

## The Monastery of Santa Lucia in Foligno and the *Legenda* of Santa Chiara

### From Beguine Community to *Scriptorium*.

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#### Abstract

*During the fifteenth century female convents flourished in north-central Italy revealing a flurry of extraordinary literary production together with an unprecedented intellectual activity among women: the monastery of St. Lucia in Foligno is particularly interesting for being emblematic of this new direction among female institutions. From the old beguine of lay communities to the enterprising wealthy nuns of later monasteries, women found their way through social discrimination. They were capable of surviving marginalization by using and reversing to their advantage the same religious establishment that was relentlessly persecuting them.*

**Keywords:** Beguine, scriptorium, legenda, community, monastery, nuns, discrimination

#### Introduction

During the fifteenth century female convents flourished in north-central Italy revealing a flurry of extraordinary literary production together with an unprecedented intellectual activity among women: the monastery of St. Lucia in Foligno is particularly interesting for being emblematic of this new direction among female institutions.

The monastery originated with a group of women coming from Sulmona in 1424. In his *Umbria Serafica* Agostino da Stroncone gives news of their arrival.<sup>1</sup> The women escaped incidents of violence in Sulmona between religious and civil authority. They were all from the same noble family of Sulmona and found support in Foligno's local noble family, the Trinci. Their names are recorded as Gemma and her daughters Margarita and Chiara, accompanied by a relative, Lisa, and under the direction of Alexandrina, Gemma's cousin. Alexandrina seemed to be the more enterprising and soon became abbess of Santa Lucia. The official date for the arrival of the exiled women is the 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1424 or according to other sources, perhaps 1425.<sup>2</sup> Their intention was the foundation of a monastery to complement a previous older establishment; there was in fact in the same location a group of unidentified women living in a kind of beguine community under the Augustinian rule. All the women in Santa Lucia, the new and the old ones, were determined to remain completely on their own, which is without any assistance from friars as was usual for a female community. But this did not seem to be the friars' fault: the women refused to be under friars' surveillance unless they could have

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1670 and 1680 Father Agostino Mattielli da Stroncone gathered all available information on Franciscan movement in Umbria since the beginning in 1208. The original manuscript of his work, *Umbria Serafica* is in the Archive at the *Portiuncola* in Santa Maria degli Angeli. Luciano Canonici. *Santa Lucia di Foligno. Storia di un monastero e di un ideale.* (Edizioni Portiuncola :S.Maria degli Angeli, 1974) : 14,n5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 33-35

as spiritual directors the friars of the *Osservanza* presided by Friar Paoluccio Trinci, who had just founded the convent of San Bartolomeo of Marano. In 1427, under the Rule proclaimed by Urban IV, all the women at Saint Lucia received direction from the Friars of Saint Bartolomeo of Marano, as they wished.<sup>3</sup>

Santa Lucia is an example of the evolution from the loose organization of the first laywomen communities to the rather different structure of a monastery directly ordered by papal authority. Like the other famous convent of Santa Maria di Monteluca in Perugia, between 1450 and 1580 St. Lucia in Foligno became a *scriptorium* of educated nuns, a place where women, usually wealthy and of noble origin, would take residence while pursuing literary activity. This represented a historical development often preceded by the formation of communities of laywomen.

### **From Lay Community to Regular Convent**

It is necessary to clarify the social background that determined the evolution from lay community to regular convent and also to examine the reasons that provoked the decision of many women to enter a religious community. Already in the previous twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a great number of women chose to separate themselves from their family joining other women with a common purpose. Considering the complexity of that time's social environment it would be unrealistic to assume that women flocked to the convent's life purely for religious vocation. The socioeconomic structure existing in the fifteenth century was the consequence of previous historical happenings that caused and pushed for the formation of enclosed areas exclusively dedicated to women: there was no free space for women in medieval society. Already in earlier time the Church's direction was evident: soon the feminine gender would be the most controlled species on earth.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a particular reaction to a rigid social environment caused a unique phenomenon that spread all over Europe, taking multiform shapes according to local customs: many laywomen gathered together sharing their living space and organizing their daily lives in communities. Were all the women participating in common life dedicated to religious pursuit? Or were there other important elements more or equally compelling that pushed them to search for support sharing their life and activity with others?

