary understood the divine essence, which would make her the equal of God.⁷⁰ Grillo's rebuttal somewhat tetchily denies this intent, on the grounds that derogating from Christ's status was equally to derogate from Mary's, while still emphasizing the exceptional wisdom and supernatural insight that God conferred on Mary through grace and revelation. She was "privileged above all human creatures and possessed the gift of wisdom in its most perfect degree."⁷¹ While Grillo draws principally on Aquinas and Bonaventure as his principal authorities in arguing this case, an initial passage structured as an extended *praeteritio* reviews more ambitious claims that Grillo attributes generically to Marian treatises (*Mariali*): that Mary possessed perfect cognition of the Trinity, of the Incarnation and Redemption, of Heaven and earth, of angels and demons, and that she was capable of the infused "morning knowledge" (*cognitio matutina*) of the angels, infused directly in her by the Divine Word.⁷² The passage as a whole offers a concise demonstration of Grillo's rarely displayed, but extensive, theological erudition, in a way intended to bear out his statement that any seeming lapses of orthodoxy in his verse are not due to ignorance but represent precise and defensible choices. If he leans towards the "softened" theology of Birgitta or Bernard, it is not because he lacks the knowledge of "dry" theology to fight on the schoolmen's preferred ground.

The preceding argument does not intend to suggest that Grillo was unorthodox in his Mariology; simply that he tended, like Birgitta herself, to accord the greatest power and agency to the Virgin that the spectrum of orthodoxy permitted. She is the "greatest of contemplatives" (*summa contemplatrix*), endowed with a wisdom and spiritual insight beyond any other human being.⁷³ She is

70 Grillo, *Lettere*, 1.184 ("l'incomprensibile comprese", "dubitando non forse, ch'io volessi inferire che la Vergine Santissima avesse compreso la divina essenza, & in conseguenza non venissi à farla eguale a Dio medesimo.").

71 Grillo, *Lettere*, 1. 547: "se ben tengo che la Beata Virgine fosse la più privilegiata di tutte le creature, e che avesse in spetie il dono della sapientia perfettissimo."

72 Ibid. On the distinction between *cognitio matutina* and *vespertine* in angels, see Harm Goris, "Angelic Knowledge in Aquinas and Bonaventure," in *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Tobias Hoffmann (Leiden: 2012), 163–66.

73 On Mary as *summa contemplatrix* in late-medieval thought, see Fr. Simon Mary of the Cross, "Mary, *summa contemplatrix* in Denis the Carthusian," PhD dissertation, International Marian Research Institute, Dayton Ohio, 2021, esp. 208–16.

companion to Christ in the redemption of humanity in the most emphatic manner in which that role can be understood. Grillo aligns with Birgitta in representing Mary’s *compassio* as extending to a kind of mystical fusion with Christ, describing her, for example, in *Christo flagellato* as “Mary on the outside” and “the pierced Christ within.”⁷⁴ The extent to which Grillo’s inclination to an exalted, Birgittine vision of a Christ-like redemptive Mary reflected more general trends within post-Tridentine Cassinese culture lies outside the scope of this essay, but some evidence for this is offered by Tintoretto’s *Entombment* at San Giorgio Maggiore, in which the figure of the fainting Mary pointedly mirrors in her posture the languid cruciform of her dead Son.⁷⁵

His theological positions aside, it is also worth underlining that Grillo differs from many post-Tridentine clerics in his willingness to countenance the kind of free, imaginative engagement with Scripture that an early 16th-century monk like Lanspergius could advocate, even for laypeople. It is striking, in this connection, that he addresses his most important statement on the theology of the *Pietosi affetti* not to a fellow monk or a priest or bishop, but rather to his uncle, Niccolò Spinola, a layman engaged in the *vita activa* of law and government, similar in profile to Luigi Veniero and Servilio Treo, the dedicatees, respectively of *Christo flagellato* and *Le essequie di Christo*.⁷⁶ Still more striking is that Grillo places Spinola in the role of adjudicator in his dispute with his anonymous *opponitore*, praising him as a man capable of “speculatively disputing and theologically loving” (*speculativamente disputare, & theologicamente amare*).⁷⁷ The phrase imputes to Spinola the intellectual and spiritual capacities encapsulated in Grillo’s two definitions of “dry” and “softened” theology, implying that he is capable both of critically assessing the merits of the accusations leveled against *Christo flagellato* by arrogant “subtle speculatives” and of appreciating the merits of the loving, quasi-instinctual, empathetic piety of “devout contemplatives” like Birgitta.⁷⁸ In an era that sought to ringfence and discipline Scriptural study and contemplation, and to subordinate lay devotion

74 Grillo, *Christo flagellato*, 11: “ella è Giesù trafitto / dentro, et Maria di fuori.” Grillo also appears to have adhered to the widespread belief – not made dogma until the 19th century – of Mary’s freedom from original sin. See the madrigal “Già non ti fù de le sue gratie avara” in Angelo Grillo, *Pietosi affetti* (Venice: 1629), 600.

75 See Nichols, *Tintoretto*, 293 and plate 211.

76 Treo (1548–1622) was a Friulian lawyer and official in the service of the Venetian government. Other religious works of Grillo’s are addressed to aristocratic laywomen; see Cox, *The Prodigious Muse*, 25.

77 Grillo, *Lettere*, 1. 546.

78 Spinola’s expertise in the field of “scholastic and positive theology,” as well as his classical erudition and literary talent, are mentioned in the caption to a sonnet addressed to him by Grillo in *La prima parte delle rime* (Bergamo: 1589), unnumbered but ordered alphabetically by incipit (“Tu, che le Greche, e le Latine carte.”).

to clerical oversight, this may be seen in some ways as a “throwback” attitude, plausibly attributable to Grillo’s Cassinese background and distantly echoing the type of religious sociability characteristic of the Catholic Reform movement of the 1530s and 40s, for example in the cenacles of Juan de Valdés in Naples and Reginald Pole in Viterbo. That Grillo elected the laywoman Birgitta as the supreme inspiration and authority of *Christo flagellato* represents an important gesture on this score.⁷⁹

The Cult of Birgitta at San Paolo Fuori Le Mura

Grillo’s Cassinese affiliation is also relevant to his response to Birgitta in more specific ways. The Congregation’s chief Roman monastery was attached to the basilica of San Paolo Fuori Le Mura, one of the seven great pilgrimage churches of Rome. Grillo was abbot there between 1602/3 and 1607, just before his time in Praglia. He may even have composed *Christo flagellato* during his time at San Paolo, although his letters from Praglia represent his time in Rome as one of wearisome *negotium* rather than literary leisure.⁸⁰ The basilica had close associations with the cult of Birgitta, in that it was here, supposedly, towards the end of her life, in 1370, that a sculpted image of the crucified Christ turned his head and spoke to the future saint as she prayed or meditated before it.⁸¹

79 Further work on Grillo’s Mariology might profitably explore the potential influence of another important lay female religious writer, Vittoria Colonna, whose religious verse Grillo sometimes echoes (see Ferretti, *Le muse del Cavario*, 237, and McHugh, “Devotion, Desire,” 156). Birgitta’s likely influence on Colonna’s representations of Mary is discussed in Unn Falkeid, “*Magistra apostolorum*: The Virgin Mary in Birgitta of Sweden and Vittoria Colonna,” in *Vittoria Colonna: Poetry, Religion, Art, Impact*, ed. Virginia Cox and Shannon McHugh (Amsterdam: 2022), 75–93.

80 The date of Grillo’s arrival in Rome is disputed. Durante and Martellotti, *Angelo Grillo*, 208–210, speak of him taking up his role as abbot in 1602, while Luca Ceriotti, *Contributo alla cronologia abbaziale dei monasteri cassinesi (1419–1810)* (Parma: 2019), 69 n.43, post-dates his assumption of the role to after March 1603. The contract for Lavinia Fontana’s *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen*, discussed below in the text, suggests that Grillo was already abbot there by February 1603 at the latest. That *Christo flagellato* may have been composed in Rome is suggested by allusions to the column of Christ’s scourging in several poems towards the end of the sequence (*Christo flagellato*, 95–96). These are likely to refer to the relic found in Santa Prassede, which had been brought to Rome from the Holy Land in 1222 by Cardinal Giovanni Colonna the Younger.

81 On the history of this miracle, see Claudia D’Alberto, “Il crocefisso parlante di Santa Brigida di Svezia nella basilica di San Paolo fuori le mura, e i crocefissi replicati, copiati, e riprodotti a Roma al tempo del papato avignonese,” *Studi medievali e moderni. Arte, letteratura, storia*, a. xv, fasc 1–2, n. 29 (2011), 235–37.

In the last decade of the 16th century, shortly before Grillo’s period of residence there, a new commemoration of the miracle was introduced into the fabric of the church, as part of a more general, highly ambitious restructuring of the transept and apse. The miraculous crucifix was relocated to a newly constructed altar on a pylon on the transverse wall, and a statue of Birgitta attributed to the sculptor Stefano Maderno, perhaps in collaboration with Silla Longhi da Viggìù, was placed diagonally opposite, at a lower level, in an open-air *confessio* beneath the main presbytery.⁸² The intent of this placement seems to have been to evoke the original, miraculous encounter between Christ and Birgitta. “The dramatically activated space between the two sculptures became a stage for the perpetual reperformance of a miracle that took place 250 years before.”⁸³

It is fascinating to recollect that this piece of performance art, or sculptural “enactment,”⁸⁴ was present at the time of Grillo’s time as abbot of San Paolo Fuori Le Mura. As a striking new work of art, and as a dramatic tribute to the “marvelous piety” of a saint he revered, it was well calculated to appeal to a man of Grillo’s artistic and spiritual sensibilities. Grillo’s interest in the visual arts (as also in music) is well documented in his letters and verse. Poems praising or evoking specific sacred works of art make up a recognizable microgenre within the *Pietosi affetti*, while, as Francesco Ferretti has suggestively argued, the whole collection may be seen as intrinsically pictorial, a “vast mental picture gallery” of intensely envisaged spiritual vignettes.⁸⁵ Where concrete

82 A *confessio*, in church architecture, is a type of crypt, designed for veneration, generally beneath the main altar. In my description of the original setting of Maderno’s statue of Birgitta, I am relying on the reconstructions in Harula Economopoulos, *Stefano Maderno scultore 1571 ca–1636: i maestri, la formazione, le opere giovanili* (Rome: 2015), 143–59, and Nicola Camerlenghi, *Saint Paul’s Outside the Walls: A Roman Basilica from Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Cambridge: 2018), 196–208. Camerlenghi’s discussion includes illustrations that aid in visualizing the now-vanished configuration (see especially 6.9, reproduced here as Fig. 9.3., and 6.11. Camerlenghi’s illustrations are now available online at https://rcweb.dartmouth.edu/CamerlenghiN/VirtualBasilica/downloadableimages_page2.html). See also on the statue and its setting, Morgan Currie, “Sanctified Presence: Sculpture and Sainthood in Early Modern Italy,” PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2015, 59–61, 352–53.

83 Camerlenghi, *Saint Paul’s*, 200.

84 Currie, “Sanctified Presence,” 60.

85 (“una sorta di immane pinacoteca mentale”). See Francesco Ferretti, “Lecfrasi mistica negli *Pietosi affetti* di Angelo Grillo,” in *Tra norma e trasgressione: letteratura e immagini sacre in Italia nell’epoca della Controriforma*, ed. Andrea Campana, Fabio Giunta, and Edoardo Ripari (Città di Castello: 2019), 114. See also, on Grillo’s paintings inspired by sacred images, Simona Morando, “O che spettacolo miro, / di sangue, e di martirio: i ‘pietosi affetti’ di Angelo Grillo nell’opera dei pittori,” in *Il sacro nell’arte. La conoscenza del*



FIGURE 9.2 Stefano Maderno, *Statue of St. Bridget*, late 1590s. Basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura, Rome

IMAGE PROVIDED BY FONDAZIONE FEDERICO ZERI, UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

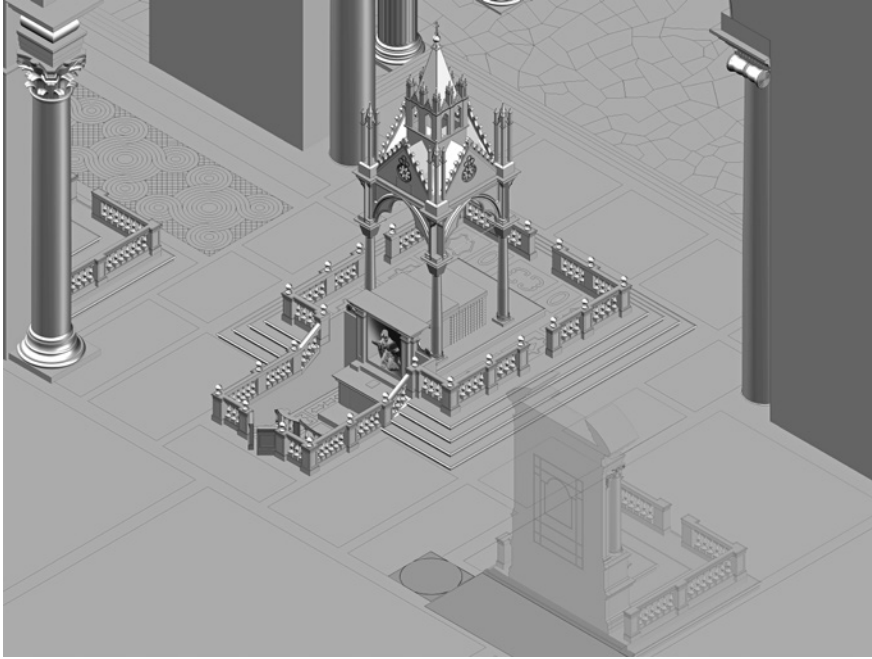


FIGURE 9.3 Evan Gallitelli, Reconstruction of the original site of Maderno's statue of Saint Birgitta in San Paolo Fuori le Mura. From Nicola Camerlenghi, *Saint Paul's Outside the Walls* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 197 (fig. 6. 9)

relations with artists are concerned, Grillo's verse documents his friendship with his Genoese compatriots Bernardo and Giovanni Battista Castello and his admiration of Sofonisba Anguissola who also resided in Genoa in the 1580s.⁸⁶ In 1586, he was responsible for introducing Bernardo Castello to Torquato Tasso, laying the groundwork for a famous 1590 edition of the *Gerusalemme Liberata* with illustrations to each canto by Castello.⁸⁷ Later in his career, as abbot of San Paolo d'Argon, near Bergamo, between 1617 and 1620, Grillo

divino attraverso i sensi tra xv e xviii secolo, ed. Laura Stagno (Genoa: 2009), 37–54. For an overview of the relationship of Grillo's religious verse to the visual arts and music, see Ferretti, *Le muse del Calvario*, 181–91. On Cassinese patronage of the visual arts generally, see *The Network of Cassinese Arts in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Alessandro Nova and Giancarla Peretti (Rome: 2021).

86 Grillo's relationship with Bernardo Castello is documented in *Parte prima delle rime del Sign[or] Don Angelo Grillo* (Bergamo: 1589), 4r (Sonnets XII–XIII); 58r (Sonnet CXXV); 80r (Sonnet CLXXXIII). For Giovanni Battista Castello, see 80v–82v (Canzone XI); for Anguissola, *ivi*, 48v (Sonnet CIII). In each case, the poems must be read in conjunction with the entries in Giulio Guastavini's "Tavola" (unnumbered but ordered alphabetically by *incipit*). See also Durante and Martellotti, *Don Angelo Grillo*, 146.

87 Durante and Martellotti, *Don Angelo Grillo*, 135–36.

conducted an energetic campaign of restoration and embellishment of a local Marian church, Santa Maria d'Argon, installing new altars and commissioning altarpieces from local painters.⁸⁸

The religious-artistic context at San Paolo Fuori Le Mura is critical in considering Grillo's meditations on Birgitta and her place in Christian culture. In addition to his private – or semi-private – poetic activities, Grillo's "day job" as abbot of San Paolo Fuori Le Mura involved him in the custodianship of an important site for Birgitta's cult. The timing of the commission and installation of Maderno's sculpture strongly suggest that, as in the better-known case of Maderno's Saint Cecilia in Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, the work was put in place for the papal jubilee of 1600, which brought hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to the city. This serves to recall that, in addition to memorializing a particular historic miracle (Christ's response to the praying Birgitta), Maderno's installation also served to model the ideal relationship of worshipper to sacred image in the sculpted rapture of the kneeling saint. In a similar way, Grillo's *pietosi affetti*, taking Birgitta as model, served as mirrors and models for the reader's own devotional meditations on the Passion of Christ. Suggestive regarding the active role Grillo envisaged for his verse as spur to devout meditation is a copy of *Christo flagellato* in the National Library of Austria (19.F.73), presumably a variant edition. This contains among its prefatory matter, between Petracci's note to the reader and the first sonnet, a copy of Anton II Wierix's 1604 engraving ROSARIO DOLOROSO, which shows the five sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary against a background of thorns.⁸⁹

As well as reflecting on Maderno's image of Birgitta, it seems likely that Grillo himself commissioned a further artwork relating to Birgitta while at San Paolo: an altarpiece representing the miracle of the crucifix by the Tuscan artist Ludovico Cardi, known as Il Cigoli (1559–1613). Cigoli painted two altarpieces for San Paolo, both lost in a fire of 1823: the Birgitta altarpiece and a *Burial of*

88 See Durante and Martellotti, *Don Angelo Grillo*, 274; Raboni, "Il madrigalista," 138; Giovanni Suardi, *Trescore e il suo distretto, memorie storiche* (Bergamo: 1853), 326–27. On Grillo's time at San Paolo d'Argon – a relatively ill-documented period in his career – see also Luca Ceriotti, "Don Valeriano e alcune lettere di minima importanza," in *Testimoni dell'ingegno*, ed. Carminati, 388.

89 See http://digital.onb.ac.at/OnbViewer/viewer.faces?doc=ABO_+Z155394907 (consulted on 21 November 2022). Further on Wierix's engravings, see Lisa Beaven, "The Early Modern Sensorium: The Rosary in Seventeenth-Century Rome," *Journal of Religious History*, 44.4 (December 2020), 457–60. The Wierix engraving is not mentioned in the only detailed bibliographical description of the 1607 edition that I have been able to find, that in the online catalogue of the Istituto Centrale del Catalogo Unico (ICCU), see <https://opac.sbn.it/en/advanced-search#1686919572326>. I am grateful to Jessica Goethals for calling my attention to the image in the Vienna copy.

Saint Paul, intended for the main altar.⁹⁰ Preparatory drawings suggest that he began to plan the *Burial of Saint Paul* from 1607, and its commission has been conjecturally dated to “between the spring of 1606 and the autumn of 1607.”⁹¹ The presence of drawings for both this and the Birgitta altarpiece on a single sheet in the Biblioteca Marucelliana in Florence suggests Cigoli’s initial work on the two projects proceeded hand-in-hand.⁹² *In situ* work on the paintings appears to have begun in the winter of 1608 and the following spring, after an earlier planned start in the spring of 1608 was postponed on account of Cigoli’s court duties in Florence.⁹³

Cigoli’s nephew and biographer Giovanni Battista Cardi speaks of the Birgitta altarpiece having been painted “for the Abbot” of San Paolo, and it seems reasonable to conjecture that the commission was due to Grillo, rather than his successor, Anastasio Casanico, of Carpendolo, near Brescia, who took office in the second half of 1607 or 1608.⁹⁴ In addition to more general factors that support this supposition (Grillo’s devotion to Birgitta, his interest in the visual arts), it seems quite likely that Grillo and Cigoli were personally acquainted. The two had mutual acquaintances in Florence, in the form of the poet Ottavio Rinuccini and the composer Giulio Caccini, and we know from Grillo’s letters that he visited Florence in the spring of 1600 and heard a performance there of a “beautiful pastoral” by Rinuccini – presumably either *Dafne* or *Euridice* – set to music by Caccini.⁹⁵ It is not improbable that Grillo met Cigoli on this visit, since Caccini’s son, Pompeo, was a member of his workshop, and Cigoli was involved as set designer for the performance of *Euridice*

90 For discussion, see Anna Matteoli, *Lodovico Cardi-Cigoli, pittore e architetto: fonti biografiche, catalogo delle opere, documenti, bibliografia, indici analitici* (Pisa: 1980), 211–13 (scheda 81); Miles L. Chappell, “Lodovico Cigoli’s Lost *Burial of Saint Paul*: Newly Discovered Drawings,” *Master Drawings*, 22.3 (1984), 287–94 and 335–45; idem, *Disegni di Lodovico Cigoli (1559–1613): Catalogo della mostra* (Florence: 1992), 168–70 (scheda 100). The *Burial of St Paul*, which Cigoli left slightly unfinished at his death in 1613, hung on the main altar until the 19th century.

91 Chappell, “Lodovico Cigoli’s Lost *Burial*,” 287. See also Matteoli, *Lodovico Cardi-Cigoli*, 213.

92 Chappell, “Lodovico Cigoli’s Lost *Burial*,” 292 and Plate 10.

93 See Matteoli, *Lodovico Cardi-Cigoli*, 29, 187, 212–13.

94 No exact dates are available for Casanico’s arrival or Grillo’s departure. See Ceriotti, *Contributo*, 69–70 nn. 43–44. Durante and Martellotti, *Don Angelo Grillo*, 225–26 date Grillo’s departure from San Paolo to 1607, some time after Easter, when the Congregation met and he received his next assignment.

95 On Grillo’s visit to Florence in 1600 and his attendance of Rinuccini and Caccini’s pastoral, see, most recently and exhaustively, Tim Carter and Francesca Fantappiè, *Staging Euridice: Theatre, Sets, and Music in Late Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: 2021), 41–46. For the phrase “bella pastorale” (contained in a letter from Grillo to Caccini), see 44, n. 111.

planned for the wedding of Maria de' Medici with Henri IV of France.⁹⁶ Cigoli was also, more generally, well connected within the Florentine intellectual community, a theorist as well as a practitioner of painting and a member of several academies – precisely the model of educated “gentleman artist” with whom *letterati* like Grillo were most likely to mix.⁹⁷

The composition of Cigoli's Birgitta altarpiece is recorded in two Seicento sources: an engraving of the early 1620s by Matteo Greuter, from a drawing by Giovanni Maggi, representing the principal altarpieces of San Paolo (where Maderno's sculpture is also depicted), and a late 17th-century painted copy of the altarpiece in the museum of the Basilica, which has been attributed to Giuseppe Ghezzi.⁹⁸ (Figs. 9.4 and 9.5) The image shows Birgitta kneeling in a nun-like habit, a little behind and to one side of the crucifix. Her position enables the torsion of Christ's body, and the twisted position of his head, which are conspicuous features of the San Paolo crucifix, to be read as the effects of his turning to speak to the saint beside him. (This is particularly clear in the Greuter engraving.) Birgitta's stance in the painting echoes that in Maderno's sculpture in some regards, and it is not difficult to imagine that the relation between the two works may have been part of the commission's appeal for Cigoli, who had written on the *paragone* between painting and sculpture.⁹⁹ On the evidence of the Greuter engraving, Cigoli's altarpiece seems to have been placed on the altar of the chapel to the right of the high altar, now dedicated to San Lorenzo, so it would have been located relatively close to Maderno's statue.¹⁰⁰

The Cigoli altarpieces were not Grillo's only artistic commission for San Paolo, nor perhaps the only one with connections to Birgitta. In 1603, towards the beginning of his tenure as abbot, Grillo commissioned the Bolognese artist Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614) to paint the martyrdom of Saint Stephen for one of the side chapels in the transept, probably following the advice of Cardinal Girolamo Bernerio (or Bernieri), who had earlier commissioned an altarpiece from Fontana for the Basilica of Santa Sabina. Grillo's agency in this commission has not been the object of much consideration. His identity as patron

96 See Timothy McGee, “Pompeo Caccini and *Euridice*: New Biographical Notes,” *Renaissance and Reformation*, n. s. 14.2 (1990), 84 and 95 (Document IV); Carter and Fantappiè, *Staging Euridice*, 25–37, 72–129.

97 Miles L. Chappell, “Cigoli, Galileo, and *Invidia*,” *The Art Bulletin*, 57.1 (1975), 91–98, offers a useful cultural profile of Cigoli.

98 The engraving is reproduced in Economopoulos, *Stefano Maderno*, 149–50, fig. 61 and in Camerlenghi, *St Paul's*, 208, fig. 6.19. The Cigoli altarpiece is second from the right in the top section. Ghezzi's painting is reproduced in Economopoulos, *Stefano Maderno*, 154, fig. 65 and in D'Alberto, “Il crocefisso,” 231, fig. 2.

99 See Miles L. Chappell, “Reform and Continuity in Later Florentine Drawing,” *Master Drawings*, 43.3 (2005), 341–42.

100 Matteoli, *Lodovico Cardi-Cigoli*, 185.

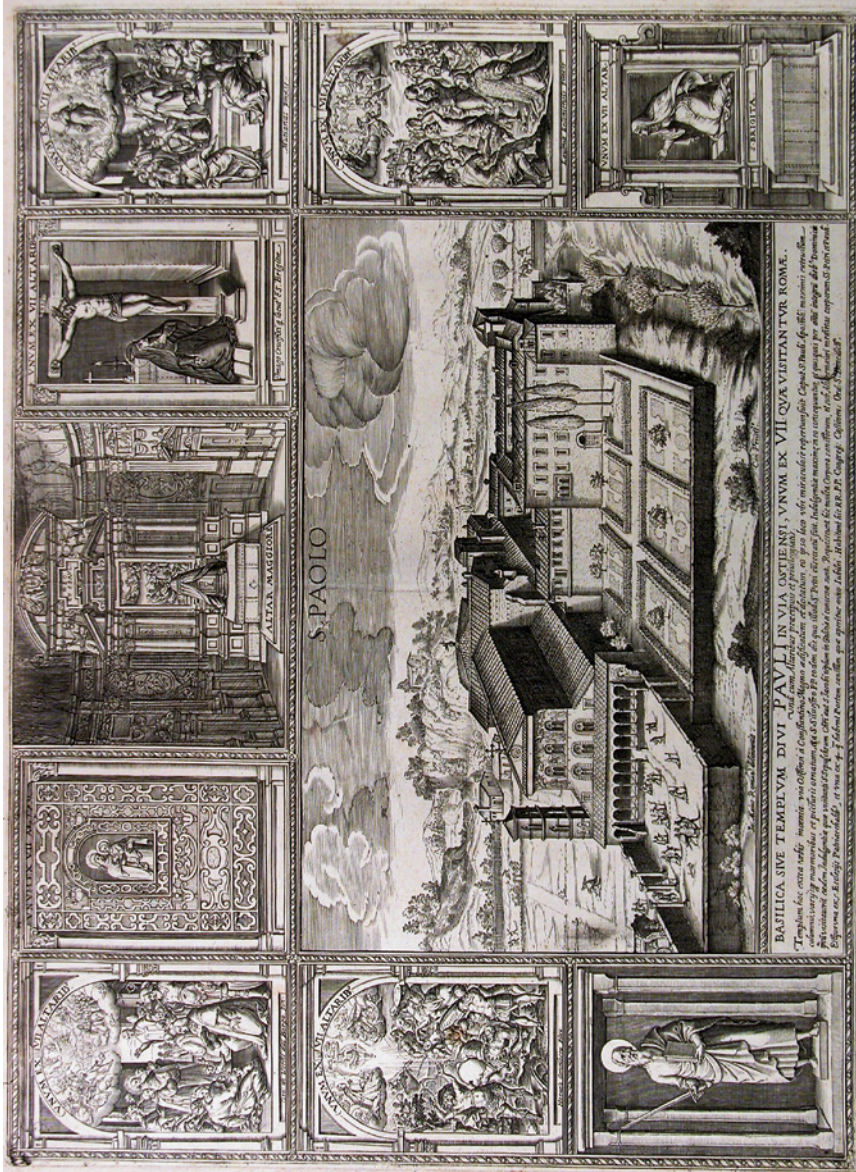


FIGURE 9.4 Matteo Greuter, *S. Paolo Basilica sive templum divi Pauli in via ostiensis*, from Giovanni Maggi's *Le dieci basiliche del giubileo*, engraving, 1625. Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte, Rome. Fondo Lanciani, BIASA, Rome XI.132.60

PHOTO BY NICOLA CAMERLENGHI



FIGURE 9.5 Giuseppe Ghezzi (attributed), *St. Bridget Talking to the Crucifix*, after a lost painting by Ludovico Cardi, called Cigoli, c.1683–1693. Museo of the Basilica di San Paolo fuori le mura, Rome

IMAGE PROVIDED BY FONDAZIONE FEDERICO ZERI, UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

was initially not recognised (the contract for the painting names him only as “Don Angelo da Genova”), and Bernerio, who was present at the signing of the contract, still tends to be presented as the effective patron or instigator of the work.¹⁰¹ Commissioned in February 1603, the work seems to have been completed in spring or summer of 1604, when Fontana is documented as working on the vast canvas in the *palazzo* of Cardinal Alessandro d’Este.¹⁰² It presumably met with Grillo’s satisfaction, as a warmly appreciative letter of 1606 attests that Fontana painted his portrait at this time.¹⁰³

Seen through the lens of Grillo’s interests, and the context of San Paolo, it cannot be excluded that Fontana’s painting has Birgittine inflections. It is quite possible that the composition reflects personal input on Grillo’s part; certainly, the contract for the painting envisages an explicit directive role for the “Reverend Father Abbot,” who, so he may “know what this altarpiece is to be,” must see a cartoon (*disegno*) in advance, which he will have the right to “alter in any way he chooses.”¹⁰⁴ Fontana’s altarpiece was lost in the same fire that destroyed Cigoli’s *Saint Birgitta*, but it is clear from an engraving by Jacques Callot’s of 1607–11 that a notable feature of the composition was the role given to the figure of Saul of Tarsus – the future Saint Paul – in the foreground, turning to engage with the viewer and indicating the martyrdom of the saint. Although a passage of the Acts of the Apostles (7.58–8.1) places Saul at the martyrdom of Stephen, and although Raphael and Giulio Romano had already had Saul figure prominently in their versions of the episode, Fontana’s placing of this figure, and the gesture she gives to him, are nonetheless distinctive enough to deserve our notice.¹⁰⁵ This iconography may reflect a revelation

101 The hypothesis that Grillo was responsible for commissioning Fontana’s work was first made in Durante and Martellotti’s 1989 biography of Grillo (*Don Angelo Grillo*, 225). Earlier literature had strongly emphasized Bernerio’s role: see, for example, Angela Ghirardi, “Una pittrice bolognese nella Roma del Seicento,” *Il Carrobbio*, 10 (1984), 154 and Maria Teresa Cantaro, *Lavinia Fontana Bolognese, “pittora singolare,” 1552–1614* (Milan: 1989), 208–209. Vera Fortunati, “Fontana, Lavinia,” in *DBI*, 48 (1997), 697, correctly identifies the “Angelo da Genova” of the contract with Grillo but she nonetheless emphasizes Bernerio’s leading role in the commission. The contract for the altarpiece is transcribed in Cantaro, *Lavinia Fontana*, 312 (doc. 5a.21). On Bernerio’s importance as an early patron of Fontana’s in Rome, see Cantaro, *Lavinia Fontana*, 14–15.

102 Ghirardi, “Una pittrice,” 154; Cantaro, *Lavinia Fontana*, 16, 209, and 313 (doc. 5a.22).

103 Durante and Martellotti, *Don Angelo Grillo*, 220–1.

104 Cantaro, *Lavinia Fontana*, 312 (“acciò che il M[ol]to Rev[erend]o p[ad]re Abb[at]e sappia che cosa habbia da essere la sud[ett]a pala obliga la sig[nor]a Lavinia a farli vedere il disegno che intende fare per la sud[ett]a pala, et che il sud[ett]o m[olt]o Rev[erend]o Padre Abb[at]e possi alterare il disegno secondo che li parerà.”).

105 Raphael’s and Giulio Romano’s versions of the *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen* are discussed in Jürg Meyer zur Capellen, *Raphael: A Critical Catalogue of his Paintings. Vol. II. The Roman Religious Paintings, ca. 1508–1520* (Landshut: 2005), 230–35.



FIGURE 9.6 Jacques Callot after Lavinia Fontana, *The Martyrdom of St. Stephen*, plate 1 from 'Les Tableaux de Rome, Les Eglises Jubilaires' (The Paintings of Rome, The Jubilee Churches), c. 1607–1611, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

of Birgitta’s (Rev. IV: 6), in which Paul appears to “show” to her (*ostendere*) the role of Stephen’s martyrdom in his conversion, both through the example Stephen provided of superhuman faith and courage, and through his dying prayer that his persecutors be pardoned (Acts 7.60: “lay not this sin to their charge”).¹⁰⁶ Consalvo Durante, in his edition of the *Revelationes*, notes that other authorities (Denis the Carthusian, Saint Ambrose) had previously suggested a connection between Stephen’s prayer and Paul’s conversion, yet he emphasizes that it is Paul’s own words, as reported by Birgitta, that confirm this connection.¹⁰⁷ As in the case of Christ’s blood-stained footprints in the wake of the flagellation, so here we see a clear example of how the *Revelations* could serve to “elucidate” Scripture, in this case by spelling out a causal connection that the text of the Bible does not make plain.

Written in Stone: Birgitta’s Words in an Age of Orthodoxy

A prominent detail that deserves notice in Cigoli’s Birgitta altarpiece is the open book besides Birgitta, to which she gestures with her right hand. The positioning of the object, and Birgitta’s emphatic gesture, serve to underline its mediatory role between the viewer and the sacred scene. The book bears an inscription from Psalm 30 [31], consisting of the second half of verse 15 and the whole of verse 16: in the King James Version, “... deliver me from the hand of mine enemies and from them that persecute me.// Make thy face to shine upon thy servant: save me for thy mercies’ sake.” (Fig. 9.7) Interestingly, the text has been adapted as if voiced by Birgitta (i.e. with relevant nouns and adjectives in the feminine form), and with the “illustra” of the Vulgate adapted to “inclina,” so that God is implored to turn his face to the speaker, rather than making it shine on her.¹⁰⁸ We are thus encouraged to read the text as an utterance of Birgitta’s in the course of her devotions before the crucifix, and one that bore immediate and miraculous results. The inclusion – and free adaptation – of a psalm text, and the use to which it is put, are reminiscent of Grillo’s own psalm

106 I am grateful to Unn Falkeid for pointing out the potential connection between this revelation and Fontana’s altarpiece.

107 *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 240. The text is found at *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 239; cfr. Rev. IV: 6, in *Revelations*, trans. Searby, Vol. 2, 35–36.

108 Matteoli, *Lodovico Cardi-Cigoli*, 186–87, transcribes the inscription from the Ghezzi copy of the painting as follows (with my italics marking out the adaptations): “[ERI]PE ME DE / [M]ANU INI- / [M]ICORUM / [ET A PE] RSE- / [QUENTIBUS] ME. // *INCLINA FACI-* / *EM TUA*[M] SUPER / *SERVAM TUAM* / *SALVAM ME FAC* / IN MISERICORD- / IA TUA D[OMI]NE.”



FIGURE 9.7

Giuseppe Ghezzi (attributed), Detail of *St. Bridget Talking to the Crucifix*, after a lost painting by Ludovico Cardi, called Cigoli, c.1683–1693. Museo of the Basilica di San Paolo fuori le mura, Rome

COURTESY OF THE PAPAL BASILICA OF SAN PAOLO FUORI LE MURA. PHOTO BY UNN FALKEID

text, *Le lagrime del penitente*, first published in 1593 and included in successive editions of the *Pietosi effetti*.¹⁰⁹ In this sequence, elegantly sidestepping the ban on direct vernacular adaptations of the bible, Grillo paraphrases each verse of the seven penitential psalms in a sonnet, adapting the voice from the biblical David to a modern everyman penitent. The movement is not dissimilar from that which we see in the Cigoli altarpiece inscription, which seems to dramatize Birgitta's adaptation, or appropriation, of a psalm text in her devotions, while serving at the same time – like Grillo's psalmic *lagrime* – as a prompt for the viewer's own prayers.

The presence of the displayed psalm text in Cigoli's altarpiece becomes especially interesting if we consider that the first written account of the miracle of the crucifix, dating to around half a century before Cigoli's commission, gives a parallel role in the episode to a very different text. Drawing on early popular beliefs, Olaus Magnus's life of Birgitta's daughter, St Katarina, published in 1553 alongside his biography of Birgitta, tells us that the crucifix spoke to Birgitta at a time when she was was "tearfully reading [or reciting] the fifteen prayers on Christ's Passion".¹¹⁰ The reference is to a work of Birgitta's now considered apocryphal: the *Fifteen Prayers* (*Quindecim orationes*), which circulated widely from the 15th century both in manuscript and in print and was presented in some sources as having apotropaic powers (in that reciting

109 On this text, see Francesco Ferretti, "L'ingegnoso penitente. Angelo Grillo e i *Salmi penitenziali*," in *La Bibbia in poesia. Volgarizzamenti dei Salmi e poesia religiosa in età moderna*, ed. Rosanna Alhaique Pettinelli, Rosanna Morace, Pietro Petteruti Pellegrino, and Ugo Vignuzzi (Rome: 2015), 151–68.

110 ("xv orationes de passione Christi lachrymose legenti.") D'Alberto, "Il crocefisso," 233, fig. 3.

the prayers over a stipulated period guaranteed precise salvific effects).¹¹¹ It is possible that the original setting of Maderno’s statue of Birgitta at San Paolo contained an allusion to this detail in Magnus’s narration. The Maggi-Greuter engraving cited above as a source for Cigoli’s lost altarpiece has an image of Maderno’s Birgitta with an open book lying by her knees – not foregrounded by a gesture, as in the Cigoli image, but in a role seemingly internal to the miracle narrative, lying as if discarded when the saint turned wonderingly to the crucifix as it spoke.¹¹² This iconography echoes that of woodcuts found in late 15th and early 16th-century editions of the *Quindecim orationes*, which show Birgitta before a crucifix with an open book beside her, presumably to be identified with the prayers.¹¹³

This possible substitution of an august biblical text (the *Psalms*) for one of more questionable status (the *Quindecim orationes*) prompts broader reflection on the material presented here. As this essay has demonstrated, the first decade of the 17th century in Italy was a remarkable period in the history of the reception of St Birgitta. It opened with a newly unveiled installation of the miracle of the crucifix being revealed to the vast crowds of pilgrims who visited the Basilica of San Paolo Fuori Le Mura in the jubilee year. Six years later, Durante published his edition of the *Revelations* – the first for fifty years, and a work whose reception is immediately attested in Mallonio’s re-edition of Paleotti’s treatise on the Turin shroud, as well as Grillo’s *Christo flagellato*, his letter to Spinola, and his commission of Cigoli’s Birgitta altarpiece. There is also some evidence that a new translation of the *Revelations*, based on Durante’s edition, was completed around this time, though it did not appear in print.¹¹⁴

Despite this enthusiasm, however, Grillo’s allusions to Birgitta in his writings betray an underlying wariness, brought out in his insistence on her ratification by popes and church councils, and her approbation by theologians and bishops. We may detect a similar impulse at work in the contract for Lavinia Fontana’s Saint Stephen altarpiece, when Grillo demands the right to amend Fontana’s *disegno* as he chooses – potentially, as we have seen, incorporating insights from Birgitta – while referring the final decision on the composition

111 For examples, see D’Alberto, “Il crocefisso,” 234–35; also 132–144 of Marco Faini’s chapter in this volume (“The Fifteen Prayers Attributed to Birgitta and Their Circulation in Italy: Private Devotion, Heterodoxy, and Censorship”).