Laywomen formed at first small groups loosely organized, but soon they attracted an ever greater number of women particularly from the working class, but also from the rich middle class, from the merchant class and from nobility. As Father Meersseman explains, one of the main reasons for the multiplication of non-enclosed women penitents was the monastery's economic structure. He argues that many of these women attracted by the lay-pietism current at the time, coinciding with the beginning of Gregorian reform, did not possess an adequate dowry for entering a regular traditional monastery.<sup>4</sup> This was not the only problem. In fact women from all walks of life were attracted by the new opportunity of living together. There were all kind of them: destitute or abused women, women with physical or mental disabilities, women who could not marry or did not have family support, women not necessarily religious or interested in a religious life but in dire life circumstance, they all

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 41-43

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Gerard Meersseman, *Ordo Fraternalitatis, Confraternite e pietà dei laici nel medioevo*. (Herder Editrice:Roma, 1977): 282.

found themselves in need of shelter and protection. Lay communities sprouting everywhere became the answer. At the beginning of thirteenth century, the solution to women's many social problems was the organization of *beguinages* or *courts* in northern Europe and in Italy the hospices for penitents. The women entering the hospices were called *beghine*, *pinzocchere* or *mantellate* depending on the location. These communities did not accept any of the traditional religious rules: thus, the *Memoriale propositi fratrum et sororum de Penitentia in domibus propriis existentium* was generally adopted. This was an older regulation for men and women who were dedicated to practice penance in their own home: it was afterward modified and restructured in 1221 by Ugolino da Segni.<sup>5</sup> Economy and socio-politics were important, often prevalent aspects of the social dynamic. Social issues, local politics and religious practices were completely intermixed, thus constantly influencing each other. Augustine Thompson points out the strict interdependence between civil and religious practices and laws. Despite the effort to separate and distinguish civil administration and Church administration, it was in practice not possible to avoid the Church's influence upon civic affairs. In Italian society this situation fluctuated through the centuries with variations according to local politics, but never changed. Thompson argues that in the late thirteenth century, in its effort to compete with the Church, the civic jurisdiction modeled itself on religious structures claiming legal legitimacy over Episcopal authority, but too often did not succeed or it did at the cost of bloody conflicts.<sup>6</sup>

The women exiled from Sulmona were precisely victims of the type of situation described by Thompson. In their city the conflict between the local powerful families reached the internal life of the convent where they resided, the Monastery of Santa Chiara founded in 1268-1269 by Floresenda di Palena daughter of Tommaso, Lord of Palena, near Chieti. Noble families in the region were all deeply involved in the convent's maintenance where their female relatives lived in a very comfortable and rich environment: political struggle among them affected the women's lives in the convent because they also took sides for their family. One of these conflicts more serious than others between the families of Merlini and Quadrari of Sulmona was the cause for the escape of the women who found refuge in Foligno: they saved their lives using the social structure appositely created for women's protection.

### **The Status of Medieval Women**

In the fifteenth century the lay communities of old with their social flexibility were disappearing and the available social structure for women was then the monastery or convent organized as a strictly religious establishment. Even though the main motivation for the formation of the laywomen's associations was of socioeconomic nature, soon enough all women were forced to establish a rigid religious program in their community in order to avoid clerical negative reactions, inspired by a growing deep mistrust toward the feminine gender. On the other hand it seems that women adjusted easily to the necessity dictated by their situation. There were not many choices for medieval women: either an early marriage with dozens of children to bear, a life of prostitution or a monastic life. Twelfth and thirteenth century lay communities were a good solution and offered the same

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 265-283.

<sup>6</sup> "The growing division of civil and ecclesiastic jurisdictions paradoxically led the commune to cultivate an ever more sacred ethos for itself. [...] Secularized communes needed their own divine legitimacy. They sought it in heaven, invoking the protection of new patron saints and on earth, saturating their laws, assemblies, and communal institutions with sacred rhetoric, symbolism, and ritual." Augustine Thompson. *Cities of God. The Religion of Italian Communes 1125-1325*. (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2005):108.

opportunity to all women in need: they were closer to Francis' ideal than any other institution. Nonetheless, women's communities, under increased suspicion by Episcopal authority, were never allowed to have a positive development, just as Francis' ideal failed to be recognized. The Franciscans, after the great excitement for reform inspired by Francis, instead of following the pattern indicated by him that could have also helped greatly the women's associations, were never able to give breathing space to them. Franciscans went back to the traditional scheme of convent life recruiting rich women among nobility or the well to do families of the emergent middle-class. Often the friars were ordered by religious authority to take care of remaining laywomen's organization; however, already at the beginning of the fourteenth century in 1311 Pope Clement V declared that all *beghine* were heretics and laywomen communities slowly disappeared absorbed by regular monasteries. This corresponds to the evolution of Santa Lucia in Foligno from beguine community to regular convent. The beguines were transformed into nuns in the enclosed area of a traditional monastery and a different story took place, the story of the many convents in north central Italy heirs of the laywomen communities, but completely reorganized according to papal jurisdiction. Some nuns in the most ancient convents such as Santa Lucia in Foligno or Santa Maria di Monteluca in Perugia still today remind scholars of the old *beghine*.<sup>7</sup>

#### **The Specific Case of Santa Lucia in Foligno**

In the convent of Santa Lucia in Foligno, two women among others exemplify the kind of female activity characteristic of the fifteenth-century monasteries: Sister Caterina Guarnieri of Osimo and Battista Malatesta of Montefeltro, who changed her name to Sister Hyeronima. We know of their existence thanks to the chronicle of the monastery, whose main author has been Caterina Guarnieri. The chronicle of the monastery is contained in a manuscript now located in the Archive of the *Curia Generale, Ordine dei Frati Minori* in Rome, codex A 23, dated at the beginning of sixteenth century. The existence of this codex was notified by Giovanni Boccali at the International Convention, *Clara claris praeclara*, 20-22 November 2003 in *S.Maria degli Angeli, Assisi*.<sup>8</sup> From the handwriting it is evident that the manuscript has been written by one person only. It is not in good condition, thus reading is somewhat difficult. Sister Caterina Guarnieri was in charge of the chronicle at the Monastery of Santa Lucia and was the first copyist to document the events at the monastery from 1425 to 1536. She is the daughter of Stefano Guarnieri da Osimo, chancellor of Perugia in 1466-1488. We know from her father's testament in 1484 that Caterina Guarnieri was the twelfth child among five brothers and eight sisters.<sup>9</sup> She died in 1547. The chronicle continues by the hand of Sister Antonia, the scribe who worked as a copyist after Caterina's death. Sister Antonia also writes the eulogy for Caterina: "Caterina was a good woman both for family inheritance and for her virtue; she is remembered for her saintly life and had an important position at the convent. She was abbess for

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Dalarun and Fabio Zinelli refer to the previous establishment upon which the convent of St.Lucia was organized as a « sorte de beguinage » some kind of beguine community. «Le manuscrit des sœurs de Santa Lucia de Foligno, I. Notice». *Studi medievali*, 46 (2005): 117-167.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Boccali, "Leggenda in rima su S.Chiara d'Assisi." *Frate Francesco*, 71(2005): 389-414.

<sup>9</sup> Her father's Testament is in U. Nicolini. "Stefano Guarnieri da Osimo, cancelliere di Perugia dal 1466 al 1488." *L'Umanesimo Umbro, Atti del IX Convegno di Studi Umbri* (Gubbio, 1974): 324-329.

three years and wrote numerous works for her sisters whom she loved greatly.”<sup>10</sup> Caterina does not seem to have been more than a copyist;<sup>11</sup> however, without doubt she contributed with excellence to the intellectual ferment of the new humanistic culture that was developing in parallel with a more organized monastic life. Looking at her family situation it can be argued that entering the convent might have not been her personal choice. She had eight sisters: how many of them were able to have a convenient marriage particularly after their father’s death? With the escalating discrimination against lay communities, the only decent alternative to marriage was the regular convent and it was indeed the best solution in a woman’s destiny. It is then possible that an intellectually gifted woman could prefer entering the convent where she had the chance to exercise her talent like in no other place available to the female gender: university was an exclusively male territory. Religiosity was part of the deal: being a pervasive force in society, religion was automatically drawn into daily life without necessarily meaning or implying a deep belief in everything was preached by the Church. We do not have a record for what happened to the whole Guarnieri family, but we know that out of nine girls three became nuns: Caterina entered Santa Lucia in Foligno in 1489, Gerolama, Caterina’s older sister, joined the nuns at St. Maria di Monteluca in Perugia and so did Susanna, the younger sister, right after the father’s death in 1494. To believe that they entered the convent exclusively for religious vocation would be a narrow, partial view of the women’s actual position in Italian fifteenth-century society. Taking into account the growing control upon women communities as well as the rampant authority in the hand of the Inquisition, at any time ready for accusation of heresy, the idea that the activity at Saint Lucia, as in any other convent flourishing in Italy, could have as main inspiration a “profound spiritual need” (*profonde exigence spirituelle*)<sup>12</sup> sounds quite unrealistic. By the same token the beautiful description of the nuns’ life given by Mario Sensi is colored by poetic imagination more than by historical reality. As Sensi rightly observes, for absence of documentation we know nothing of the internal convent life, but immediately after this statement he goes on describing the nuns’ inner experience: “characterized by hard penance, mysticism and by Franciscan peace. [...] Submitted to their spiritual directors these religious women searched only for a silent asceticism and a life of poverty. [...] Their ideal was to follow on the way indicated by Saint Chiara [...]”<sup>13</sup> Certainly the