112 The image is reproduced in Economopoulos, *Stefano Maderno*, 149–50, figs. 61 and 62 (detail).

113 Faini, “The fifteen prayers,” 129–154.

114 See Barnaba Vaerini, *Gli scrittori di Bergamo* (Bergamo: 1788), 199–200. The translator was a Capuchin friar, Bernardino da Bergamo.

to Cardinal Bernerio, a prince of the Church and pillar of the Inquisition.¹¹⁵ As Grillo must have been all too aware from his experiences at San Paolo, at more than two hundred years from her death and canonization, Birgitta had acquired a long and diverse tradition of veneration, among both learned and popular audiences. Her cult incorporated miracles (such as that of San Paolo) which had not been part of her canonization process, and texts (such as the *Quindecim orationes*) that stood on the margins of her corpus. These helped to foster the type of accessible, Christocentric, affective piety that Grillo advocated as an antidote to the desiccated “subtlety” of the schools; yet, unchecked, they could veer close to the “popular naivety” or “tender nonsense and foolishness of gossiping women” which he repudiates in his letter to Spinola. Orthodoxy and rational defensibility on the one hand, affect and “wonder” on the other – these were the conflicting imperatives of Counter-Reformation art and devotion. As Grillo’s writings and his art commissions as abbot of San Paolo illustrate, Birgitta proved a fruitful terrain on which these dynamic tensions could play out.¹¹⁶

Acknowledgements

Warmest thanks to Marco Faini, Unn Falkeid, Jessica Goethals, and Louise Rice for their exceptionally insightful and productive comments on earlier versions of this essay.

115 See Cantaro, *Lavinia Fontana*, 312, where after the clause about Grillo’s right to intervene in the composition (see n. 104 above), it is stipulated that “principalmente sarà giudicato dall’Ill[ustrissi]mo sig[no]r Card[ina]le d’Ascoli [Bernerio].” On Bernerio’s involvement with the Inquisition, see Anon., “Bernieri, Girolamo,” in *DBI*, 9 (1967), 360–62.

116 In the interest of completeness, five late madrigals by Grillo not discussed here for which Birgitta’s *Revelations* are identified as the source should be mentioned. See *Pietosi affetti*, ed. Chiarla, 614–15 and 647–48 (nos. 949–51 and 1021–22). The first cluster of three poems embroiders a line in Rev. IV: 70.13: *Nec ipse me astantem cruci videre poterat, nisi sanguine expresso per ciliarum compressionum* (“He could not even see me standing there by the Cross without blinking to get rid of the blood”). See *Revelations*, trans. Searby, Vol. 2, 127; cfr. *Revelationes*, ed. Durante, 309b. The later two madrigals, on Mary’s supposed descent into Purgatory on her feast days to rescue souls and accompany them to Heaven may come from a more popular or apochryphal Birgittine source. A degree of distance is implied by the conjectural incipit of no. 1021: “S’egli è pur ver come per fama sona” (If it is indeed true what report tells us).

“The Most Illustrious and Divine of All the Sibyls.” Saint Birgitta in the Prophetic Visions of Tommaso Campanella and Queen Cristina of Sweden

Unn Falkeid

Introduction¹

On 23 December 1655, the day before Christmas Eve, a majestic procession entered Porta Flaminia, the current Porta del Popolo, on the northern side of Rome. The newly abdicated Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–1689) was riding on her white horse and escorted by the governors of Rome and a series of dignitaries. Among this noble group were Cardinal Orsini and Cardinal Costaguti, each sitting on a donkey reenacting Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. On Pope Alexander VII’s commission, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the most celebrated artist of the age, had restored Porta Flaminia with the following inscription: FELICI FAUSTOQUE ORNATA INGRESSUI ANNO DOMINI MDCLV (“adorned for a happy and auspicious entry in the year of the Lord 1655”).²

Arriving at the piazza, a complete group of cardinals greeted the queen, and together they solemnly marched down Via del Corso before they took the right towards the Vatican palace across the Tiber River. The performance had been well-prepared. Pope Alexander had through an edict declared this important date in December to be an official feast day for Roman citizens. Accordingly, along the streets the population crowded in to get a glimpse of the spectacle. Then, at the gates of St. Peter’s, the queen descended her horse and kissed the holy cross while she was sprinkled with baptismal water. Her

1 I am most grateful to my dear friend and colleague Anna Wainwright for our rich and joyful collaboration on this volume and research project. I also owe warm thanks to Virginia Cox and Jessica Goethals, who carefully read my chapter and contributed with valuable comments, and finally to the two anonymous readers at Brill for their prudent suggestions.

2 Marie-Louise Rodén has a detailed description of the procession in her rich biography of the queen, *Drottning Christina. En biografi* (Queen Christina. A Biography) (Stockholm: 2008), 173–75. See also Veronica Buckley’s more popular biography, *Christina, Queen of Sweden: The Restless Life of a European Eccentric* (London: 2004). The sources are Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Arm. xv, n. 89. “Relazione del Viaggio, e ricevimento fatto dal N.S. Papa Alessandro VII nello Stato Eccl:co, e in Roma alla Maestà di Cristina Alessandra Regina Suetia.”

entrance into the basilica was accompanied by the antiphon *Ista est speciosa*, followed by the praise *Te Deum*. When she finally reached the pope, who was sitting on his throne, Christina kneeled and piously kissed his hands and feet.

After the tense decades in the wake of the Council of Trent, followed by the Thirty Years' War with its murky religious undertones which split Europe into several conflicting parts, Christina's conversion was celebrated as a true triumph of the Catholic Church – a triumph perpetuated by Bernini's inscription and theatrically staged by the kneeling queen at the pope's feet. Christina, however, who now took the name Christina Alexandra in a seemingly ingratiating gesture to honour the pope, soon revealed that she was far from being an obedient tool for the church. Like her predecessor and fellow citizen, Birgitta Birgersdotter, who probably entered Rome through the very same gate in December 1349, just in time for the inauguration of the Holy Jubilee, Christina came to challenge the church in several ways. Both women were *princesse* from the distant north with ambitions that went far beyond the papacy's plans.

A central question in this chapter is how Queen Christina may have regarded Birgitta, the most important saint from the Nordic kingdoms and the Scandinavian people's main access to papal power for centuries. Since there is no evidence that Christina ever read Birgitta's revelations – Birgitta's name is hardly mentioned in Christina's unfinished autobiography, in her many letters, philosophical maxims, and historical essays – it has been a scholarly tradition to claim that the saint was of lesser importance to her, if any importance at all.³ In Rome, however, where a fervent veneration of the saint took place in the restored mood of confidence at the turn of the 17th century, the citizens most likely associated the Swedish queen with the powerful and respected Swedish saint. Given Birgitta's unique position in Europe, reflected by the translations

3 In Susanna Åkerman's groundbreaking work, *Queen Christina of Sweden and Her Circle. The Transformation of a Seventeenth-Century Philosophical Libertine* (Leiden: 1991), Birgitta is mentioned briefly only once, and not as a figure of any importance for the queen. In Iiro Kajanto's investigation of the most common images and rhetorical *exempla* of Queen Christina in the panegyric literature of the 16th century, Birgitta's name is not mentioned at all. See Iiro Kajanto, *Christina Heroina. Mythological and Historical Exemplification in the Latin Panegyrics on Christina Queen of Sweden*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae* (Helsinki: 1993). In a similar way, Birgitta is referred to once, and then only in the connection with Azzolino's oratorio without elaboration or further explanation in Marie-Louise Rodén's book *Church Politics in Seventeenth-Century Rome. Cardinal Decio Azzolino, Queen Christina of Sweden, and the Squadrone Volante* (Stockholm: 2000). See also Stefano Fogelberg Rota's brief discussion of the lack of Birgitta in the studies of Christina, in *Poesiens drottning. Christina av Sverige och de italienska akademierna* (The Queen of Poetry. Christina of Sweden and the Italian Academies) (Lund: 2008), 160.

of her *Celestial revelations* into a variety of vernacular languages and by the numerous Birgittine convents spread out on the continent, it is not impossible that the newly converted Christina herself also had her native fellow in mind when she moved to Italy.⁴ Moreover, as Birgitta had gained an extraordinary reputation as a prophet during the Renaissance and the years prior to Christina's conversion, one may expect that the saint played a vital role in the formation of the queen's own religious and intellectual orientation.

Prophetic literature had indeed been one of Christina's passions a long time before she entered Rome; in particular, one text in her extensive collection of printed books and manuscripts, now part of the Vatican library, seems to be of special importance for her. Even while Christina was still living in Sweden, she was probably well acquainted with *Monarchia del Messia* written by the Italian poet and philosopher Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639). The treatise coincides with Christina's political yearnings for universal concord and peace as well as with her profound engagement with millenarian and messianic ideas. Of great interest in this context are the numerous quotations of Birgitta's revelations in Campanella's treatise. Indeed, in *Monarchia del Messia* Birgitta is equated with the foremost prophets in the long millenarian tradition from the Calabrian theologian Joachim of Fiore (c.1135–1202), probably the most important apocalyptic thinker of the whole medieval tradition, to the author's own time.

Another source which links the two Swedish women together is the *Oratorio di S:ta Brigida*, composed by Cardinal Decio Azzolino (1623–1689). Pope Alexander appointed the cardinal to be the Vatican's unofficial envoy at Christina's court the very same winter she entered Rome. Peers in age, the cardinal and the queen developed an intense friendship, and when Christina applied for taking over the guardianship of Casa di Santa Brigida at Piazza Farnese in 1673, three hundred years after Birgitta's death, Azzolino wrote the oratorio in her support.

In the following, I will examine Saint Birgitta's role in these two sources. In Campanella's prophetic vision of a coming Golden Age of happiness and universal peace, Birgitta's voice is crucial. Likewise, in Azzolino's oratorio, a fictive Birgitta prophetically hails Christina as the expected liberator of the world. As I hope my analyses will reveal, Birgitta may have played a far more important part in Christina's political and millenarian preferences than hitherto noticed. Moreover, what Campanella's text uncovers, together with the intense commitment to prophetic ideas among Christina's circle of friends and

4 For further information about the translations of Birgitta's revelations and the Birgittine convents in Europe, see the introduction to this book.

acquaintances, including Cardinal Azzolino, is a most curious embracing of Birgitta's revelations at the threshold of modernity.

Campanella and the Venetian Controversy

In June 1607, Tommaso Campanella managed to smuggle out a pile of manuscripts from his jail cell in Castel Sant'Elmo in Naples. Among the manuscripts were *Atheismus triumphatus*, *Monarchia di Spagna*, *Discorso a' Principi d'Italia*, *Città del Sole*, *Antiveneti*, and *Monarchia del Messia* – all treatises which came to give Campanella a reputation as one of the most extraordinary voices in early 17th-century Europe.⁵

The reason for Campanella's imprisonment was an upheaval in 1599 in his hometown of Stilo in Calabria in Southern Italy, of which he was the spiritual leader. After entering the Dominican order as a young man, followed by several travels and stays in Naples, Rome, Florence and Padua, where he befriended Galileo Galilei among others, he returned to Stilo in August 1598. Here he soon started to organize a vast conspiracy with the aim of transforming the province into a republic as well as removing it from the tyrannical rule of the king of Spain. Campanella's political vision was supported by his astrological conviction, by celestial signs interpreted as abnormal, and by an eager reading of prophetic literature – all of which developed into an expectation of a fundamental change, or an imminent *rivoluzione*.

The Calabrian conspiracy was not successful. Discovered in August 1599, the Spanish viceroy's armed forces repressed it immediately. The young *stilesese* managed, however, to avoid the death penalty by feigning madness. The punishment was nevertheless rather merciless. For about a quarter of a century Campanella was imprisoned in different Neapolitan fortresses, of which the years in the Castel Sant'Elmo were probably the worst. Against all odds, however, the incarceration was also extraordinarily fecund. With the aim of producing a new foundation for the entire encyclopedia of knowledge, as Germana Ernst has described it, Campanella dedicated himself to a passionate

5 Vittorio Frajese, "Introduzione," in Tommaso Campanella, *La Monarchia del Messia*, ed. Vittorio Frajese (Rome: 1995), 15. For more extensive and systematic investigations of Campanella, see the seminal studies by Germana Ernst and John M. Headley. Germana Ernst, *Tommaso Campanella. Il libro e il corpo della natura* (Rome-Bari: 2002). English trans., *Tommaso Campanella. The Book and the Body of Nature*, trans. David L. Marshall (Dordrecht: 2010); John M. Headley, *Tommaso Campanella and the Transformation of the World* (Princeton, NJ: 1997).

literary activity.⁶ Thus, most of Campanella's vast oeuvre was written in the darkness of his cell, and one of the most controversial texts he wrote during this period was the *Monarchia del Messia*.

The immediate motivation for the treatise was the conflict between the papacy in Rome and the Republic of Venice. Venetian legislation had limited the church's acquisition of real property, something that led to a papal interdict of the city from 1605 to 1607.⁷ The interdict brought a good deal of interest among European states as it involved broad discussions about papal sovereignty and the Catholic Church's political intervention in other states in order to defend ecclesiastic interests. While curialists, such as Cardinal Cesare Baronio and his fellow Oratorian Tommaso Bozio, fervently argued for the pope's right to strike hard as he possessed "directam potestatem in regna", others reacted far more hostilely to the growing triumphalism of the papacy and the pope's claim to territorial authority.

One of the critics was the Neapolitan theologian Giovanni Marsilio, who in May 1606 published the small treatise *Risposta d'un dottore in teologia ad una lettera scrittagli da un reverendo suo amico*, in which he proposed eight declarations against the papal intervention. Campanella got hold of Marsilio's treatise some few months later, and as a reaction to it, he composed his *Monarchia del Messia*.⁸ As Campanella explained in a letter to Cardinal Odoardo Farnese by the end of August, he would compose a book in defence of Pope Paul v. The reason was, as he argued, that:

after so many troubled years, caused by the diversity of principalities and the various laws, it is both natural and convenient for the governor of the world to unite all the people under one single law and under one most happy principedom, heralded by the poets as the Golden Age, described by philosophers as the ultimate republic, still yet to be experienced, and envisioned by prophets in the tranquillity of Jerusalem liberated from the Babylon of heretics and unfaithful.⁹

6 Germana Ernst, *Tommaso Campanella*, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/campanella/>. 2014. Trans. Jill Kraye.

7 Headley, *Tommaso Campanella*, 255. See also Frajese, "Introduzione," 5–14.

8 Frajese, "Introduzione," 12.

9 Tommaso Campanella, *Lettere*, ed. Vincenzo Spampinato (Bari: 1927), 25–26. New edition, edited by Germana Ernst (Florence: 2010). The quotation is taken from Frajese, "Introduzione," 9: "[...] dopo tanti scompigli del mondo avvenuti per la diversità di principati e di leggi varie, è natural e conveniente al governor del mondo unir tutte le genti sotto una sola legge et un principato felicissimo cantata da' poeti per secolo d'oro, da' filosofi descritto per stato d'ottima repubblica ancor non vista, da profeti antevista nella tranquillità di Gerusalem liberate da Babilonia d'eretici e d'infedeli." My translation.

Of special interest in this claim is how Campanella brings together the voices of the classical poets, the philosophers and the Biblical prophets, a unity he came to develop further in his *Monarchia del Messia*.

The United King-Priest

As a response, thus, to Marsilio's treatise, Campanella wrote his book in which he explains and expands on his pro-papal and messianic program. Against the Thomistic-Aristotelian idea about the division of spiritual and political power, claimed by Marsilio, he spares nothing. According to divine reasoning, Christ, and his vicar, is and ought to be the ultimate power. As Campanella argues, the devil possesses the power to split people, languages, and religions. The good ruler, on the other hand, is the person who does the opposite, that is, the lord who is able to gather the entire human race, regardless of divisions and particularities, under one single law. Consequently, a single ruler is preferable, in which both spiritual and temporal power are united.

The aim of *Monarchia del Messia* is a strong defense of the unity of temporal and religious power. According to Campanella, Christ (and subsequently his earthly vicar) was both king and priest – the titleholder of the royal priesthood of the Biblical Melchizedek, and not simply the spiritual priesthood of Aaron, as thinkers within the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition claimed (such as Giovanni Marsilio). Christ was the awaited Messiah. He was the new David, the shepherd boy from Bethlehem who conquered Goliath and gathered the Israelite people into his splendid kingdom. The perfect ruler is, thus, both a king and a priest, and Campanella's explanation for this claim is that the religion is the *anima republicae* – the soul of the state. "Religion," he writes in *Monarchia del Messia*, "is the soul of the republic, because it is found in all the parts of the republic, [...] and this soul joins those parts with each other and with God in a wondrous bond; it makes that unity extremely strong and most lovable."¹⁰

As we see from the quotation, Campanella uses the organic metaphor of the body to defend the supremacy of the king-priest. The republic is an animated body whose limbs and internal organs represent different parts of

10 Campanella, *Monarchia del Messia*, 54–55: "Anima della repubblica è la religione, perché essa si trova in ogni parte tutta [...] et questa li unisce tra loro, e con Dio di vincolo mirabile, e fa l'unità fortissima, et amabilissima." The English translation of this passage is taken from Ernst, *Tommaso Campanella* (2010), 143. The rest of the translations from *Monarchia del Messia* throughout this chapter are mine.

society and whose head (*il capo*) is the sacred high prince, that is, the pope. Even though the metaphor of the body politic originated in Aristotle's philosophy and was a most common idea in late medieval and early modern political theory, Campanella moved within a dangerous landscape by applying it to papal power.¹¹ In the shadows of his pro-papal claim lurked nothing but one of the Catholic Church's most infamous declarations, the bull *Unam Sanctam*. Issued by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302, the bull proposed a severely hierocratic interpretation of papal power, with no independence for secular rulers: as the successor of Peter, Christ had appointed the pope the single head (*caput*) of Christianity, with full power on earth, both spiritual and temporal.

Unam Sanctam stated the most extreme assertion of the pontiff's political and juridical primacy over secular rulers that probably had ever been promulgated, and the reactions were strong and immediate. Although Boniface was forced to draw it back, the bull paved the way to a deep religious and political conflict which would be long-lasting. The crisis of legitimacy which followed in the wake of the Avignon papacy, and which ended with the Great Western Schism of the church, may be understood, as I have previously argued, as an outcome of the papacy's increasing centralization and claim to earthly power in the beginning of 14th century.¹² Since the final truce at the Council of Constance in 1417 and the election of Pope Martin V, the church had therefore been most cautious in presenting such claims again. The papacy grew admittedly once again in power and wealth, as it did in the 14th century. Indeed, as Paolo Prodi has argued, from the Reformation to Campanella's own time, a full fusion and interpenetration took place in Italy within the religious and political spheres, with the consequence that religion was reduced to pure politics.¹³

Yet, despite the church's increasing monarchical structure, the pope refrained from expressing any theocratic pretensions like *Unam Sanctam*. Indeed, the papacy was especially careful in the wake of the turbulent years of the Reformation in which the church was under strong pressure. By the end of the 16th century, Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621) prudently

11 For a classical study of the organic metaphors in medieval political philosophy, see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957; repr. Princeton, NJ: 1997). See also Jacques Le Goff, "Head or Heart? The Political Use of Body Metaphors in the Middle Ages," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher (New York: 1989), 3 vols., 1: 12–26.

12 In the book *The Avignon Papacy Contested*, I explored the intellectual debates and the reactions towards the papacy's increasing centralization in the wake of the church politics in the 14th century. See Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested: An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge, MA: 2017).

13 Paolo Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice* (Bologna: 1982). See also Headley, *Tommaso Campanella*, 247–60.

developed the theory about the church's "indirect power", which the papacy quickly adopted as its endorsed ideology, thus covering its secular ambitions. Although a powerful and wealthy historical institution, the church claimed that officially it did not exercise any worldly power. Campanella, however, strongly refuted Bellarmino. As he argues in *Monarchia del Messia*:

The Catholics disagree, because the theologians partly want the pope to be a lord with direct spiritual power, to create laws and correct those laws that are contrary to the gospel, and to have a law court. But they also claim that his power is indirect *in temporalibus* when it deviates from the spiritual, correcting and adapting the politics to the religion. This is the opinion of Bellarmino, Navarro, Turrecremata [...] They claim that the ecclesiastic exemption and liberty is *de iure divino*, and the spiritual is in no way subjected to temporal power, but that it still is without power and temporal benefits, if not bestowed by the princes.¹⁴

As this passage makes clear, Campanella's aim was probably to reveal the ambiguous heart of Bellarmino's theory. While Bellarmino and his fellows on one hand stressed the divine origin of the pope's power, on the other hand they presented the power as indirect, which necessarily meant that it was given by earthly princes. Subsequently, Bellarmino's defence of the papacy was lukewarm, according to Campanella, and did not have the power to confront and solve the crisis which the Catholic Church was facing in a war-torn Europe.