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<sup>10</sup> Paraphrased from the Saint Lucia Chronicle’s eulogy written by Sister Antonia: “L’ultimo di’ de marzo (1547) morì la matre sora Caterina da Ozimo, donna da bene de sangue e de virtù, e veramente d’esse hauta a memoria per le sue virtù e sancta vita...Epsa matre scripse el libro de Melchiade e quello de Hierusalem, e io sora Antonia, ci la adiutai ; e multe altre cose à scripture per consolatione de le sore, ad le quale epsa matre portava grandissima carità e amore. Fo vicaria nove anni e tre anni fo abbatissa, poi Dio la menò alla gloria beata a remunerarla de le sue buone opere [...]”Giovanni Boccali. “Legenda in rima su S.Chiara d’Assisi nel cod.A23 dell’Archivio della Curia generale dei Frati Minori in Roma.” *Frate Francesco*, 71 (2005):389-414, 390.

<sup>11</sup> J. Dalarun and F. Zinelli “Poésie et théologie à Santa Lucia de Foligno. Sur une laude de Battista de Montefeltro”, *Caterina Vigri. La santa e la città*. (Atti del Convegno Bologna, 13-15 Nov. 2002):19-43.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Dalarun and Fabio Zinelli. « Le manuscrit des sœurs de Santa Lucia de Foligno, I. Notice». *Studi medievali*, 46.(2005) : 117-167 +VII fig., 27.

<sup>13</sup> Mario Sensi explains: «Anche per la scarsità della documentazione, è stata invece finora poco studiata la loro vita interna, caratterizzata da aspre penitenze, da slanci mistici e soprattutto da una francescana serenità.[...]Docili alla guida dei loro direttori spirituali queste religiose altro non cercavano che l’ascesi riservata e pauperistica. Loro ideale fu quello di ripercorrere la strada di Chiara

description paints the image of what the Church wished and still today wishes to be, not necessarily of what really was.

The general direction in fifteenth century Italian society was to create more monasteries avoiding the awkward situation in which a woman would find herself without a man. A demonstration of this trend is in a later document written by a notary from Bologna around 1550. The notary Giovanni Boccaferro addressed a *Discorso sopra il governo delle monache (Discourse on the discipline for nuns)* to the bishop of Bologna, Giovanni Campeggi, in order to take position against an ecclesiastic reformation that had the tendency to eliminate the economic and social reasons for the existence of monasteries. Boccaferro argues that this would be dangerous for the social stability and explains the absolute necessity of feminine convent life for various reasons strictly connected to demographic, social and economic problems. He affirms convincingly that monasteries are the “only remedy for women who cannot be married.” This was an opinion shared by the majority of citizens. Boccaferro’s strong conviction represents the apex of a long process already evident during fifteenth century manifested in the increased importance and growing number of feminine convents connected to the Franciscan movement of the *Osservanza*.<sup>14</sup> It was also a confirmation of the usefulness of the previous beguine movement that had first recognized and found a solution for women’s social need: the old beguine community was now transformed and institutionalized in conformity with an imposed religious structure becoming ever stricter as time brought increasing challenge to the Church’s authority. The earlier beguine establishments were mostly composed of women trying to fight an unkind social reality, sharing their work, mostly labor, in order to survive. A laywomen community had a more democratic goal compared to the fifteenth century’s monastery populated with high frequency by wealthy and well educated women. Their motivation in entering the convent might have been similar to the beguines’ need for a community, because they also found themselves at loss in their society. The difference though consisted in having the support of their powerful families: their wealth allowed for more freedom and communication with the exterior world. As a consequence they had the opportunity to use their good education at the service of the community, as Caterina Guarnieri did recording the events at the monastery, or they could be dedicated to learning and creative literary activity as Battista Malatesta of Montefeltro following the particular interest of the time, which coincided with the new cultural movement of humanism.

### **Monastic Scholarship**

In Santa Lucia in Foligno Battista Malatesta of Montefeltro distinguished herself among the most learned for knowledge and creativity. She was mentioned and praised for her many talents by Sister Caterina in her *Ricordanze*, the chronicle of St. Lucia’s Monastery. Battista was born in 1384 and married Galeazzo Malatesta, lord of Pesaro, in 1406. She entered Santa Lucia in 1444 or 1445 with the name of Sister Hyeronima and was followed by her daughter Elisabetta already married with Pier Gentile Varano, Lord of Camerino. Elisabetta had lost her husband in one of the many local wars and brought to the convent also her daughter Costanza Varano. In a typical situation Battista Malatesta, a

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d’Assisi [...] » citation in Jacques Dalarun and Fabio Zinelli «Le manuscrit des sœurs de Santa Lucia de Foligno, I. Notice». *Studi medievali*, 46. (117-167 +VII fig.): 147.

<sup>14</sup> « [...]essi monasterii debbono esser il ridotto di quelle che maritar non puonsi » Gabriella Zarri. «Monasteri femminili e città.» *Storia d’Italia. La chiesa e il potere politico*. Annali v. 9 (Torino : Einaudi Editore, 1986): 359-429, 361-363.

wealthy sixty-three year old lady with a good marriage behind her and whose family inheritance could afford to pay for her new residence, used the convent as a place for a protected retirement. Her husband Galeazzo Malatesta was still alive but probably too busy being at war as most noble men of the time.<sup>15</sup> She was accompanied by her daughter Elisabetta, whose social position was affected by her recent widowhood. Hyeronima's niece Costanza followed as well, probably too young to make her own decision, but in a difficult social situation having just lost her father. Clearly the convent represented a safe haven for women who did not have men's protection: contrary to the old beguines, however, they needed to be wealthy in order to pay for their security. Battista Malatesta found refuge at Santa Lucia together with her two female relatives and stayed until her death in 1448. As customary, she left a testament in favor of the monastery.

Hyeronima was very learned in humanistic culture; she wrote Latin orations and Italian poems, leaving at her death letters and poetry in Latin and Italian, some still unedited. She must have done most of her work before entering the convent because her life did not last long afterwards. Caterina Osimo never met her because she joined the convent in 1488 while Hyeronima died in 1448, but certainly her fame was still alive among the other sisters from whom Caterina could gather information for her chronicle. According to Caterina, Hyeronima "era docta in ogni scientia liberale et maxime in strologia, et havea grande cervello di componere et rimare laude..." ("...she was learned in every liberal science especially in astrology, and she had great ability for composing rhymed *laude* ..."). Coming from the noble family of the counts of Montefeltro and destined to a marriage with Malatesta, another noble and very powerful family, Hyeronima lived in a privileged situation, open to the possibility of developing her intellectual interest. Her remarkable creative talent was also praised by Leonardo Bruni Aretino, a well known humanist scholar, who, in a long letter in Latin, qualified her as "a very learned woman."<sup>16</sup> Bruni wrote his letter between 1423 and 1426, before Battista entered the convent; he advised the lady to read classical Latin authors. He was obviously concerned that she should learn what is most proper for a woman; thus, for example, she should give priority to religious literature and moral writings while she would not need to practice the rhetorical art of speaking in public that, just as the art of war, was not destined to women. As Jacques Dalarun comments we do not know whether Battista followed all of Bruni's advices.<sup>17</sup> But certainly in her letters she did practice public discourse and participated in the political life of her time; she also excelled in astrology which, as other sciences, Bruni did not consider necessary for women. Besides her communication with Bruni, Battista had an intellectual relationship with her father-in-law, Malatesta I Senatore of Pesaro a learned man with whom Battista exchanged poems and correspondence. In the manuscript under consideration, codex A 23 in Rome, only one poem has a clearly stated authorship attributed to Hyeronima Battista. The title is: *Laude devota delli dolori mentali del Signore, composta da Madonna Hyeronima da Pesaro, sora del Monastero de Sancta Lucia de Fuligni.*

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<sup>15</sup> According to other sources Galeazzo Malatesta was already dead when Battista entered the convent. Luciano Canonici. *Santa Lucia di Foligno. Storia di un monastero e di un ideale.* (Edizioni Portiuncola :S.Maria degli Angeli, 1974) : 64.