Birgitta's Voice in *Monarchia del Messia*

Birgitta of Sweden plays a central role in Campanella's defence of the pope's supremacy. Campanella even equates her with the main prophets from the Old Testament who, according to the Italian philosopher, all supported his messianic predictions:

14 Campanella, *Monarchia del Messia*, 74–75: "Vi sono poscia i cattolici divisi, perché i teologi in parte vogliono che il papa sia signore in spirituale direttamente, e che possa far leggi, e correggere le leggi contrarie al Vangelo, e tenere tribunale; ma solo *indirecteae* esser signore *in temporalibus*, in quanto deviano dallo spirituale, correggendo et drizzando la politica alla religion. Questo sente Bellarmino, Navarro, Turrecremata [...] Ma che l'essentione et libertà ecclesiastica sia *de iure divino*, et non esser soggetto lo spirituale al temporale in cosa alcuna; ma non aver dominio, e beni temporali, se non per donatione de prencipi."

Jeremiah, in 30, shows exactly the restored papacy in the heaven, which means Rome. [...]. And then he [the pope] heads the whole world, like Ezekiel, Isaiah, David, and all the prophets quoted above [have explained]. There is no argument left to discuss, because all usurpations, or past permits, are human acts [and] not prophecy, which must be corrected in the way [...] that was promised to Saint Birgitta.¹⁵

The quotation is complex, as Campanella's ardent language often is. What is clear, however, is that he presents Birgitta as a devotee of the pope's earthly power. Her authority in this question is, according to Campanella, based on her prophetic activity. An irony, though, is that Birgitta herself expressed a profound critique of Pope Boniface VIII's bull *Unam Sanctam* and of what she suspected to be the growing temporal power of the church.

Birgitta argued for a balance between temporal and spiritual power. Indeed, as she carefully proposed in her *speculum regale* to the Swedish king Magnus Eriksson, the king had a divine mission. He was appointed by God, and his duty was, on the one hand, to transfer God's justice to his subjects, and thus, on the other, to help his subjects attain salvation. “I had two excellent servants”, Christ explains to her in the vision:

One was a priest, the other a layman. The first was my apostle Peter who had a priestly office. The second was apostle Paul who was, as it were, a layman [...] See what great love I had for these two! I gave the keys of heaven to Peter so that whatever he bound or loosed on earth might be bound or loosed in heaven. I allowed Paul to become like Peter in glory and honor. It should be clear that, as they were equals and partners together on earth, so now they are partners in everlasting glory in heaven and glorified together.¹⁶

15 Campanella, *Monarchia del Messia*, 132–33: “Hieremia, nel 30, mostra propriamente il papato redificato in eccelso, che vuol dir Roma. E poi: *Exit dux ex eo, et princeps de medio eius producetur, et applicabo eum, et accedet ad me. Quis enim est* etc. Dove mostra che il papa è per elettione prodotto, e che Dio lo applica a sé, e lo regge con lo spirito suo, perché l'huomo da se non può a tanto alzarsi, e poi di tutto il mondo lo fa capo, come Ezechiele, et Isaia, et David, et tutti li profeti di sopra citati. Non resta di sciorre argomento alcuno, perché tutte le usurpationo, o permissioni passate sono atti humani non profetia, li quali s'hanno da correggere nel modo, che Constantino, come fu promesso a santa Brigida.”

16 Rev. VIII: 1.26–30: “Ego auem habui duos optimos famulos. Vnus eorum erat clericus et alter laicus. Primus erat Petrus apostolus meus clerici officium habens. Secundus fuit apostolus Paulus quasi laicus ... Ecce, qualem caritatem cum istis duobus feci! Nam Petro dedi claves regni celorum, ut quecumque ligaret et solueret in terra ligata et soluta essent in celis. Paulo vero dedi, ut similis Petro fieret in gloria et honore.” Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelaciones Books I–VIII*, ed. Hans Aili, Birger Bergh, Ann-Mari Jönsson, and Carl-Gustf

As with a series of other European intellectuals, such as Dante Alighieri, Marsilius of Padua, and William of Ockham, Birgitta reacted strongly against the papacy's increasing temporal power. Indeed, her political revelations, gathered in the two books *Tractatus de summis pontificibus* and *Liber celestis imperatoris ad reges*, must be read within the context of the literary war which took place in the 14th and early 15th century in the wake of Pope Boniface's infamous bull.

Obviously highly conscious of his controversial argument, Campanella is most careful in his allusions to Boniface. The three times he openly refers to him, he describes him as "extravagant".¹⁷ Still, it is no doubt that he recalls and supports the theocratic pretensions expressed in *Unam Sanctam*. This is, for instance, clearly revealed in his critique of Dante. "Dante errs seriously", Campanella argues, "when he says that the pope must not have temporal dominion since the sons of Levi were there of righteousness. He errs because the pope is not a Levitical priest, but a Melchizedek."¹⁸ With this he means that the pope's power is not reduced to the spiritual dominion, as in the tradition of the Levitical priesthood. The pope is a Melchizedek possessing the dual position of king and priest.

When it comes to Birgitta, however, Campanella ignores the fact that the Swedish saint in many ways shared Dante's political view. Campanella simply appropriates Birgitta's philosophy as proof for his own convictions. By repeatedly quoting her revelations, he twists her arguments around:

This Christ declared to Saint Birgitta in book 4, chapter 3, saying that: "the king is not master of the realm but the helmsman." And then: "What is the king if not mediator and savior of the kingdom and of the people?" And in book 7, chapter 16, she complains about the present princes turned into Machiavellians: "Now, kingdoms are no longer kingdoms, but places of immaturity, delusions, and robbery. Just as a robber seeks ways and opportunities of getting inside to make his gain without being noticed, so too kings nowadays seek new ways of promoting their family, pocketing money and cleverly taxing their subjects."¹⁹

Undhagen, 8 vols. (Stockholm: 1967–2002). *The Revelations of Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. Denis Searby, with introductions and notes by Bridget Morris, 4 vols. (Oxford: 2006–2015).

17 See Campanella, *Monarchia del Messia*, 98, 113, and 142.

18 Campanella, *Monarchia del Messia*, 85: "Erra Dante grassamente, quando dice che il papa non deve havere dominio temporale, perché del rettaggio i figli di Levi furono essenti, perché non è levitico sacerdote il papa, ma melchisedecchio."

19 Campanella, *Monarchia del Messia*, 140: "Questo dichiarò Christo a santa Brigida nel 4, in capo 3, dicendo che *Rex non est dominus coronae, sed rector*. E poi: *Non est nisi mediator, et conservator regni, et populi, et defensor*. E nel 7, a c. 16. si lamenta de presenti precipi

Campanella's argument is that temporal power is subjected to the spiritual, thus challenging the medieval principle of the balance between the two swords. Moreover, as we see from the quotation, Birgitta is referred to as an authority in this matter. Birgitta's visions, he claims, work as an antidote to contemporary Machiavellianism. For Campanella, Niccolò Machiavelli, who in his treatise *Il Principe* (1513) reduced religion to a question of political tactic, was the figure who ushered in the ideas of pluralism and atheism which in the 17th century were spreading all over Europe.²⁰

Ideas of *renovatio mundi*

Campanella had in many ways good reason for interpreting Birgitta's revelations in this way. Despite Birgitta's message about the necessary division between religious and political power, there is no doubt that she also was convinced of an imminent change with clear theocratic pretensions. Moreover, during the Renaissance she had gained an undeniable status as a messianic promoter of a coming Angelic Savior.

In a famous revelation (Rev. VI: 67), Birgitta presents her own version of salvation history, in three ages, within the figure of the world as a ship: The first age spans from Adam to the incarnation of Christ, symbolized by the ship's high prow. The low middle part of the ship figures the humility and honesty of the early Christian centuries, while the rise of the pope indicates the final age, which according to Birgitta had just started and which would last until the Day of Judgment. At the end of this age, the Antichrist would be born from an accursed woman pretending to have spiritual wisdom, and from an accursed man, chastising the impious and proud inhabitants of the world.

Birgitta's third *status* is probably not the very same as the Joachimite Age of the Spirit. Birgitta was always eager to defend the church as a historical institution. Still, her clear expectations of the tribulation that the church must suffer, followed by a thorough reform and a period of tranquility, illumination, and

così fatti alla macchiavellesca: *Nunc regna sunt puerilia et deliramenta, et latrocinia, quia sicut latro quaerit modum, et tempus, quo insidietur, et obtineat lucra, ne notetur; sic reges inquirunt quomodo genus eorum eleuetur, quomodo pecuniae imbursentur, quomodo subditi sapienter onerentur, et libenter faciunt iustitiam propter lucrum temporale, non propter aeternum.*"

20 As Headley has argued in his chapter on Campanella's controversy with Machiavelli, the author of *Il principe* represented the greatest intellectual antagonist of Campanella after Aristotle. He constantly fought his ideas, and most expressively in the treatise *Atheismus triumphatus*. Headley, *Tommaso Campanella*, 180–96.

liberty, reveal a deep awareness of contemporary apocalyptic ideas of *renovatio mundi*. The same may be said, as Marjorie Reeves has convincingly argued, of Birgitta's description of the involuntary agent of God's judgement.²¹

Whether the chastiser would be Christian, heretic or pagan, is unclear. In Rev. IV: 22 Birgitta describes him as *arator* (the plowman), in Rev. VIII: 18 he appears as *venator* (the hunter), and in the Birgittine revelations gathered by Johannes Tortsch of Leipzig in the first half of the 15th century, the so-called *Onus mundi*, the chastiser is labelled *Dux venturus* (the coming Prince).²² Furthermore, Birgitta's portrayal of the future *sanctus papa* who will reside in Rome (Rev. VI: 74), shares similarities with the Joachimite Angelic Pope. Indeed, Birgitta's many visions of the pope's and the emperor's future return to Rome have not only political and moral connotations. They are obviously fundamental aspects of her prophecies of the Last Things, in which the two powers would fulfill their divine missions. In other revelations, such as in Rev. VI: 83, Birgitta explains how those who in the future respond to the call of Christ will be blessed, and how before Antichrist the door of faith will be opened to gentiles – images which all are closely related to the contemporary Joachimites and later picked up by Campanella.

Birgitta was from her earliest visionary career associated with the prophetic tradition in the wake of Joachim of Fiore, even though she never labelled herself a prophet. In several revelations, however, she compares her mission with the undertaking of Moses, the main prophet in the Biblical tradition. In Rev. II: 10 she claims that the voice who is speaking to her is the same as Moses hears in the burning bush: "I who am now speaking with you am that voice heard from the bush. I have heard the misery of my peoples."²³ God's call is clear: as Moses once freed Israel from the land of Pharaoh, Birgitta's mission is to bring the believers through the desert to the promised land of God. While

21 Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages. A Study in Joachimism* (1969, repr. Notre Dame: 2011), 338–39. On the same issue, see also Reeves' introduction "The Medieval Heritage," in *Prophetic Rome in the High Renaissance Period*, ed. Majorie Reeves (Oxford: 1992), 15–16.

22 *Onus mundi*, printed in Rome by Eucharius Silber, 1485. ISTC ib00675000. Chapter 8 is entitled: "De duce venturo qui erit future tribulationis executor." See also the entry to the database *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden: Legacy of Birgitta | Onus mundi, alieque reuelationes quarti libri*, impr. Eucharius Silber (Franck). 1485. Rome. (uio.no).

23 Birgitta of Sweden, Rev. II: 10: "Ego sum illa vox de rubo sonans, qui nunc loquor tecum. Miseraia populi mei ascendit in aures meas." For a more systematic investigation of the figure of Moses in Birgitta's *Revelations*, see Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: 2001), 74–77; and, more recently, Unn Falkeid, "Stupor et mirabilia! The Ascent of an Early Modern Redeemer," in *Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine*. 34 (66), 15–29.

she was still living in her home country, Master Mathias of Linköping, Birgitta's Swedish confessor, depicts her in his prologue to the *Revelations* not only as the reborn Moses, but also as the threshold figure who inaugurates the age of spiritual renewal, not unlike the Franciscan spirituals configured Saint Francis. Equally, in Alphonso Pecha's prologue to Book VIII of the *Revelations*, entitled "The Hermit's Letter to Kings" (*Epistola solitarii ad reges*), Birgitta is styled as the last figure in the long lineage of Biblical prophets and classical sibyls. After Birgitta's canonization, and in the wake of Mathias' and Alfonso's influential texts, the "true prophetess of God" was one of the fundamental characteristics of her sanctity.

As Brian Richardson has discussed in his significant contribution to this book, and which is explored by other scholars as well, such as Marjorie Reeves, Ottavia Niccoli, Roberto Rusconi, and more recently Michele Lodone, excerpts of Birgitta's revelations circulated both in Latin and Italian after her death.²⁴ Still, the diffusion of her original texts was rather limited compared to the production and circulation of spurious work. In both traditions, however, Birgitta's name was closely associated with Joachim of Fiore. In the concluding chapters of the *Onus mundi*, Johannes Tortsch clearly links the Swedish saint with Joachim. Likewise, the many Renaissance pseudo-Birgittine prophecies that circulated on the Italian peninsula connect the Swedish saint with the abbot from Calabria. One of these apocryphal prophecies, "Ave Iesu Christo figlioli di Maria", was curiously enough attributed to both Birgitta and Joachim of Fiore, as Richardson has shown.²⁵

Other prophetic works, such as the popular *Apocalypsa Nova* attributed to the Franciscan monk Amadeus of Portugal, also called Beatus Amadeus

24 See Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*; Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Princeton, NJ: 1990); Roberto Rusconi, *Profezia e profeti alla fine del Medioevo* (Rome: 1999); Michele Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgarizzamenti e riscritture profetiche," *Rivista Di Storia Della Chiesa in Italia* LXXIII, no. 1 (2019): 69–84, 79–84; See also Domenico Pezzini, "The Italian Reception of Birgittine Writings," in *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into the Medieval European Vernaculars*, ed. Bridget Morris and Veronica O'Mara (Turnhout: 2000), 186–212; Domenico, Pezzini, "Il primo volgarizzamento italiano delle rivelazioni e degli altri scritti di S. Brigida: il codice I.V. 25/26 della Biblioteca degli intronati si Siena (1399)," in *Santa Brigida, Napoli, l'Italia: atti del convegno di studi italo-svedese, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 10–11 maggio 2006* ed. Olle Ferm, Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese & Marcello Rotili, (Naples: 2009). 61–73; Silvia Nocentini, "The Transmission of Birgittine and Catherinian Works within the Mystical Tradition: Exchanges, Cross-Readings, Connections," in *Sanctity and Female Authorship. Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (New York & London: 2020), 93–112.

25 For a further analysis of this poem, see Jessica Goethal's and Anna Wainwright's rich and thought-provoking chapter in this book.

(1420–1482), containing among other things prophecies of an Angelic Pastor who would restore peace and universal concord, Birgitta is frequently quoted alongside Joachim of Fiore.²⁶ The Bosnian philosopher and theologian Giorgio Benigno Salviati (1444/48–1520), a follower of the rebellious Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, who himself had an uneasy relationship with the Birgittine legacy, revised and extended *Apocalypsa Nova* by adding Birgittine prophecies.²⁷ In the popular *Pronosticatio* of the German monk and astrologer Johann Lichtenberger (originally 1488, but published later in many different editions), Birgitta is frequently quoted together with the Sibyls, Daniel, Joachim of Fiore and other prophets.²⁸ Moreover, in the *Imminente flagello de Italia* (presumably printed in 1510), Birgitta is mentioned together with a long list of prophets, beginning with Joachim of Fiore.²⁹ Other important Renaissance admirers of the Swedish diviner were Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, Domenica Narducci, Caterina Cibo, Dionisio Gallo, Antonia Negri, and the Cabbalist Guillaume Postel.³⁰ Postel underscored the truth of

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- 26 Anna Morisi-Guerra, “The *Apocalypsa Nova*. A Plan for reform,” in Reeves, *Prophetic Rome*, 30. On *Apocalypsa Nova*, see also Eduardo Fernández Guerrero, “Profetizar la Reforma. Paolo Angelo y el Apocalypsis nova,” in *Visiones imperiales y profecía. Roma, España, Nuevo Mundo*, ed. Stefania Pastore and Mercedes García-Arenal (Madrid: 2018), 103–26.
- 27 For Salviati’s references to Birgitta, see Cesare Vasoli, “Giorgio Benigno Salviati (Dragišić),” in Reeves, *Prophetic Rome*, 121–156. See also Cesare Vasoli, *Civitas Mundi. Studi sulla cultura del Cinquecento* (Rome: 1996), 101–19. For Savonarola’s conflicting relationship to Birgitta, see Tamar Herzig, *Savonarola’s Women: Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: 2008); Andriana Valerio, “Verso Savonarola: Profezia e Politica in Brigida di Svezia,” in *Verso Savonarola. Misticismo, profezia, empiti riformistici fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini and Giuseppe Picone (Florence: 1999), 25–34.
- 28 Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, 347–351; Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 3. See also Giancarlo Petrella, *La “Pronosticatio” di Johannes Lichtenberger: un testo profetico nell’Italia del Rinascimento, con edizione anastatica di Johannes Lichtenberger, Pronosticatione in vulgare, Milano, Giovanni Antonio di Farre, 18 luglio 1500* (Udine: 2010), 26–27.
- 29 Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 93.
- 30 For Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola’s and Dionisio Gallo’s celebration of Birgitta, see Marion Leathers Kuntz, *The Anointment of Dionisio: Prophecy and Politics in Renaissance Italy* (University Park, PA: 2001). For Dominca Narducci and Caterina Cibo, see Clara Stella’s contribution to this book (“A Lineage of Apocalyptic Queens: The Portrayal of Birgitta of Sweden in Domenica Narducci’s Sermon to Caterina Cibo (1533)”). See also Adriana Valerio, “Caterina Cibo e la spiritualità savonaroliana attarverso il magistero profetico de Domenica da Paradiso,” in *Munerva Parva. Studi in onore di Boris Ulianich*, ed. G. Luongo (Naples: 2000), 141–54. For Antonia Negri, see Eleonora Cappuccilli, “In the steps of Birgitta of Sweden: the reluctant authority of Paola Antonia Negri (1508–1555),” *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 35. Issue 4 (2021): 583–99. See also Cappuccilli’s contribution to this book (“The Semantics of Obedience. Birgittine Influences on Paola Antonia Negri’s Letters”). See also my study on the connections between Birgitta and Vittoria Colonna

Birgitta's prophecies in his work *Panthenousia* (1547) in which he envisions a universal reform and a restitution of all things.³¹

The list of Renaissance pamphlets, prayers and popular prophecies which echoed the legacy of Joachim of Fiore, and in which Birgitta's name regularly appears, is long. Campanella obviously founded his reading of Birgitta on this tradition. Birgitta represented the chastising voice which predicted the tribulations of a coming Antichrist. Her voice was strengthened by the numerous Renaissance prophecies about an imminent political Messiah, i.e. an Angelic Pastor who would restore the world order and peace. When it comes to Campanella's *Monarchia del Messia*, though, this century-long prophetic tradition, in which Birgitta was endowed with an extraordinary authority, merges with the philosopher's empirical speculations and humanistic studies.

The Latest Prophet

In several passages throughout the treatise, Campanella refers to specific books and chapters of Birgitta's *Revelations*, which again reveals his rare familiarity with Birgitta's literary corpus. During his imprisonment, he was able to follow political events and even get hold of books. Perhaps he also managed to get a copy of Consalvo Durante's edition of Birgitta's revelations, which was printed in Rome the very same year as he wrote his *Monarchia del Messia* (1606)? We do not know this for sure. Campanella, however, obviously knew Birgitta's words very well from before that time as well, which gives us reason to believe that he might have been in possession of earlier prints, such as Olaus Magnus' complete edition of the *Revelations* from 1557, also printed in Rome.

According to testimonies during Campanella's trial in the wake of his rebellion in 1599, his messianic interests and millenarian prophecies were broad and had affected his thoughts and political actions for several years already. As a certain Giovan Battista Pizzoni witnessed, Campanella had once told him in confidence:

and the reform movement in Rome in the early 16th century. Unn Falkeid, "Magistra apostolorum: The Virgin Mary in Birgitta of Sweden and Vittoria Colonna," in *Vittoria Colonna. Poetry, Religion, Art, Impact*, ed. Virginia Cox & Shannon McHugh (Amsterdam: 2021). 75–95.

31 Marion Leathers Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel: Prophet of the Restitution of All Things* (The Hague: 1981); Aldo Stella, "Esperienze e influssi di Guillaume Postel fra i movimenti eterodossi padovani e veneziani," in *Postello, Venezia e il suo mondo*, ed. Marion Leathers Kuntz (Florence: 1987), 119–36.

I have foreseen and I have many prophecies, as those also prophesied by St. Birgitta, St. Catherine of Siena, Blessed Joachim [of Fiore] and Savonarola, that in the year sixteen hundred there will be great rumors, eradications and uprisings of people and mutations of state, and for this reason it will be good to be armed.³²

In addition to exposing his familiarity with Birgitta's revelations, the quotation strikingly reveals how Campanella locates the Swedish saint within the exclusive lineage of Italian prophets, from Joachim of Fiore to Savonarola, of which he probably regarded himself as the latest offshoot.

Campanella grants, to be sure, the prophets a key role in the establishment of the coming Golden Age. As he depicts them, the prophets are bearers of truth. Despite their destiny as victims, persecuted and even executed as they usually are by false princes, their government will continue, he argues. The reason for this is that prophets are masters by nature, and the most prominent among these masters is, precisely, Birgitta. "The revelations of this saint," he explains, "are every day seen to be verified [...] and the words from the mouth of Christ are to be preferred over all theological speculations in this matter and in any other."³³ The divine words conveyed by Birgitta had, in other words, far more authority than the theologians' learned interpretations, and the words' veracity are continuously experienced.

Birgitta is quoted thoroughly throughout *Monarchia del Messia*. Towards the end, her name appears on almost every page, until the final crescendo in the very last paragraph of the book, in which Birgitta is transformed into the self-same sword, which the philosopher raises against the spokesmen of the ecclesiastic politics of the two powers. The figure he dwells on here is Domingo de Soto (1494–1560), the Spanish friar within Campanella's own order who strongly supported Cardinal Bellarmino's theory of the pope's indirect power.

32 Luigi Amabile, *Fra Tommaso Campanella. La sua congiura, i suoi processi e la sua pazzia* (Morano, Naples: 1882), III, p. 20: "Io ho previsto et ho molte profetie come di s. Brigida, s. Catherina di Siena, del Beato Joachino et del Savonarola hanno prophetato che nell'anno seicento dovevano essere gran romori debellioni et sollevationi di populi et mutationi di stato, et saria bene per che saria armato, per ciò credendosi che queste profetie per lui e per questi stati di Calabria se volea tenir armato." The quotation is taken from Frajese, "Introduzione," 18. My translation.

33 Campanella, *Monarchia del Messia*, 129: "Le revelation du questa santa ogni giorno si veggono verificare, e furo approvate da Concilij e gravissimi theologi, e sendo della bocca di Christo si devono preferire a tutti theologi opinanti in questa materia et in ogni altra."

And so, Christ declared to Saint Birgitta, that the Church has its judges, who are the priests, the defenders, who are the princes, the farmers, who are the plebeians, and all these make a body whose soul is the evangelical religion, and not the king, as Soto foolishly says. The opinion which Soto denies is admittedly true, that is, that every domination was introduced by usurped and permissive tyranny. But only the kingdom and the government were natural, and Christ revoked it for this. There is therefore no proper lord in the Christian world, but the king and shepherd, except inasmuch as they confuse their names and take one for the other.³⁴

Once again, Birgitta is referred to as the leading expert regarding the supremacy of the shepherd-king, that is, the figure who unites temporal and divine powers. As Campanella argues, in accordance with Augustine's political theology, the establishment of secular rulers was a consequence of the Fall and thus a punishment of human pride. So far, he does agree with Soto. But as he also claims: the intervention of Christ in human history eradicated all forms of old systems and hierarchies by re-establishing divine law, under which the entire human race could come together, transcending earthly divisions and conflicts.

Birgitta's Presence in Other Works

Birgitta's name also appears in other works by Campanella. In sonnet 58, presumably written in 1603, her name is even part of the title: *Sonetto cavato dall' "Apocalisse" e santa Brigida* (Sonnet taken from the Apocalypse and Saint Birgitta).³⁵

Molti secoli son, che l'umana germe,
vinto dal rio costume, al mondo diede
genti doppie di sesso e doppia fede,
pronti agl'inganni, alle virtuti informe.

34 Campanella, *Monarchia del Messia*, 142: "E così dichiarò Christo a Santa Brigida, che la Chiesa ha li giudici, che son i sacerdoti, li difensori, che son li principi, gli agricoltori, che è la plebe, e tutti questi fanno un corpo di cui anima è la religione evangelica, e non il re, come dice stoltamente Soto. È vera quell'opinione che il Soto nega, cioè ogni dominio essere introdotto per tirannide usurpata, e permissive, ma solo essere naturale il regno, et il governo, et a questo ne rivoò Christo. Non ci è dunque propriamente signore nel mondo christiano, ma re e pastore, se non in quanto ci confondon gli nomi, e si piglia l'un per l'altra."

35 *Tutte le opere di Tommaso Campanella*, ed. Luigi Firpo (Milan: 1954), Vol. I, 1331.

In mezzo a tanti mali io per vederme,
 stavo piangendo, ed ecco ch s'avvede
 Europa in parte, dove men possiede
 ambo gli porti di lussuria il verme.

Quel che aspettavan tutti vati insieme,
 veggo più venti correre a vendetta
 contra la belva onde natura geme.

Un destrier bianco il suo cammino affretta,
 di nostra redenzion verace speme:
 l'adultera il destin, temendo, aspetta.

Many centuries have passed, since the human germ, / overcome by the
 evil habit, gave to the world / a people double of sex and double of faith, /
 ready for deceit, for formless virtues. / Finding myself in the midst of so
 much evil / I was weeping, and this is what happens / a split Europe where
 both parts are lesser / and both bring you the worm of lust. / What all the
 prophets were waiting for, / I see winds running for revenge / against the
 beast whence nature groans. / A white horse hastens his way, / our hope
 of true redemption: /the adulteress, fearing, awaits the destiny.³⁶

The poem, highly apocalyptic in tone, brings to the fore the image of a war-torn Europe, divided in two (Campanella is probably referring to the Lutherans and Catholics). The devil is ruling in both camps. The lyric self, then, recalls the prophets. But he also presents himself as a visionary (“veggo più venti”), who foresees the apocalyptic white horse who will conquer the beasts and bring concord and salvation to humanity (Apoc. vi, 2).

According to Luigi Firpo, the Birgittine passage that Campanella is alluding to in this poem is book IV, chapter 43 of the *Revelations*, in which the Virgin Mary is likening bad pastors to a worm gnawing away the roots of a tree. However, this is only a suggestion. The image of wicked priests is, after all, a subject that runs through the entire *Revelations*, which means that it may be inspired by a series of other revelations as well. The same may be said about Campanella's madrigal 8, vv. 12–16, in which Lina Bolzoni assumes that the expression “muto idolo” (dumb idol) is an image taken from Birgitta's *Revelations* I: 48 and IV: 133, where Moses recalls how he once saved his people:³⁷

36 *Tutte le opera di Tommaso Campanella*, Vol. I, 127. My translation.

37 *Opere letterari di Tommaso Campanella*, ed. Lina Bolzoni (Turin: 1977), 269. My translation.

Più prodigi e più grandi
 il tuo Nume schernito,
 qual muto idolo, agogna oggi, che quei
 ch'i mostri han sovvertito
 di Samaria, d'Egitto e di Caldei.

Today the people long for more prodigious and greater miracles – your Nume mocked, like a mute idol – than those of the monsters that destroyed Samaria, Egypt, and Chaldea

Bolzoni may absolutely be right in tracing the words back to Birgitta. But since the expression is used in none of the indicated passages of Birgitta's revelations, at least not literally, the image might just as easily be taken from other revelations as well. Also, Moses is, as we have seen, a central figure in Birgitta's revelations, and a figure with whom Birgitta even herself associated. Of importance is, regardless, that Birgitta's voice resounds in Campanella's rich and philosophical poems, as it does in other works as well.

Besides *Monarchia del Messia*, Birgitta's name appears most conspicuously in *Articuli prophetales*, a compilation of the defense that Campanella presented during the trial in 1599.³⁸ To a certain degree, the treatise may be labelled Campanella's most extreme millenarian text, which expands on the legitimacy and the reasons for the author's belief in a great *mutazione* and the coming of a Golden Age. Here, he lists works by saints and prophets, scholars, philosophers, and astrologers, including Birgitta.

Once again, the references to Birgitta are numerous. Indeed, her name appears far more often than other writers or authorities and may only be surpassed by Biblical figures such as David, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Moses, or Saint Paul. Birgitta is, for instance, quoted concerning the prophecies of the possible coming desolation of Rome, inflicted by the Turks as God's punishment. She is referred to as a saint, a prophet, a divine seer, and in chapter 8, Campanella calls her “*illustrissima Sybillarum*” (the most illustrious of all the Sibyls). In the same passage, he reveals how Birgitta's political theology coincides with his own visions:

In book 6, ch. 77 of the *Revelations*, the Lord says: “There will come a time when there will be one sheepfold and one shepherd, one faith and one clear knowledge of God” etc., and he promises to give the salvation of all

38 *Articuli prophetales* is published in a modern critical edition, edited by Germana Ernst (Florence: 1977). All translations from this book are mine.

the nations. In *Extravagantes*, ch. 78 he promises a universal reformer after present troubles, so: “The stupid will rule, and the wise will not raise up their heads, honor and truth will be laid low until the coming of the one who will placate my anger and will spare not even his own soul for the love of justice.” I imagine that this is a preview of an angelic pope foreseen by abbot Joachim and predicted by Saint Vincent.³⁹

After this passage, the references to and discussions of Birgitta’s revelations continue in length, precision, and depth, over several pages, describing how an epoch will come in which there will be an end to the evils that currently afflict humanity. Wars, pestilence, hunger, and slavery will cease, and a new and wonderful era will arise, bringing happiness and glory to the human race.⁴⁰ In this new era, he proclaims, once again with a precise quotation from Birgitta’s *Revelations* (Rev. vi: 83), “there will be so much piety among the gentiles that Christians will be like their servants spiritually. The scriptures will be fulfilled that speak of the people which does not understand, who will glorify me, and of the wasteland that shall be built up. They shall all sing ‘Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit and raise to all his saints.’”⁴¹

The *Articuli prophetales* is replete with references, quotations, and allusions to Birgitta. What they tell – and what Campanella himself also stated repeatedly – is that the Swedish saint was a most important figure in his own intellectual and personal formation. She was a model in his youth, a spiritual companion in the troubled years of his imprisonment, and an interlocutor his entire life.

39 Campanella, *Articuli prophetales*, 109: “In lib. 6 *Revelatioum* cap. 77 dicit Dominus: ‘Erit tempus quo fiet unum ovile et unus pastor, una fides, una clara cognition Dei’ etc. et promittit salute cunctis nationibus. In *Revel. Extravagant.*, cap. 78, promittit reformatorem universalem post praesentes turbationes, sic: ‘Discordiae abundabunt, stulti dominabuntur, sense et sapientes non levabunt caput, honor et veritas prosternentur, donec veniat qui placabit iram meam, et qui suae animae non parcat pro charitate aequitati’. Hunc ego puto esse Papam angelicum praevisum ab abate Ioachino et prophetatum a sancto Vincentio praedicatorio.”

40 Campanella, *Articuli prophetales*, 110: “unde bella, pestes, fames et servitus sub Turcis et aliis, divinae irae instrumentis, vigent et vigeant, donec omnes principatus christiani ob discordias pereant, ac inde oriatur pulcherrima reformatio postmodum sub uno capite per praedicationem apostolicorum hominum, conversis ad fidem infidelibus, cum summo principe illorum.”

41 Campanella, *Articuli prophetales*, 110–11: “Et in 6 cap. 83: ‘Christiani erunt spiritualiter servi paganorum convertendorum, complebitur sermo: Populus non intelligens glorificabit me. Aedificabuntur deserta et cantabunt omnes Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui sancto.’”

Campanella's profound regard for Birgitta is perhaps most noticeably confirmed in a letter he wrote in 1606, that is, the very same year he composed his *Monarchia del Messia*. As soon as I can leave this jail, he writes, I will travel to Vadstena in order to visit Saint Birgitta's tomb: "It is she who is my love, it is she who reconciled me with Christ, it is she who has prophesied the events of my life; she is the most illustrious and divine of all the sibyls."⁴²

Irenic Visions

Embedded in Campanella's theocratic vision we are confronted, paradoxically enough, by the concept of toleration. In contrast to laws that protected particular groups, such as the Mosaic Law, which celebrated the Israelites as the chosen people of God, the law of Christ aimed at the salvation of all humankind. As Campanella argues, the law of Christ was universal, and as such it liberated people from old yokes and superstitions. While the devil's work is division and the separation of human beings, Christ's *lex libertatis* had the power to invert old hierarchies, even sexual, because no man had absolute power over others, except for Christ and his successors.

The unity of king and priest, envisioned in *Monarchia del Messia*, would allow humanity to return to a single, divine law. Accordingly, in the coming monarchy of the Messiah, all of humankind would be united into a single fold under one shepherd, as predicted by the prophets. This global ambition, underscored by the numerous references to Birgitta, was probably one of the reasons for the success of Campanella's ideas among intellectuals of the 17th century. Philosophers, such as the Dutch humanist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), who promoted irenic visions of an all-embracing church, reconciled on the principle of religion and toleration, were deeply engaged with Campanella's theory.

Grotius glossed his edition of Campanella's *Aforismi politici* – a treatise which also was smuggled out of Campanella's cell together with *Monarchia del Messia* and other texts, and later published in Paris in 1637 – with acute comments and observations. As Luigi Firpo, Germana Ernst, and more recently Jean-Paul de Lucca have discussed, the Protestant Grotius agreed with the Catholic Campanella that it was a Christian duty to seek the unity of

42 Letter 143 in Tommaso Campanella, *Lettere*, ed. V. Spampinato (Bari: 1927): "ipsa est amor meus, ipsa me Christo reconciliavit, ipsa de negotiis vaticana est: ipsa est sybillarum illustrissima et divinissima." The quotation is taken from Lina Bolzoni, "Tommaso Campanella e le donne: fascino e negazione della differenza," *Annali d'Italianistica*, Vol. 7, *Women's Voices in Italian Literature* (1989), 193–216; 213.

the church.⁴³ Moreover, both philosophers promoted the idea of a universal human law as a precondition for restoring and maintaining peace.

It is uncertain whether the two philosophers ever met, although Grotius was obviously aware of the presence of Campanella in Paris when he returned to the city in March 1635 as Sweden's ambassador. What is of importance in our context, though, is that Grotius is one of the figures who links Queen Christina to Campanella. Grotius' decade-long correspondence with Gérard Vossius, the father of Queen Christina's influential librarian, Isaac Vossius, reveals that Grotius sent him at least two (unspecified) works by Campanella, of which one may have been the Latin translation of *Monarchia del Messia* (1633).⁴⁴ Likewise, Grotius' letters to Christina's powerful mentor Axel Oxenstierna make clear that the ambassador was highly engaged with Campanella's work.⁴⁵

The Swedish historian Susanna Åkerman has thoroughly explored the influence of prophetic literature on Christina and her circle of intellectual libertines, and Campanella's name appears frequently.⁴⁶ Indeed, as Åkerman argues, even the queen's conversion may be interpreted as inspired by millenarian and messianic convictions, and in particular by Campanella's vision of a political Messiah under which humanity would peacefully assemble. In the years after she signed the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which ended the Thirty Years' War, Christina had neatly fashioned herself as a new Alexander, an *Agitatrix* of Peace, who worked persistently for concord and toleration. After her arrival in Rome, her ambitions were soon revealed to go far beyond the Vatican's massive propaganda campaign, in which her conversion was configured as the ultimate success of the Catholic Church. Her aim was to undertake the role of the Christian liberator: as she and her supporters discretely shaped her, the newly converted queen was the angelic figure predicted by the long prophetic tradition, whose duty was to gather the world under Christ's *lex libertatis*. Christina, however, needed a kingdom in order to realize this plan.

43 Tommaso Campanella, *Aforismi politici*, ed. Luigi Firpo (Turin: 1941). Ernst, *Tommaso Campanella. The Book and the Body of Nature*, 89; Jean-Paul De Lucca, "Grotius and Campanella: A footnote to Luigi Firpo," *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, Anno XXI, 2015, 1: 25–34.

44 The Latin translation, *Monarchia Messiae*, was printed in Jesi by Gregorio Arnazzini in 1633.

45 De Lucca, "Grotius and Campanella," 29–31.

46 Three of Susanna Åkerman's studies have been of great importance for this chapter. *Fenixelden. Drottning Kristina som alchemist* (The Fire of the Phoenix. Queen Christina as Alchemist) (Möklinta: 2013); *Queen Christina of Sweden and her Circle. The Transformation of a Seventeenth-Century Philosophical Libertine* (Leiden: 1991); "Queen Christina and Messianic Thought," in *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews*, ed. David S. Katz and Jonathan I. Israel (Leiden: 1990), 142–60.

The Swedish queen was received in Rome with splendid Baroque festivities, with processions, fireworks, jousts, operas, panegyrics, and hymns, which were arranged long before her arrival and which continued over several months. Christina, however, had probably already by then entered into a secret agreement with the influential Cardinal Mazarin regarding the French plans of restoring the independent monarchy of Naples. Cardinal Mazarin was a member of the group known as the "Flying Squad" (*Squadrone volante*), led by Cardinal Decio Azzolino, whom Pope Alexander appointed as the queen's ambassador in Rome.⁴⁷ The Squad consisted of a cluster of open-minded clerics who worked for the reform and modernization of the papal administration, putting an end to nepotism, and manoeuvring the papacy into political neutrality. Christina, who was in need of supporters in Rome and allies in her plans to seek another throne, initiated a close collaboration with the Squad, which on its side benefitted from the former queen's reputation and social legitimacy.

In 1656 Christina was secretly offered the throne of Naples, which recently had reclaimed its independence from Spanish dominion. The plot, though, went wrong. After the rumours reached the papacy about Christina's brutal murder of Gian Rinaldo Mondaleschi, one of her trusted men who betrayed the plans during her covert negotiations in Paris in 1657, she was for a long time a persona non grata in Rome. However, with the persistent support of Cardinal Decio Azzolino, with whom Christina had entered into an intimate friendship, she slowly managed to restore the bonds with the papacy and establish herself as a leading patron of poets, artists, and intellectuals. Her Palazzo Riario across the Tiber, today the Corsini Palace which houses the famous Accademia dei Lincei, became a cultural centre in Rome with leading figures such as the theologian Athanasius Kircher, the astronomer Domenico Cassini, the composer Arcangelo Corelli, and the artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini.⁴⁸

The Intellectual Yearnings of a Queen

Stirred already in Sweden, Christina's irenic pretensions, as well as her deep interest in millenarian and esoteric literature, continued to the end of her life. Her rich library, which she opened for the Roman public and which was later

47 For further information about the collaboration between Christina and the "Flying Squad," see Marie-Louise Rodén, *Church Politics in Seventeenth-Century Rome*.

48 In his book *Poesins drottning. Christina av Sverige och de italienske akademierna*, Stefano Fogelberg Rota investigates thoroughly Queen Christina's collaboration with Italian academies.

included in the Vatican library, contained not only classical literature, humanistic treatises, and natural philosophy. Esoteric literature – Cabbala, astrology, hermetic and platonic studies, prophecies, and above all alchemy – also constituted a substantial part of the collection.⁴⁹ Indeed, alchemy was a deep passion which she shared with Decio Azzolino and a series of other intellectuals in Rome, an interest which went back to her youth in Stockholm. When she abdicated, she made her emblem the phoenix – a common alchemic symbol in the 16th and 17th centuries for death and transmutation through fire. The phoenix was sometimes even used on the philosophers' stone itself, that is, the elixir of life, which was alchemy's main goal to produce. In Palazzo Riario, Christina created a laboratory, a *distelleria*, where she gathered her mixed circle of famous friends and fellows, and together they performed a series of experiments in order to distil and purify the philosophers' stone.⁵⁰

The intent to set herself up as ruler of Naples was probably conceived long before Christina entered Rome. According to Åkerman, Mazarin's letters state that the plans were initiated by Christina herself, and not by her French supporters, as previously claimed. Moreover, there were reports about Italian rebels at her court in Sweden; one of these acquaintances, a certain Nicholas Hensenius, had been an eyewitness to the Naples revolt in 1648.⁵¹ Compelling in this context is how Campanella's name was associated with Naples. His plan for a temporal universal monarchy built undeniably upon his experiences from the upheavals he led in Southern Italy at the turn of the century.