<sup>16</sup> Giovanni Boccali, "Leggenda in rima su S.Chiara d'Assisi." *Frate Francesco*, 71(2005): 389-414, 399.

<sup>17</sup> J.Dalarun and F.Zinelli. "Poésie et théologie à Santa Lucia de Foligno. Sur une laude de Battista de Montefeltro" *Caterina Vigri. La santa e la città. Atti del Convegno Bologna* (13-15 Nov. 2002):19-43, 29-32.

This *laude* has been amply studied and commented by Dalarun and Zinelli. Another *laude* dedicated to Santa Chiara of Assisi, also in the same manuscript, does not have a clear attribution. At the beginning of the manuscript Caterina acknowledges the author of Chiara's *Legenda: una sora del monastero de Sancta Lucia*, (a sister at the monastery of Saint Lucia). She does not specify the name, but Giovanni Boccali attributed without hesitation the *Legenda* to Sister Hyeronima. Unfortunately, we can never or rarely be sure of a manuscript's original author; in fact, Jacques Dalarun noticed incongruence in the manuscript and cast doubt on the attribution to Hyeronima. Dalarun argues that in the manuscript located in the Archive of the *Curia Generale, Ordine dei Frati Minori* in Rome, only one *laude*, the one just mentioned, is clearly of Battista. The situation is complicated by the fact that the manuscript contains writings from other authors such as Bonaventura and Caterina Vigri. The two *laude*, the one clearly attributed to Battista and the *Legenda* of Santa Chiara are not together in the manuscript and actually they seem to belong to two different pamphlets later on tied up in the same codex. According to Dalarun the only good argument for attributing the *Legenda* to Battista is in another codex, the manuscript of Pesaro, in which, however, only a part of the *Legenda* is said to belong to Battista.<sup>18</sup> Dalarun is in the process of clarifying the *Legenda's* authorship and we are waiting with bated breath.

The *Legenda* is an invocation and a prayer in Old Italian, with the description of few traits of Chiara's life: it consists of 62 octaves and one quatrain. Caterina Guarnieri introduces the *laude: Incomenza la legenda della gloriosa sancta Chiara composta in rima da una sora del Monasterio de Sancta Lucia de Fulignj* (Here starts the story of the glorious Saint Chiara composed in rhyme by a sister at the Monastery of Saint Lucia in Foligno). The most prevalent theme in the poem is the theme of *light* with much wordplay with the name *Chiara* (Clare): the Italian proper name *Chiara* is also a feminine adjective and means *light* corresponding to the English adjective *clear*; instead the English noun *light* translates in Italian as *luce* or *lume*. The Italian *chiarissima luce* is a *very clear light*. In a significant parallel the major characteristic in Dante's *Cantica* of *Paradiso* is precisely the light that pervades the paradisiacal environment and becomes ever more resplendent and clear as Dante ascends to experience divine glory. God is supernatural Light. With the most extraordinary talent Dante infuses light in every word that describes his Paradise: thus, the reader also receives light and a sense of Dante's divine inspiration. For an Italian reader the perception of light in Dante's Paradise is indeed the most salient experience that distinguishes this *Cantica* from the other two, *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*: this is a quality of Dante's poetic genius that is almost completely lost even in the best English translation. The author of the *Legenda* seems to be aware and sensitive to Dante's expression of light and we find in her poem the same effort for composing words as clusters of light whenever she describes Clare's divine illumination. The many words associated with the theme of light are without doubt a mannerism inspired by Dante's superior poetic strength. The striking resemblances to Dante's style are from both the *Commedia* and the *Vita Nova*: in one of the octaves (number 8) the poetess convincingly paraphrases Dante's verses in the *Vita Nova* (I, XXI) illustrating the noble demeanor of Beatrice appearing as supreme love among ordinary men: the same is applied to the image of Clare.

There are other *topoi*, popular in Franciscan hagiography that the nun is using, such as the comparison of Clare to a plant grown out of Francis's spirituality—a plant (*pianta*) giving a *fragrant flower* (*aulente fiore*)— the mention of Clare's virginity, obligatory requirement for sanctity, and her mother's prophecy that she will give birth to an extraordinary holy woman. Also in octave 51 there is

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<sup>18</sup> Pesaro, Biblioteca Oliveriana, 454, II (XVII – XVIII centuries), ff.44r-45v.

a reference to *I Fioretti* with which the writer reports words taken by Francis' preaching on the square of Montefeltro, Battista's birthplace.<sup>19</sup> This might be a small element in favor of Battista's authorship. However the poetic imitation of Dante is most important because it reinforces the idea and demonstrates the fact that the author was a woman extremely well learned and with an unusual literary knowledge.