Not only the Swedish ambassador Grotius, but also several other figures who came in contact with Christina in the years before and after her conversion, had close connections to Campanella. One of these was Christina's medical adviser Pierre Michon Bourdelot, who would cure the queen from a neurotic disorder in 1652. As Åkerman explains, Bourdelot drew upon a wealth of radical opinions gained from his involvement with Campanella, whose work he knew through his uncle, Jean Bourdelot.⁵² Indeed, it was Jean Bourdelot, the learned humanist and *maître des requêtes* (master of requests) of Marie de' Medici, who helped Campanella to escape from Italy and move to Paris in 1634,

49 Åkerman's study, *Fenixelden* (2013) presents a systematic investigation of Christina's esoteric collection of books and manuscripts.

50 A rich study of Christina's alchemic interests is Anna Maria Partini, *Cristina di Svezia e il suo cenacolo alchemico* (Rome: 2010).

51 Åkerman, "Queen Christina of Sweden and Messianic Thought," 159.

52 Åkerman, *Queen Christina and her Circle*, 40–41. For the contact with Campanella and Jean Bourdelot, see also Headley, *Tommaso Campanella*, 147.

and his collection of Campanella's work was later bought by his nephew Pierre and offered to Christina.⁵³

Another central figure in Christina's intellectual circle before she entered Rome was the French theologian and libertine Isaac La Peyrère, whose millenarian visions of a coming political Messiah influenced the queen considerably. When Christina was visiting Amsterdam in 1654, he lived in the neighbouring house. They had close contact, and the queen would even economically support the publication of La Peyrère's heretical work *Prae Adamitae* (1655). Once again, of importance in our context, is the presence of Campanella. As Richard H. Popkin has argued, it is possible that La Peyrère met Campanella in Paris, where he was received as a great figure in Marin Mersenne's exclusive circle of intellectuals.⁵⁴ La Puyère's own predictions of an earthly ruler, a universal monarch who one day would join the warring factions and prepare the ground for major spiritual changes, testify to his familiarity with the age-old Joachimite tradition, a tradition which now involved Campanella's political theology as well, and in which Birgitta's name had gained such a pivotal significance.

Christina's library contained a good portion of Joachimite literature, according to Åkerman, including prophecies by Joachim da Fiore himself, such as the famous treatise *Vaticinia de summis pontificibus*, Beatus Amadeus' *Apocalypsa Nova*, and Guillaume Postel's *Panthenosia*, just to mention a few. In all these, Birgitta is, as we have seen, referred to as a foremost authority. Likewise, Christina's 1611 edition of Nostradamus contains an introductory summary of Birgitta's revelations aiming to emphasize the significance of the French prophet, which once again underscored Birgitta's centrality. Christina would also have been in possession of numerous works by Campanella, including the Latin translation of *Monarchia del Messia*, and as Åkerman has suggested, few played a more significant role in Christina's political and intellectual formation, than Campanella himself.⁵⁵

Considering all this, the fact that Christina is reported to have been reading Birgitta's revelations herself during her stay in Brussels in 1655, that is, before her arrival to Rome, is quite astonishing.⁵⁶ Indeed, the ardent book-collector she was, Christina was in possession of a Birgittine manuscript, entitled "S. Birgittae liber celestis Imperatoris ad Regem Revelatus", and two volumes

53 Åkerman, *Fenixelden*, 157–158. See also Headley, *Tommaso Campanella*, 147 and 153n.

54 Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676). His Life, Work and Influence* (Leiden: 1987), 65.

55 Åkerman, *Fenixelden*, 157.

56 For these reports, see Åkerman, *Queen Christina and her Circle*, 173.

of Birgitta's revelations, printed in Rome in 1556.⁵⁷ The volumes in question are probably *Memoriale effigiatum librorum prophetiarum seu visionum B. Brigidae alias Birgittae, viduae stirpis regiae de regno Svetiae*, printed by their common compatriot Olaus Magnus after settling in the Casa di Santa Brigida at Piazza Farnese in Rome.

These evidences testify to the presence of Birgitta in Christina's political and intellectual yearnings. But why does the queen hardly mention the saint in her own writings? Maybe the eccentric Christina had good reasons for avoiding overt associations with Birgitta, venerated as she was for her piety and ascetic way of life? One thing is sure, though, Christina's irenic visions of a universal peace and of a profound reform of the church persisted despite her failed attempt to achieve the throne of Naples. She shared these millenarian interests with her liberal friend, Cardinal Decio Azzolino, and at a certain moment, he came to her aid by bringing Birgitta once again to the fore.

Oratio di S:ta Brigida

In 1673, exactly 300 years after Birgitta's death, Queen Christina applied to take over the role as the guardian of Casa di Santa Brigida in Rome. The previous guardian, John II Casimir Vasa, king of Poland, had recently passed away, and the current protector was Cardinal Orsini. Decio Azzolino supported the application by writing a *relazione*, in which he defended Christina, as the only Catholic monarch from Sweden, as the legitimate guardian of the house. Sometime later, on the occasion of the solemn celebration of Christina's new role, Azzolino wrote the oratorio. We do not know who composed the music. Marie-Louise Rodén has suggested Giacomo Carissimi (1605–1674), who was one of the most celebrated composers of early Baroque Rome, and a master of the oratorio genre. Indeed, Rodén is one of the few who has studied Azzolino's extraordinary unpublished work, although without any comparative reading or thorough analyses of the text.⁵⁸

The oratorio, now in the Azzolino Archive in the Biblioteca Comunale di Jesi (Le Marche), consists of 14 handwritten pages, and is divided into two parts

57 Åkerman, *Fenixelden*, 189–190, fn. 415. The two printed volumes from 1556 are registered in Ms. Ottob. lat. 2543, 96 and 372, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. For the manuscript, see Ms. Reg. lat. 1334, ff. 91–93, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana: "S. Birgittae liber celestis Imperatoris as Regem Revelatus."

58 Marie-Louise Rodén, "Ett helgon, en Drottning och en Kardinal. Oratorio di S:ta Brigida av Decio Azzolino," in *Romhorisont: tidsskrift för Foreningen Svenska Rominstitutets Vänner och Svenska institutet i Rom*, Art. 14, 1987: 14–19.

(*Parte prima* and *Parte seconda*).⁵⁹ In the first part, we meet Birgitta when she has just returned from pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela with her husband Ulf Gudmarsson. While Ulf is sleeping, she is tempted by a demon and by a personification of the two vices, Lust (“Diletto”) and Ambition (“Ambizione”). The demon calls on the two vices (page 1). Birgitta has just returned from the sacred temple on the Spanish coast, the demon explains, and is thus tired and slothful (“Sú sú compagni fidi, / Horche fatto hà ritorno / Dal sagro tempio degl’Ispan Lidi / Al sui nation soggiorno, / E stanca, e neghittiosa”). Ambition and Lust, then, mock the search for eternal happiness in remote countries and tempt her by reminding her of her wealth, her high rank and her noble origin in Sweden.

Birgitta resists the temptations, and when Ulf wakes up from his sleep, she manages to persuade him of the need to withdraw from the world and seek the pious life of the monastery. After some resistance, Ulf surrenders and in a duet, they announce the promise together (page 4):

V'abandono, vi lascio, v'oblio
 o tesori, grandezze, e contenti.
 Siete fango, catene, e tormenti
 a chi brama di vivere à Dio.
 Son corone più belle
 quelle che à i giusti in Ciel
 danno le Stelle.

I surrender you, I leave you, I forget you, o treasures, prides, and pleasures.
 You are mud, chains, and torments to those who yearn to live with God.
 There are more beautiful crowns, those who the righteous in Heaven are
 offered by the Stars.

Azzolino probably bases his text on Birgitta's *Vita*, written by the two Peters, Magister and Prior Peter, in occasion of the canonization process in 1391. The *Vita* describes how Birgitta and Ulf, after returning from their pilgrimage to Spain, moved to the Cistercians at Alvastra monastery, where soon after Ulf died.

A curious detail in Azzolino's oratorio is the celestial crown offered by the stars (“Son corone più belle / quelle che à i giusti in Ciel / danno le Stelle”), which creates subtle links to John's Apocalypse. In the Apocalypse or the Book of Revelation (Revelation 12: 1, 2 and 5) a triumphal woman appears, clothed

59 Warm thanks to the librarian in Jesi who sent me a copy of the manuscript in a period when it was impossible to travel because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head sits a crown of twelve stars. The crown in Azzolino's text probably reflects images from the Birgittine corpus as well. Indeed, during their journey from Santiago de Compostela, a certain Cistercian named Svennung who accompanied the couple is said to have received a vision in which he saw Birgitta crowned with seven crowns.⁶⁰ Moreover, in a vision received by Birgitta in Rome (Rev. IV: 124), Saint Agnes places a crown on her head with seven precious stones symbolizing her patience in suffering. In the Renaissance prophetic tradition, Birgitta is also associated with the stars. The Florentine prophet Domenica Narducci, for instance, describes in one of her sermons a vision of Birgitta in a procession with ten queens, modelled on the apocalyptic Mary, wearing a black cloak embroidered with stars and gems.⁶¹

In the second part of the oratorio, we meet a Birgitta in deep grief after her husband's death, and Saint Agnes who is sent by the Virgin Mary to give her comfort. Among the most remarkable things she says, is how she will resurrect like a phoenix (p. 11):

Soffri, ubedisci, e spera
 nell'Incarnato Verbo,
 che dopo affanno acerbo
 havrai gioia sincera.
 Resta ò Donna felice,
 che hòr hora tu sarai l'alta Fenice,
 a cui Giesù riveli
 gl'arcani impenetrabili de' Cieli.

Suffer, obey, and hope, in the Incarnated Word, that after bitter pain you will have sincere joy. Stay happy Woman, soon you will be the lofty Phoenix, to which Jesus reveals / the impenetrable secrets of the Heavens.

The phoenix, to which I will return, may be read as a foreshadowing figure of Christina, who soon appears in the text. But before the passage in which

60 *Acta et Processus canonizationis b. Birgitte*, ed. Isak Collijn, SFSS. Ser. 2. Latinska skrifter 1 (Uppsala: 1924–1931), 503.

61 *I Sermoni di Domenica da Paradiso. Studi e testo critic*, ed. Rita Librandi and Adriana Valerio (Florence: 1999), 129. For a further reading of this sermon, see Clara Stella's contribution to this book. On Domenica Narducci, see also Isabella Gagliardi, *Sola con Dio. La missione di Domenica da Paradiso nella Firenze del primo Cinquecento* (Florence: 2007), and Adriana Valerio, "Le influenze di Brigida di Svezia nell'esperienza mistica di Domenica da Paradiso (1473–1553)," *Birgittiana* 7 (1999), 3–43.

we meet the queen, Saint John appears, underscoring Agnes' words to Birgitta about the divine secrets that will be revealed to her. "I am John", he says, "who was considered worthy to preach with mystic words the dark secrets of Heaven, both future and past. I uncover everything for you, I will show you everything" (p. 12: "Son Giovanni ... / Che se al mondo fu degno / Con mistiche parole / Di scrivere del Ciel gl'arcani oscuri / E passati, e future, / Tutti à te li discopro, à te l'insegno"). The saint is presented as the evangelist. He has, however, many similarities to John from the biblical Book of Revelation, which gives the oratorio an apocalyptic framework, and which is most fitting for the glimpse into the future that Birgitta now is offered.

The oratorio ends with Birgitta's praise of the Virgin Mary, in which she suddenly breaks out in a prophecy. Of the most wonderful secrets that have been revealed to her, she claims, the greatest is the coming of a royal figure from far north (p. 13):

Mà frà tanti stupor
 quanto mio Dio nel ravvisar godei
 che ne i popoli rei
 della Sueca regione
 sorgere un dì farai da regia cuna
 che sprezzando fortuna,
 regni, scettri, e corone
 portento di virtù, trofeo di fede
 verrà di Piero à venerar' la Sede.

But among so many amazements I enjoyed by revelations from my God, the greatest was that among the guilty people in the Swedish region, will rise one day, from a royal cradle, one who despises luck, kingdoms, scepters, and crowns. A preacher of virtues, trophy of faith, will come to Peter to worship the Holy See.

The prophecy is that one day a royal person, presumably Christina, will come to Rome in veneration and support of the papacy. Of great significance in this context is the delicate bonds Azzolino spins between the two Swedish women. Like Birgitta, Christina is of high birth, even royal, and as Birgitta predicts, she will also reject the vanity of the world in order to go to Rome. The last four lines of the prophecy have a clear similarity to the opening of Birgitta's promise which she declared together with Ulf: "V'abandono, vi lascio, v'oblio / o tesori, grandezze, e contenti. / Siete fango, catene, e tormenti / a chi brama di vivere à Dio" ("I surrender, I leave, I forget you, o treasures, prides and pleasures. You are mud, chains, and torments to those who yearn to live with God.").

A more subtle association between the two women is the afore-mentioned phoenix (p. 11). Birgitta was also compared with a phoenix in her *Revelations*. In Rev. 11: 18, to which Azzolino probably is referring, Birgitta is full of doubts. She asks Christ how he could condescend to come as a guest to such a base widow as her, who is poor in every work, weak in understanding, and ridden with sin. Christ comforts her by assuring her that he can make a poor person rich, and a foolish person capable and intelligent. Then he adds:

I am also able to restore an aged person to youth. It is like the phoenix that brings together dried twigs. Among them is the twig of a certain tree that is dry by nature on the outside and warm on the inside. The warmth of the sunbeams comes to it first and kindles it, and then all the twigs are set on fire from it. In the same way you should gather your sins. Among them you should have a piece of wood that is warm on the inside and dry on the outside ... Then the fire of my love will come into the heart first and in that way you will be enkindled with all the virtues. Thoroughly burned by them and purged from sins, you will arise like the rejuvenated bird, having put off the skin of sensuality.⁶²

Christ's words to Birgitta are that like the phoenix, which rises from its own ashes, she will be purged and resurrect. The consolation is clearly echoed in Azzolino's oratorio (p. 11): "Resta ò Donna felice, / che hòr hora tu sarai l'alta Fenice" (Stay happy Woman, soon you will be the lofty Phoenix).

The phoenix was a common image of Christ in the Middle Ages. In the context of Azzolino's oratorio, however, the bird also prefigures Christina, whose emblem was also the phoenix. Like a phoenix, risen from a royal cradle, Christina is, in Birgitta's vision and ventriloquizing speech, the expected *Agitatrix* or preacher of peace, virtue and toleration. Christina is nothing but the symbol of the great *mutazione*. The emblem provides Christina's mission as the new guardian of Casa di Santa Brigida with a messianic significance.

62 Birgitta of Sweden, Rev. 11: 18, 12–13: "Ego sufficio eciam antiquum renouare ad iuuentem. Sicut enim Fenix comportat in vallem stipulas siccas, inter quas comportat stipulas unius arboris, que exterius est sicca ex natura et intus calida, in quam primo venit calor radii solis et incenditur, deinde ex ipsa omnes stipule accenduntur, sic oportet te congregare virtutes, quibus a peccatis renouari possis. Inter quas unum lignum habere debes, quod interius est calidum et exterius siccum, idest cor, quod purum sit et siccatum exterius ab omni mundi delectacione et interius plenum omni caritate, ut nichil velis, nichil desideres nisi me. Tunc in hoc primo veniet ignis caritatis mee, et sic incenderis omnibus virtutibus, in quibus concremata et a peccatis purgata resurges quasi auis renouata, deposita pelle delectacionis."

Birgitta, on her side, is through the symbol of the phoenix drawn into the world of alchemy and the ambiguous experimental natural philosophy which flourished in early modern Europe, and especially in Christina's *cenacolo* in Rome.

Conclusion

The fusion of different cultures of knowledge that characterized Campanella's and Christina's universe, and which is a feature of early modern Europe, proved in many ways to be highly dynamic. Messianic and millenarian expectations of a coming age of universal peace, rooted in centuries-long medieval theological and political traditions, rendered contemporary events, such as Campanella's revolt in Southern Italy or Christina's attempt to become the ruler of Naples, a compelling actuality. Concurrently, the very same expectations paved the way for future-oriented irenic notions about toleration and universal laws under which all of humanity could gather.

In the middle of this melting pot of ideas which epitomized the world of Campanella and Christina – of historical and philological investigations, of religious yearnings, mathematic calculations, astrological observations, and alchemic experiments – we hear the prophetic voice of Birgitta. Birgitta's revelations appealed unexpectedly to new generations of readers who continually revived the rebellious vein of her voice and call to action.

One Life, Many Hagiographers: The Earliest Vitae of Birgitta of Sweden

Silvia Nocentini

Birgitta died on 23 July 1373 and was buried in the Clarissan monastery of San Lorenzo in Panisperna in Rome.¹ However, it was important for Birgitta's religious family that her remains be brought back to Sweden to rest in the institution, Vadstena, that she had founded. Hence on 2 December Birgitta's son Birger, her daughter Catherine and her two confessors, Prior Peter and Master Peter, embarked upon a long journey from Rome which would end in Vadstena in July 1374. They made their first stop in Montefalco, where the bishop of Spoleto, Galhardus, set up a local inquiry into the life and miracles of Birgitta. Hence on 14 December 1373 a number of witnesses, including Gomez de Alborno, swore an oath in the church of San Francesco in Montefalco. On this occasion the last confessor of Birgitta, Alfonso Pecha, was not among the witnesses; he was, however, present there three days later on 17 December, when Prior Peter and Master Peter gave to the bishop's notaries a booklet (*quendam quaternum papireum*) that they had drawn up soon after Birgitta's death in Rome. The booklet contained the Vita of Birgitta and accounts of some of her miracles, and today remains the first known account of these. It was later formally included in the Acts of the canonization process, preceded by the so-called *Relacio Galhardi* – which recounts how the Spoleto bishop started

¹ I will make use of the following abbreviations:

AP = *Acta et processus canonizacionis Beate Birgitte. Efter Cod. A 14 Holm., Cod. Ottob. Lat. 90 o. Cod. Harl. 612*, ed. I. Collijn, (Uppsala: 1924–1931);

BAI = *Biblioteca agiografica italiana (BAI)*, ed. Jacques Dalarun, Lino Leonardi, 2 vols., (Firenze: 2003).

BHL = *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina antiquae et mediae aetatis*, ed. Socii Bollandiani, 2 vols., (Bruxelles: 1911), *Novum Supplementum*, (Bruxelles: 1986);

C15 = BHL 1339 (*Vita brevis*, the shortest among the early Lives of Birgitta);

VP = BHL 1334 (*Vita Processus*, Life inserted in the canonization acts);

VPa = BHL 1334b (*Vita Panisperna*, the longest among the early Lives of Birgitta);

CL = BHL 1341 (*Commissio Lincopensis*: collection of 61 miracles gathered in 1376 by the bishop of Linköping);

RU = BHL 1342 (*Relatio Upsalensis*, account of miracles occurred during the journey of Birgitta's corpse from Rome to Vadstena, and authenticated by the bishop of Uppsala in 1375).

his inquiry – and followed by several depositions about miracles, the usual notarial *subscriptiones*, and the bishop's *confirmacio* of the Acts.

As stated above, this is the first account of Birgitta's life we know about: the reason for this is that the question remains unsolved as to whether the account we can read now in the Acts is the earliest Vita or not. In fact, there are three principal redactions of this Vita. In order from the shortest version to the longest, these are:² the so-called C15 Vita (BHL 1339), the so-called Process-Vita (BHL 1334), and the so-called Panisperna-Vita (BHL 1334b).

A number of other hagiographical texts also circulated with the early Vita and are relevant to the question of whether or not the text in question is indeed the earliest account of Birgitta's life.

In May 1375 Birgitta's daughter Catherine returned to Rome, bringing along with her a first collection of miracles – known as the *Relacio Upsaliensis* (BHL 1342, hereafter RU) after the archbishop of Uppsala who authenticated it – gathered after they were observed during the journey of Birgitta's corpse from Rome to Sweden and in the first year after she was buried in Vadstena. In the same year the bishop of Linköping, Nicolaus, set up a commission to revise the whole collection: the so-called *Commissio Lincopiensis* (BHL 1341) added 61 miracles, which were sent to Rome on 9 December 1376. In the meantime, since the first collection had not been compiled according to the stipulated format and lacked the information necessary for the canonization process to go ahead, Pope Gregory XI appointed two Danish bishops to review the *Relacio Upsaliensis*. They did so and sent the Pope their account in the form of a letter on 3 March 1377 (BHL 1340c). Two more collections of miracles were inserted into the Acts of the Process: the *Collectio Neapolitana*, authenticated by the bishop of Naples on 20 October 1376 (BHL 1343), and the *Collectio Suecicana*, which gathered miracles observed in Sweden between 1378 and 1390 (BHL 1345).

Since the Vita often circulated in manuscript volumes that also contained the *Revelations*, it is important to keep in mind that diverse stages of redactions characterized the dissemination of the *Liber celestis*:

1. the first redaction was copied in the so-called *Liber Alfonsi*, finished by 1377,³ which was sent to Vadstena in order to supply the newly founded monastery with an official Birgittine corpus. At this stage the *Revelationes* comprised seven books; no manuscripts are known which transmit this redaction or its contents.

2 For the sake of simplicity, I shall adopt the most commonly used terminology.

3 Although considered lost, the existence of the *Liber Alfonsi* is testified to by a number of documentary traces, carefully reconstructed by the *Revelations* editors and in primis by C.-G. Undhagen. See. Rev. I: Introduction and Rev. IV: Introduction.

2. The second redaction was ready by 1380 and included in addition the eighth Book of Revelations (represented by the current class β of the extant Revelations manuscripts).
3. A final revision was made after the closing of the canonization inquiry (1380) and is known as the "Canonization redaction". It was later copied in the *Liber attestacionum*, a collection which includes the Revelations and the Acts of the Process.

Proceeding from the shortest to the longest version, this article first describes the relevant manuscript tradition and the editions (if any) of these hagiographical texts. It then makes an attempt to understand the relationships between the various versions. By tracing the hagiographic activity of the promoters of Birgitta's cult, it describes the diffusion of these earliest Vitae in Italy, both in the Latin and in the Italian version.

A table illustrating the distribution of the hagiographic material in the three Vitae (together *Vita confessorum*) will be of some help in following my subsequent argumentations.

Legenda:

C15 = BHL 1339 (*Vita brevis*)

VP = BHL 1334 (*Vita Processus, formae A et B*)

VPa = BHL 1334b (*Vita Panisperna, formae A et B*)

Mir. = Miracles added in longer Lives

Chapters	C15	VP	VPa
1-28	x	x	x
Mir. I		x	x
29-38	x	x	x
Mir. II		x	x
39-54	x	x	x
Mir. III			x
45-49	x	x	x
Mir. IV			x
50-54	x	x	x
Mir. V		x	x
55-65	x	x	x
Mir. VI			x (VPaB)
66-67	x	x	x

(cont.)

Chapters	C15	VP	VPa
Mir. VII			x
68–70	x	x	x
Mir. VIII		x	x (VPaA)
Mir. IX			x (VPaB)

The Latin *Vitae*

BHL 1339 = C15

Inc.: “Sicut legimus de beato Iohanne Baptista et sancto Nicholao, multotiens cooperantur merita parentum ut filiis accrescat gratia maior et perseveret in finem”, expl.: “Deinde appropinquante die quinta in ipsa aurora, iterum apparuit ei consolando eam, dicta vero missa et sacramentis perceptis, inter manus personarum predictarum emisit spiritum” (inc. verses: “Post ortum domini Christi regnantis ubique”, expl. verses: “Celitus ut verba data testificantur eidem”). It is preserved in three manuscripts:⁴

1. (U) Uppsala, Universitetsbibliotek, C15 (XIV–XV sec.), fols. 70r–84r;
2. (Ga) Lincoln, Cathedral Chapter Library, 114 (XV sec.), fols. 54v–61v;
3. (F) Lund, Universitetsbiblioteket, Medeltidshandskrift 21 (XV sec. in., acephalous), fols. 353r–358r.

U and F come from Vadstena and are collections of Birgittine texts, with F being the most complete Revelation manuscript this cloister preserved. Ga, on the other hand, is of Dutch provenance, copied by a German hand.

There is an edition based on the Uppsala manuscript (the only known so far):

J. Kruse, “Vita metrica S. Birgittae”, *Meddelanden från det litteraturhistoriska seminariet i Lund*, 1, *Lunds Universitets års-skrift*, 28 (1891–92): 10–28.

4 I have seen a digital copy of the Life in ms. Berlin, SBS, Magd. 138 (XV, post 1459), fols. 54–57v (incipit: “Sancta Birgitta tria festa habet annuatim”), which is not our C15 Vita, but the *Legenda* written by Iohannes Tortsch, one of whose works is precisely a *Festa beatae Birgittae* beginning like the reported entry in the Berlin manuscript. Cf. Ursula Winter, Kurt Heydeck, *Die Manuscripta Magdeburgica der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, Teil 2: *Ms. Magdeb. 76–168* (Wiesbaden: 2004), 123, where, on the contrary, the Vita is indicated as BHL 1339.

BHL 1334 = VP (*Process-Vita*)

Inc. prol.: “Sciendum est quod humillima ancilla Dei numquam presumeret se vocare vel vocari facere sponsa Christi vel eius canale”; inc.: “Sicut legimus de beato Iohanne Baptista et de sancto Nicolao, multotiens cooperantur merita parentum ut filiis accrescat gratia maior et perseveret in finem” expl.: “Deinde appropinquante die quinta in ipsa aurora, iterum apparuit ei Christus consolando eam, dicta vero missa et sacramentis perceptis, inter manus praedictarum personarum emisit spiritum”.

It is preserved in six manuscripts. Three of these manuscripts transmit the entire collection of files of the Acts of the Process and are copies of the so-called *Liber attestacionum*:⁵

1. (R) Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ottob. lat. 90 (1391), fols. 10r–132;
2. (S) Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, A 14 (XIV ex.–XV), fols. 28–41;
3. (L) London, British Library, Harley 612 (1440), fols. 208r–288v (this manuscript also includes the Book of Revelations).

The *Liber attestacionum* was the volume which collected all the depositions and the Vita and was handed over to Pope Boniface IX after August 10, 1391. Since the Cardinals were enormously interested in the *Liber*, sixteen copies of it were transcribed (one for each cardinal), to be ready by the time of the canonization on October 7, 1391. One of these copies was manuscript R.

The remaining three manuscripts hand down the *Vita*, along with other Birgittine texts.

One of the manuscripts also preserves a part of the Acts of the Process (Vita + CL +RU):

4. (Ha) München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 18361 (XV sec.), fols. 209v–232v (the manuscript includes the Book of Revelations).

The other two include only the Vita (along with the *Relatio Galhardi*) and the Revelations (the entire corpus or a part of it). These are also the earliest witnesses of the *Vita*,⁶ previous to the one copied in the *Liber attestacionum*:

5. (A) Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, 1073 (sec. XIV ex./ante 1386), fols. 1r–10r;

5 According to a note in L, f. 1: “Quatuordecim libri beate Brigide ex quibus ... 13us est liber attestacionum”. For R and S see AP: XVII and Rev. I: 33, n. 158.

6 This dating is due to two circumstances: the composition date of Alfonso’s *Conscriptio bona*, in which the possessor of the A manuscript is cited (1385–1386), and the entry for the P manuscript in the ancient catalogue of the S. Martino alle Scale Library (1386). See also Nocentini, “Un eremita, due confessori, tre redazioni: i primordi dell’agiografia brigidina in Italia,” *Hagiographica* 26 (2019), 303, in which I propose with more confidence an even earlier dating. To be more cautious, I adopt a wider chronological range in the present chapter.

6. (P) Palermo, Biblioteca Centrale della Regione Sicilia, IV.G.2 (XIV sec./ ante 1386), fols. 202va-209rb.

The history of these manuscripts is quite unique: the Arsenal codex belonged to the famous writer and counselor Philippe de Mézières, who was probably gifted it by Alfonso himself; the Palermo manuscript is a lavishly illuminated volume containing the Revelations made in the Neapolitan scriptorium also directed by Alfonso. The edition is based on the manuscript n. 2 (S):

AP: 71-105.

BHL 1344b = VPa (*Panisperna Vita*)

This version is known as *Panisperna Vita* after the most ancient manuscript in which it is handed down: the *Panisperna* codex, written on 18 November 1378 by a German clerk, *Nicolaus Misner alias dictus Vyogeler*, and once preserved in the monastery of San Lorenzo in *Panisperna*. On the basis of a preliminary observation of the external characteristics of the codices, the manuscript tradition of this *Vita* can be classified into two groups.

Group A includes the prologue and some additional episodes that are unique to it (4 chapters inside *Mir. IV* and *Mir. VIII* in the table): inc. prol. "Sciendum est quod humillima ancilla Dei numquam presumeret se vocare vel vocari facere sponsa Christi vel eius canale"; inc.: "Sicut legimus de beato Iohanne Baptista et de sancto Nicholao, multotiens cooperantur merita parentum ut filiis accrescat gratia maior et perseverent usque in finem" expl.: "Deinde appropinquante die quinta in ipsa aurora, iterum apparuit ei Christus consolando eam, dicta vero missa et sacramentis perceptis, inter manus dictarum personarum emisit spiritum". There are two manuscripts:

- A1. (Si) Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, G.XI.20 (XIV sec.), fols. 1r-20r;
 A2. (Za) Helsinki, Kansalliskirjasto, Nordenskiöld Collection, Mscr. 4 (ca. 1400), fols. 91r-110r.

None of these manuscripts hands down the Revelations; they do, however, include a series of Birgittine texts, mostly devoted to liturgy and addressed to sisters and friars of the Saint Saviour Order.⁷ While we do not know where

7 Si: fols. 20rb-26vb *Collectio miraculorum sanctae Brigidae* (RU), fols. 27ra-46ra *Sermo angelicus*, fols. 46rb-52ra *Orationes IV*, fols. 52rb-63va *Regula s. Salvatoris* (not complete, in the first person). Za: fols. 1-16r *Regula Salvatoris*, fols. 16r-20r 18 *Revelationes extravagantes*, fols. 21r-41r *Sermo angelicus*, fols. 44r-50r *Orationes IV*, fols. 51r-69v *Cantus sororum*, fols. 73r-90v *Summarium Processi*.

Si comes from, we can trace Za back to the Hieronymite Quarto monastery (Genoa), founded by Alfonso of Jaén, who died there on August 19, 1389.

Group B: inc.: “Sicud legimus de beato Iohanne Baptista et de sancto Nicholao, multotiens cooperantur merita parentum ut filiis accrescat gratia maior et perseveret usque ad finem” expl.: “Deinde adpropinquante die quinta in ipsa aurora, iterum apparuit ei Christus consolando eam, dicta vero missa et sacramentis perceptis, inter manus dictarum personarum emisit spiritum”. This version is characterized by some additional chapters, among which there is a letter from the Count of Nola (Mir. VI and Mir. IX in the table). Five manuscripts, most of them unknown so far:

- B1. (Pa) Roma, Archivum OFM, Panisperna (18.11.1378), fols. 1r–20r (expl.: “latius continetur”), 22v–23r (inc.: “Contigit deinde”, expl.: “emisit spiritum”);
- B2. (B) Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Magd. 98 (ca. 1400), fols. 244r–257v;
- B3. (W) Wolfenbüttel, Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Aug. 59. 2. 2° (1417), fols. 289r–306r;
- B4. (g) Göttingen, Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, theol. 202 (1469), fols. 317–330;
- B5. (Au) Augsburg, Universitätsbibliothek, II.1.2°.201 (a. 1458), fols. 364v–383r.

Pa is the most ancient manuscript of the Panisperna Vita and was once preserved in the same place Birgitta was buried in Rome before her return to Sweden; it was written by a German monk or priest, *Nicolaus Misner alias dictus Vogeler*, but this probably has nothing to do with the actual German dissemination of the manuscripts.

The manuscripts of this group omit the prologue and contain the same series of miracles and testimonies except for the last *post mortem* miracle (Mir. IX.2), which can be found only in the Panisperna manuscript. Manuscripts B2–B5 also contain the Revelations.

The *Vita Panisperna* has been partially edited on the basis of the Panisperna codex (B1) by Collijn, who collated manuscripts A1 and A2; this edition does not include the last five common chapters (“Neapoli etiam ... emisit spiritum”, nn. 66–70 in the table) and therefore the five additional ones, which are unique to this form, *i. e.* Mir. VI (B) and Mir. VII (A and B).

Ed.: AP, pp. 614–40.

The Relationships

What do we know about the relationships between these three versions? Which is the earliest form and which is the latest? So far, when scholars have discussed these issues, they have based their argumentation on old editions of the texts. It must be said that textual criticism of the Vita has always been subordinate to that of other Birgittine texts, and primarily to the Revelations and to Alfonso's works. Hence there are no specific studies of the Vita, except for that of Sara Ekwall and my preliminary survey for the edition.⁸ Likewise, no true critical editions have ever been published, mostly because no one has ever taken into consideration the entire manuscript tradition of the diverse forms that we know.

As we have seen, the C₁₅ is edited according to a single manuscript preserved in Vadstena: surely not an impartial place and not immune to manipulations.

The VP, on the other hand, has been published according to the readings of the sole manuscript S, which can be demonstrated to be the worst choice. This edition is not philologically reliable, least of all if we are seeking to work out whether it could be the earliest version of the Vita or not.

The VP_a is not yet critically edited, except for the transcription made by Collijn in the AP and based upon the Panisperna manuscript (Group B). The existence of a certain number of other witnesses in Group B and of a further version (Group A) of this text complicates our understandings not only of VP_a's position in the timeline of the three versions, but also of the mutual relationship between Group A and Group B.

Having said that, it is clear that the debate on the dating of the Vitae of Birgitta is weakened by the fact that it is not based on critical texts.

So far, two theories have been proposed: Sara Ekwall is sure that the Vita C₁₅ is the original Vita brought to Sweden by the two Peters returning from Italy. She presumes that the variant readings of VP versus C₁₅ are the most significant evidence of an eventual later interpolation made by Alfonso in order to enrich the Vita and to link it to the Book of Revelations upon which the entire canonization process was based. In Ekwall's view, this means that this redaction was written before Alfonso Pecha could make his typical editorial interventions, which Ekwall dates to around 1378/1380.

8 Sara Ekwall, *Vår äldsta Birgittavita och dennas viktigaste varianter* (Stockholm: 1965). Some general information is in Extrav.: 85; Rev. I: 4 (note 1); Rev. V: 15; ES: 90–97; *Birger Gregerssons Birgitta-Officium. Birgerus Gregorii officium Sancte Birgitte*, ed. Carl-Gustav Undhagen (Stockholm: 1960), 81–92; and more recently, Cordelia Hess, *Heilige machen im spätmittelalterlichen Ostseeraum: die Kanonisationsprozesse von Birgitta von Schweden, Nikolaus von Linköping und Dorothea von Montau*, (Berlin: 2008), 99–165. See also Silvia Nocentini, "Which Is the Earliest Vita of Birgitta of Sweden?," *Hagiographica* 28 (2021), 317–52.

In contrast to Ekwall's contention that the Vita C15 is the earliest version, Jönsson is sure that the VP is the earliest one.⁹ He bases his opinion on the simple fact that it is included among the bishop Galhardus' documents: documents which attest that the Vita was handed over to the bishop by the two Peters. Yet we know that medieval Latin literature had been subject to a long series of falsifications and manipulations. In fact, even VPa (A), as we have seen, is inserted between the *Relatio Galhardi* and the notarial documents, which is not a guarantee either about the truth of the attestations or about the year of composition of the Vita. The simple fact that VP in the Collijn edition is the transcription of what was included in the *Liber attestacionum* (1391, a good fourteen years after the composition of the Life) should raise a red flag about the dating of the Vita.

After all, continuing to study such portions of misedited texts as these could lead scholars to draw wrong conclusions, since it can be demonstrated that VP is a highly interpolated version which could possibly include many layers overlapping each other.

No theory has ever been proposed about VPa. Based on my analysis of iconographic evidence, I have argued that this long version of the Vita had an important role at the beginning of the dissemination of Birgittine hagiography in Italy, as we will see.

My analysis of the manuscript tradition of the three forms of the earliest Life of saint Birgitta of Sweden has led to some preliminary conclusions; such an analysis allows us to contextualize the external features of the texts, such as the length of each one, the content of its supplementary material, the spreading and the fortune of the single versions in Italy and in Europe, and the value of the hagiographical model to each version:¹⁰

- the shortest text (C15) is most likely to be the earliest composed by the authors and is known in two versions: one of Italian (U) and one of Swedish tradition (F and Ga);
- the two longer texts were derived almost in parallel from the first hagiographical portrait, though having different aims and different readers from it, and leading to different hagiographical models;

9 Arne Jönsson, *Alfonso of Jaén. His Life and Works with Critical Editions of the "Epistola solitarii", the "Informaciones", and the "Epistola serui Christi"* (Lund: 1989).

10 A thorough analysis of the manuscript transmission based on philological issues is beyond the scope of this chapter. My forthcoming edition of Vita C15 will include it. For a preliminary survey, see Nocentini, "Which Is the Earliest" and Silvia Nocentini, "The Transmission of Birgittine and Catherinian Works within the Mystical Tradition: Exchanges, Cross-readings, Connections," in *Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. Authorship and Sanctity in the 14th Century and Beyond*, ed. Maria Husabö Oen and Unn Falkeid, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture (New York and London: 2020): 93–112.

- the text included in the Acts of the Process (VP) is known in two forms:
 1. one (AP) depending on the same codex which served as a model for VPa (A) and including the most ancient manuscripts we have;
 2. one representing the official form to be recorded in the *Liber attestacionum*;
- VPa, in turn, is transmitted in two versions:
 1. VPa (A) composed in line with the same codex which served as a model for VP (AP);
 2. VPa (B), dated 1377–1378, was intended to be the model Life of Birgitta, to be spread with her cult.

We note that the shortest text (C15) depicts a mostly prophetic saint who exercises her main virtues by acting as the channel of God whilst also being a good, penitent – and yet powerful – woman. It is a very short portrait, most likely because it was principally intended to be read in mensa at the new Birgittine monasteries or as part of the liturgy; the authors' interest was to celebrate Birgitta as a prophet and as the founder of the Saint Saviour Order. The rewriting (BHL 1335) by Birger Gregersson, who a few years later used this brief Vita to compose a liturgical Officium for the feast of Saint Birgitta, is significant in this sense. The puzzling dates and chronological clues may be signs that the composition was carried out in multiple steps: the confessors were writing during Birgitta's last year (1372), when she seemed to be close to death; they then, possibly at a later date (before December 1373, when they left the Vita with bishop Galhardus), added the typological section introduced by chapter 56, driven by the will to better characterize the figure of the saint.

Both VP and VPa add so many episodes and miracles (mostly healings and conversions) that they portray Birgitta as a saint who, in addition to living a pious life and talking to God and the Virgin, founds a new religious Order, collects all kind of relics when making pilgrimages, and most of all is very popular because of her superhuman ability to ward off sicknesses of body and soul. It is not by chance that VPa was known as *Liber de miraculis* (Book of Miracles), a feature which casts Birgitta as a saint in a more traditional light: this hagiographical model fits better with canonization. It is not simply a switch from a shorter Vita to a longer, unbalanced one; it is a change of hagiographic paradigm that characterizes the difference between C15 and VP/VPa. This is also the reason why the shorter Life had to be modified: because a possible canonization commission would not have found a biography with such scarce and vague references to people and to actual miraculous facts to be sufficient. The aims of her religious family were now more ambitious and pointed in the direction of canonization, hence the Vita had to be consistent with this aim. The new insertions were likely to have been made by a team of editors, including the confessors – that is, the authors of the text – and Alfonso of Jaén. In fact, it can

be proved that the VP has been subject to many layers of interventions: a future edition will have to take these into account. Besides, as the edition of Birgitta's writings advanced, references to the Revelations were incorporated in the text so that the canonization commission could easily find them in the edition it had at its disposal.