As highlighted in the following octaves the words she is using in order to impress images of light in the reader's mind are the following: *splendore* (splendor, brilliance, brightness), *chiaro splendore* (clear splendor, brilliance), *splendida* (magnificent, splendid), *splendente*, *scintillante/scintillando* (shining), *stella* (star), *lucido splendore* (shiny splendor), *luce splendida e serena* (splendid and serene light), *(il)luminato* (enlightened), *divinamente viva rosa* (divinely alive or vivid rose), *gloriosa luce chiara* (glorious bright light). She repeats them in different and new combinations practically saturating the whole poem; but more than every single word the pervasive style of the poem lights up the spirit. In the same way Dante opens the door of Paradise and shows to the perceptive reader a glimpse of divine light.

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| <p>1. Jo prego quella <b>vergene pura et bella</b><br/>                 Che è matre del mio creatore<br/>                 Che doni gratia alla mia mente fella<br/>                 Ch'io possa dir de quello <b>aulente fiore</b><br/>                 Et parlar possa io de quella <b>stella</b><br/>                 Che a tucto el mondo venduto ha <b>splendore</b><br/>                 Ciô è ch'io possa dir de quella <b>pianta</b> that<br/>                 Che tenne vita evangelicha sancta.</p> | <p>1.I pray that <b>pure and beautiful Virgin</b><br/>                 who is mother of my creator<br/>                 so she might grace my feable mind<br/>                 so I could sing of that <b>fragrant flower</b><br/>                 and speak of that <b>star</b><br/>                 who gave <b>splendor</b> to the whole world<br/>                 is I could say of that <b>plant</b><br/>                 having had an evangelical santly life</p>  |
| <p>2. Et questa fo la <b>sposa del Signore</b><br/>                 Che <b>sancta Chiara</b> per nome è chiamata<br/>                 Et fo de <b>vita si chiaro splendore</b><br/>                 Che molta gente per le' s'è salvata<br/>                 Et tanto piacque al suo redemptore<br/>                 Che in cielo et in terra l'à glorificata<br/>                 Tucta s'alegra la corte <b>divina</b><br/>                 Della sua <b>luce splendida et serena</b></p>                  | <p>2.This has been our <b>Lord's lady</b><br/>                 called with the name of <b>Saint Clare</b><br/>                 and she had a <b>life</b> of such a <b>clear brilliance</b><br/>                 that many people through her were saved<br/>                 and so much she was liked by her Redeemer<br/>                 in the sky and on the earth he glorified her<br/>                 The whole <b>divine</b> court rejoices<br/>                 for her <b>splendid and serene light</b></p> |
| <p>4. Jnanze che nascesse <b>el nobil fiore</b><br/> <b>Alla sua matre fo da Dio mostrato</b><br/>                 como seria <b>si lucido splendore</b><br/> <b>che tucto el mondo ne seria luminato</b> the entire world would be enlightened<br/>                 et quando ebbe inteso tal tenore<br/>                 fo tucto el suo cor lectificato<br/>                 tornô a casa alegra con gran festa<br/>                 et parturl la matre benedecta</p>                                    | <p>4.Before the <b>noble flower</b> was born<br/> <b>to her mother by God was shown</b><br/>                 she would be such a <b>shiny brightness</b><br/>                 and when she had understood the news<br/>                 her heart had been full of happiness<br/>                 she went home with joy and celebration<br/>                 and gave birth the blessed mother</p>  |
| <p>6. Questa <b>splendente stella in Ase</b><br/>                 Nacque de stirpe degna et generosa<br/>                 jn puerile età mostrô palese<br/>                 esser <b>divinamente viva rosa</b></p>   | <p>6. This <b>shiny star</b> in Assisi<br/>                 was born from noble and generous descent<br/>                 already as a child demonstrated<br/>                 of being a <b>divinely vivid rose</b></p>   |

<sup>19</sup> Caroli Ernesto, "Biografie di San Francesco. I Fioretti; Considerazioni sulle Stimmate" *Fonti Francescane*. (Padova: Editrici Francescane, 2004): 1234. Boccali gives reference of it in "Leggenda in rima su S.Chiara d'Assisi." *Frate Francesco*, 71(2005): 389-414, 400.