The hagiographic material to be included in the Vita progressively grew and ran in parallel to the canonization project in Italy. The sets of additions regarding the Swedish period in Alvastra may have been included after May 1375, when Birgitta's daughter Catherine returned to Rome, bringing along with her a first collection of miracles known as *Relacio Upsaliensis* (BHL 1342).

However, not all the additions were inserted at once, as is demonstrated by the existence of Si (VPaA): this version lacks 5 miracles, one of which can be dated precisely to 1377, thus allowing us to date the remaining four as later insertions. The additions we have now in the two longer versions were inserted one by one in an attempt to clarify names, places and references to the Revelations for the benefit of the canonization commission, and also to complete the account of miracles in view of the future spreading of the cult. VP was indeed chosen to be part of the acts of the canonization process and so had to be rich in details; VPa, meanwhile, was meant as a *Liber de miraculis*, a volume usually preserved at the saint's tomb and which served to record every miracle observed in that place. In this sense VPa served to collect all the additional materials which would have built a traditional hagiography; in fact, one of the manuscripts originates from San Lorenzo in Panisperna, where Birgitta was first buried before she could be transferred to Sweden and where the archive preserved all Birgittine documents collected in preparation for the process. This was meant to be the authoritative reference Life, as we have seen.

The Reception

That Alfonso regarded the VPa as the authoritative reference Life is also clear from his statements at the Process.

In AP he refers to the *legenda* as including the *cedula*, the letter of the Count of Nola, which is precisely the case for VPa (B).: “[The Count of Nola] wrote to this speaking witness [Alfonso] and afterwards he sent a letter to Rome, where he described that miracle. This letter was inserted in the *legenda* her confessors had written under oath about lady Birgitta's deeds”.¹¹ In fact, the *cedula* is

11 His deposition is dated 16 September 1379 in AP: 389: “Super quo isti testi loquenti, vt asseruit, scripsit et misit postea unam cedulam in Roma, in qua scriptum est, et fuit miraculum hoc. Que quidem cedula inclusa est in illa legenda, quam dicti confessores

handed down as a part of *Vita Panisperna* (form B), a re-elaborated form dated to 1377/1378.

It is possible to demonstrate that this version (VPaB) had a key role in the Italian reception of Birgittine hagiography. Indeed, sometime after Alfonso of Jaén brought a book with Birgittine materials (*historie*) to the Dominican nun Chiara Gambacorta, prioress of San Domenico in Pisa, in the autumn of 1378. Gambacorta had a polyptych made for her convent's church which shows, in its predella, some scenes from the life of Birgitta. One of these scenes can only be found in the VPa, and another of them is only in the RU, which happens to be handed down with VPa (A) in Si.¹²

We know that a special devotion to Birgitta developed among the Dominicans throughout Europe; in particular, Sylvie Duval and Ann Roberts have demonstrated that the observant Dominican monastery of Pisa had a pioneering role in spreading the cult of Birgitta in Tuscany.¹³ Chiara Gambacorta's Life tells us that Alfonso – in Pisa at the invitation of her father Pietro Gambacorta, *signore* of the city who had traveled along with Birgitta to Jerusalem in 1372 – had a fundamental conversation with Pietro's daughter, who went by Tora before she entered the convent. The hagiography presents a father in pain for his daughter who, being widowed at a very young age, had made the resolution not to remarry and enter the monastery of the Poor Clares of San Martino.¹⁴ But Pietro had other plans for her and intervened with armed men on horseback to forcibly bring his daughter back to her house, where he kept her segregated while waiting to find a better match for her. Alfonso, who had been Birgitta's confessor and had some experience of women's spirituality, sensed a sincere vocation in Tora and therefore advised her to follow the example of Birgitta. If we are to believe the story written by the anonymous hagiographer of Tora/Chiara Gambacorta, he also gives her a book with the story of Birgitta, so that she could be inspired by it:

At that time the bishop Alfonso, who had been the confessor of saint Birgitta, arrived in Pisa. And being the aforesaid bishop servant of her

scripserunt sub juramento de gestis predictae domine Brigide". What is more, Alfonso here ascribes the authorship of the *Vita* to the two Peters, without mentioning his possible involvement in the arrangement of the text.

12 See Nocentini, "Un eremita, due confessori", 317–21.

13 Cf. Sylvie Duval, "*La beata Chiara conduttrice*". *Le Vite di Chiara Gambacorta e Maria Mancini e i testi dell'Osservanza domenicana pisana* (Rome: 2016); Ann M. Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art. The Convent of San Domenico of Pisa* (London: 2016).

14 Tora Gambacorta was born in Pisa in 1362, she was married early and soon widowed, at the age of 15.

lord father, because they met once in Hierusalem, and because of this familiarity, having a great feast together, he [Pietro] told the case of his beloved daughter, praying him to exhort and comfort her to do the will of her parents. Hence he willingly accepted this undertaking and coming to the devout girl, and speaking a little with her, and understanding her burning and fervent desire, and seeing her fervor and ready will to serve God, he comforted her to continue what she had begun and for her comfort he told her about saint Birgitta, and gave her a book with the story of this saint. And she took her in such devotion as her advocate, that she received from her many graces. And she had sermons [on Birgitta] preached in Pisa, and today her feast is solemnly celebrated every year in her monastery.¹⁵

Pietro was forced to support the decision of her daughter, who took the religious name of Chiara and, after spending a few years among the Dominicans of Santa Croce in Fossabanda, founded the first Dominican observant female monastery in Europe in 1385. A few years later Chiara conceived an iconographic cycle for her new foundation which also involves her devotion to Birgitta and reflects the reading of her Life. The paintings therefore testify to the presence in the monastery of one or more codices with the works and the Life of Birgitta, although today these are considered lost or dispersed in external archival collections.¹⁶ The most significant element for the identification of the version of Birgitta's Life that Alfonso gave to Gambacorta is the presence

15 "In quel tempo capitò in Pisa il veschovo Alfonso, che hera stato confessore di santa Brigida. Et essendo il dicto veschovo, domesticcho del suo signior padre perché si ritrovorno una volta insieme in Hierusalem, et per questa familiarità, facendosi insieme gran festa, disseli il caso della sua diletissima figlia, preghandolo che la esortasse et confortasse a far la volontà de' suo' parenti. Onde elli volentieri accettò tale impresa. Et venendo alla devota fanciulla, et parlando alquanto con essa, et intendendo il suo acceso et fervente desiderio, et vedendo il suo fervore et pronta volontà di servire a Dio, la confortò a seguitare quello che haveva cominciato et per suo conforto li disse di Santa Brigida, et delli il libro della sua istoria. Et ella la prese in tanta devozione et fecela sua avochata et da lei ricevette molte gratie. Et ella la fece in primamente predichare in Pisa, et oggi di nel suo monasterio ogni anno si celebra solennemente la sua festa". Cf. Duval, "*La beata Chiara conduttrice*", 142.

16 We know that Giovanni Dominici taught the observant Dominican nuns in Venice to make liturgical manuscripts and exchange them and other books with the sisters in Pisa. They include, among others, the manuscript Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, lat. III. 25 (c.1400), a witness of the first Book of the Revelations (Rev. I: 164). See Giovanni Dominici, *Lettere spirituali*, ed. Maria Teresa Casella and Giovanni Pozzi (Fribourg: 1969), no. 19, 128–31, and Sylvie Duval, "Usages du livre et de l'écrit chez les moniales dominicaines observantes (Italie, 1400–1450 ca.)," in *Entre stabilité et itinérance: livres et culture des*

of two miracles in the predella of the altarpiece that Chiara had made, around 1404, to be exhibited in the public part of the monastery church.¹⁷ A Madonna enthroned with the child between saint Dominic and saint Magdalene on the left, and saint John the Evangelist and saint Birgitta on the right, surmounted a predella with five scenes: the largest, in a central position, depicts the famous vision of the Nativity, described in Book VII of the *Revelations*;¹⁸ two compartments present Birgitta as a writer, receiving and transcribing the Revelations from an angel or from Christ and the Virgin; the other two compartments show the vision of a pilgrim in Montefalco and a miracle, the rescue from the shipwreck. While the source of inspiration for the compartments relating to the figure of Birgitta as a visionary and writer can be identified in the typical iconography found in the volumes of the *Revelations*, the last two episodes are certainly taken respectively from the VPa and the RU and do not find correspondence in the contemporary iconographic models of the Birgittine cult.¹⁹ Martino di Bartolomeo, the painter of this altarpiece, had another important commission when working in Pisa: the astonishing cycle of frescoes in the Hieronymite church of Saint John the Baptist in Cascina (Pisa), dated to 1398. It should be noted that the Hieronymite Order was founded by Alfonso Pecha, who was in contact with Chiara Gambacorta, as we have seen, and with the Dominicans in Pisa, in whose *Studium* the complex theological project at the base of the iconography of the Cascina church was elaborated. Martino shows here a considerable freedom in the choice of the narrative elements and the relevant iconography. He seems to have worked on the altarpiece and its predella in the same way, a few years later.

The miracle of Montefalco is only narrated in the VPa and in the deposition of Prior Peter at the canonization process.²⁰ A noble Swedish pilgrim, living in Montefalco as a recluse, sees in a dream a woman of small stature set above a column, and venerated by a group of devotees, while white and red roses come out of her mouth; the woman, it is then revealed to the recluse, is Birgitta, bringing wine and roses to the thirsty pilgrims.²¹ The scene of the dream is

ordres mendiants, XIII^e-XV^e siècle, ed. Nicole Bériou, Martin Morard, Donatella Nebbiai, and Dalla Guarda (Turnhout: 2014), 215-28.

17 The altarpiece is nowadays at the Museo Nazionale di San Matteo in Pisa, while the predella is preserved in Berlin, at the Gemäldegalerie.

18 Rev. VII: 187-90.

19 Roberts argues that Martino di Bartolomeo could have been inspired by the earliest illuminations in the Revelations manuscripts, see Roberts, *Dominican Women*. For the biography of Martino, see Michela Becchis, "Martino di Bartolomeo," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 71 (2008), 298-300.

20 S, f. 12va-12vb (VPa), ed. in AP: 632 (VPa) and 503-4 (Deposition of Prior Peter).

21 "Quedam nobilis mulier de regno Suecie, cum esset in peregrinatione prope sanctum Iacobum de Galitia, in quadam ecclesia vidit unum crucifixum in pariete depinctum.

rendered by dividing the picture in two parts: on the right, the noblewoman lying in a bed; on the left the vision with Birgitta amazing the small crowd with the prodigy of the roses.

The miracle of the shipwreck is recounted only in the RU (BHL 1342): a group of men is surprised by a storm while going to the fair of Saint Botvid, in the North of Sweden, and is praying to saint Birgitta for salvation; the ship is then raised above the waves and miraculously placed ashore by an invisible hand. However, while the men are safe, they realize that the child who was traveling with them is missing, so the group turns again to the saint, *who intervenes from a cloud high up in the still stormy sky* and brings the child back to shore. This is the moment depicted in the panel; the shattered boat remains on the right, while at the center, the child, wearing a bright yellow dress, is embraced by the father. The rest of the men are kneeling and looking gratefully to Birgitta.²² According to Ann Roberts, both visions were chosen for their relevance to Chiara and her natural and religious family: her sister nun Maria Mancini often had inspired visions and once received an apparition of Birgitta herself, as in the scene of the recluse of Montefalco; on the other hand, the miracle of the castaways of Saint Botvid could refer to the seafaring culture of

Quod diligenter intuens cum devotione et compassione, audivit tunc unam vocem dicentem sibi sic: 'Ubicumque – inquit – imaginem istam videris et loquentem audiveris, ibi manebis et ibi morieris'. Igitur hec mulier, rediens ad patriam, aliquo tempore mansit domi. Postea vero agrediens iter ad Romam, cum venisset ad civitatem Montis Falconis, vidit in domo cuiusdam domine eandem imaginem quam in Spaniam viderat et dixit ei: 'Hic – inquit – ingredieris et permanebis. Ego enim inclinabo animum domine istius domus ut tradat eam tibi'. Quod sic factum est igitur reclusa illa perseveravit ibidem in lacrimis et in ieiuniis et vitam duxit exemplarem et miraculosam. Hec autem mulier vidit semel in sompnis unam columpnam, super quam stabat quedam domina mediocris stature, quam multe turbe circumstantes aspiciebant et mirabantur. Et de ore eius exibat quasi ros et rose albe et rubee, quarum odore homines intuentes delectabant. Et vigilans igitur reclusa illa sequenti nocte etiam similia vidit et audivit vocem dicentem sibi: 'Mulier quam vidisti est domina Brigida, domina tua, et stat Rome: ipsa enim affert vinum de longinquis partibus cum rosis mixtum et dabit sitientibus peregrinis'. S, f. 12v. The transcription is mine, with corrections of minor errors.

- 22 "Quidam transeuntes navigio ad nundinas sancti Botvidi, in the upper part Suecie, adveniente gravissima tempestate nimis anxii sunt, quoniam ex procellarum impulsibus navis increpuit et aquis replebatur. Here almost nichil aliud quam subversionem expectantes domine Brigide devote implorabant auxilium. Et mox almost quadam manu navis levata est et a quadam procella in terram iactata. Here tandem cognoscentes se unum perdidisse puerulum flexis genibus eandem dominam Brigidam acclamabant. Et statim alia procella puerum iactabat in terram sanum et inlesum. Et hii qui in navi fuerunt ad monasterium Vaztena come properabant, laudantes Christi gloriam, here for eandem dominam tot et so miracula operari dignatus est, nobis cum gaudio talia referentes". S, f. 22ra–22rb. The transcription is mine. The transcription is mine, with corrections of minor errors.

Pisa.²³ However, we now know what their source may be. In fact, since there is no preceding iconographic model for these two scenes, it can be assumed that the textual source is to be found in the *Life of Birgitta* left with Chiara by Alfonso. This manuscript had to include both the VP_a and the RU, just like Si. There was also a restricted circle of lay devotees, who asked for and read Birgitta's writings and her *Life*. The examples of Philippe de Mézières and Lapo Mazzei are significant in this respect.

The first, chancellor of the Reign of Cyprus and counselor of the king of France, was in possession of a copy of Birgitta's *Life*, the *Process Vita* (version A), which he bequeathed to the Library of the Celestine friars. Having being preserved until today, we know exactly which manuscript he had in his hands.²⁴ It is possible that Philippe, a well-educated man connected to the mystical tradition and a supporter of the Avignon Papacy may have been given the *Life* by Alfonso directly.

Lapo Mazzei, the renowned Florentine notary, wrote in his letters about his devotion to Birgitta. He succeeded in obtaining a *Life of Birgitta*, though we do not know which one; maybe one of those disseminated during the canonization process, and certainly a text including miracles, which he mentioned in his letters. He possessed the *Rule of the Saint Saviour Order* as well, and complained that, at the end of 1395, it was still too difficult for lay people to access the *Revelations*, a reading reserved to the high ecclesiastical sphere.

Ser Lapo was in close connection with Antonio di Niccolò degli Alberti, sponsor of the first Birgittine monastery in Italy, the *Paradiso* in Florence. This Birgittine house played a key-role in the dissemination of the Italian translation of Birgitta's *Life*.

The Italian Translation (BAI BriSve II.214)

At the present state of the research, the known manuscript witnesses of the Italian translation are:

1. Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, I.V.26 (1399), fols. 277r–296v (*Vita*), fols. 297r–303v (*Miracles*);
2. Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, T.II.6 (post 1425), fols. 132r–160r (*Vita*), fols. 161–173 (*Miracles*);
3. Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, S. Marco 917 (1490–1520), fols. 53r–85v (*Vita*), fols. 86r–102r (*Miracles*);
4. Firenze, Archivio di Stato, Corporazioni religiose soppresse, 179.49 (XV sec.), fols. 1–36r (*Vita*), fols. 36v–52v (*Miracles*);

23 Roberts, *Dominican Women*, 90–91.

24 Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, 1073.

5. Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl. XXXVIII.15 (XV–XVI sec.), fols. 2r–69r (Vita), fols. 69r–99v (Miracles)
6. Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl. XXXVIII.93 (XVI sec.), fols. 2r–58v (Vita);
7. Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl. XXXVIII.128 (30.11.1458), fols. 1r–58r (Vita), fols. 58r–82v (Miracles);
8. Roma, Biblioteca Angelica, 1367 (post 1425), fols. 1–23 (Vita), fols. 23–34 (Miracles);
9. Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, A 71 (1497/1499), fols. 1–40 (Vita).

The translation is composed of two sections: the proper Life, in 10 chapters, and the Miracles drawn from the RU, in 16 chapters. Both Life and Miracles have an original prologue, which is not in the Latin and has to be ascribed to the translator. However, the earliest manuscript lacks the prologue to the Miracles (n. 1 in the list), while the remaining witnesses bring two additional miracles (chap. 17 and 18).

I have *recently* studied this translation, drawing the following conclusions.²⁵

The translation was made after the canonization (1391) and before 1399 (date of the earliest witness), possibly in the mid-Nineties, when the Paradiso was founded (1394). In the same years, the Miracles (BHL 1342) were *also* translated, although a new version of them was made around 1425, when two additional chapters were added to the collection of miracles.

The translator did not work from a single Latin text, nor did he/she use one of the three earliest proper Lives as the main exemplar. On the contrary, he/she assembled two sources: the liturgical Office of Birger Gregersson (BHL 1335), and one of the longer Lives, maybe the *Liber de miraculis* (BHL 1334b). Moreover, he/she had at his/her disposal a copy of the *Revelations*, from which some supplementary information is drawn. In addition to these features, the translation arranges the diverse materials in a different way in respect to the relevant Latin hagiographic sources, and, what is very interesting, intertwines with the last chapter of the Life an *Indulgenziario* (list of holy places and of the indulgences that could be gained there), a typical Franciscan text of the Late Trecento.

Because the main model for the translation is the liturgical Office (BHL 1335) by Birger Gregersson, this translation could have originated in a monastic or ecclesiastical milieu, where the Office was actually used for the common prayer starting from the end of the Trecento. Hence, it is possible that the promoting center for such an initiative had been the Paradiso in Florence, founded in the same years to which the translation can be dated. Certainly, it was here that the text was modified with the addition of chapter 17 and 18 to

25 I have presented a thorough analysis of this translation at the last Medieval Translator Congress in Bologna (June 2021) and will soon be printed in that series.

Miracles. However, we have no elements to suggest that it was translated by a Birgittine nun or friar, for two reasons: the Birgittine spirituality was nurtured of diverse religious traditions, such as the Dominican, the Franciscan, and the Carthusian ones; each one of these spiritual traditions was interested in the figure and writings of Birgitta, in copying and disseminating her works, in promoting her cult by preaching sermons and through artistic patronages. Secondly, the translator appears to be very close to the Franciscan milieu, given some explicit references to saint Francis and his cult, and the inclusion in the Life of an *Indulgenziario*.

Conclusion

The hagiography of Birgitta is a unique opportunity to enter the scriptorium of Alfonso of Jaén and take a look inside. In fact, the multiple versions of the Latin Life (1373–1391) represent the multiple attempts to build the image of Birgitta as a saint for diverse audiences; sometimes they are merely drafts of subsequent works, in order to refine her biography. We can see, through the many layers composing the text, how the promoters of her cult, especially Alfonso, worked on it and for which aim.

The slightly later Italian translation (1391–1399) is a turning point in the later reception of Birgitta's cult. In Florence, at the end of Trecento, the first Birgittine house in Italy, the Paradiso, was founded, which would become in the subsequent years an important center for Italian translations, and possibly also the source of the Italian translation of Birgitta's Life. It was not made on the basis of one of the previous Latin Lives, but on the liturgical Office, which means that it was made in ecclesiastical or monastic environments and for Birgittine circles.

I think it is necessary to continue the philological research on such texts, in order to better understand where and for whom they were written and disseminated. Because this is a fundamental question: who was reading Birgitta, or her hagiography? And why? As the reader will clearly see by going through the essays of this volume, Birgitta was a kaleidoscope for those who wanted her to be known and venerated: philology can answer these questions, as long as we interrogate the texts.²⁶

26 Comment for the readers: I would like to thank both readers for their highly appreciated comments.

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For a full overview of manuscripts and editions printed in Italy (including apocryphal works), see: *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden. A Database of Networks and Texts in Renaissance Italy*. <https://birgitta.hf.uio.no>. The database includes substantial bibliography, maps, short biographies of relevant actors, and links to manuscripts and to early printed editions.

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