de obbedientia <i>serva deputata</i>	committed servant of <b>obedience</b>
Al lei <b>verginità</b> fo sempre cara	always loved <b>virginity</b>
et fu per lei <b>humilità</b> mostrata	and gave example of <b>humility</b>
De <b>stricta povertà</b> fo sempre avara	never wanted to give up <b>poverty</b>
Et mai volse de lei esser privata	never wanted to be without it
<b>lei tre voti amò con tanto affecto</b>	<b>she loved dearly the three vows</b>
<b>che ogni pena per lor parea dilecto.</b>	<b>so much that any penance seemed a pleasure</b>

Francesco preaching at the castle of Montefeltro, birthplace of Hyeronima: *Tanto è bene quel ch'io aspetto, che ogni pena mi è diletto.*

*I Fioretti – Considerazioni sulle stimmate, I*

Tracing the process of transformation of women communities from the beguine movement to the fifteenth century regular convents it becomes evident that the old beguines left no history behind or perhaps just scattered information. In Italy, more than in other countries as in Flanders or France, they were mostly illiterate, very poor and probably too busy trying to survive to find respite in any intellectual activity. When the laywomen communities were restructured and increasingly controlled by the Church the environment changed dramatically: together with stricter religious rules, wealth and material wellbeing entered convent's life allowing for the leisure of literary creativity. Perhaps we will never know for sure to whom we owe the *Legenda* of Santa Chiara, but no matter who is the author the composition is an admirable example of feminine poetic inspiration from an age and a place, the convent, in which wealthy and noble women could afford to have a story to tell. If Battista Malatesta is the poetess, she shows in her verses cultural awareness of religious themes and at the same time she also reveals in depth literary knowledge that could have been foreign to other well educated nuns but not particularly learned in literary production. Dalarun points out that Battista's work deals exclusively with religious subjects, but in contrast her poetry is completely in tune with contemporary literary courtly rhetoric: there is nothing in Battista's writing, or very little, resembling the primitive *laude* in Jacopone da Todi's style, which was still popular in the fifteenth century as shown in Caterina Vigri's poems.<sup>20</sup> This could be a point in favor for the attribution of the *Legenda* to Sister Hyeronima. The *Legenda* of Saint Chiara is a beautiful poem with a clear influence from Dante's style; just for this reason we would be inclined to prefer the attribution to Battista, considering her sophisticated knowledge of the famous influential poems of her time. However, there might be other more compelling factors for a different interpretation as argued by Jacques Dalarun. The examples of poetry given here are just a taste of the learned activity exercised by women at the Monastery of Santa Lucia during fifteenth century. Besides Caterina Guarnieri and Battista Malatesta there were others who contributed to the fame of the convent. In the nineteenth century Foligno's historian Faloci-Pulignani remembers the peculiarity of Santa Lucia, a real cultural center in which many

<sup>20</sup> « Il est d'autant plus remarquable que sa production poétique traite exclusivement de matière sacrée [...]. Mais à l'inverse [...] la poétique mise en œuvre est résolument celle de la grande rhétorique courtoise. On ne trouve guère trace, dans ses œuvres, de la syntaxe et des figures de la *laude* primitive. Il y subsiste fort peu, par exemple, de la manière d'un Jacopone de Todi dont le succès est pourtant encore vif au XV siècle en particulier dans le milieu franciscains, comme en témoignent les *laudes*, plus archaïsantes de Caterina Vigri »<sup>20</sup> J. Dalarun and F. Zinelli. "Poésie et théologie à Santa Lucia de Foligno. Sur une *laude* de Battista de Montefeltro" *Caterina Vigri. La santa e la città. Atti del Convegno Bologna* (13-15 Nov. 2002):19-43, 32.

women could practice their talent. From the monastery they could irradiate their knowledge and interests to many similar centers in other Italian cities such as Messina, L'Aquila, Bologna, Mantova, Ferrara, all taken by the intellectual ferment of the time. However, the convent of Monteluca in Perugia was indeed the closest in spirit to the sisters of Santa Lucia; an active exchange of ideas and literary production between their *scriptorium* guaranteed to both convents an important role in the development of humanistic culture. Feloci-Pulignani reminds us of the presence in Santa Lucia of many well educated, noble young girls from the best families of central Italy. Once in the monastery, besides daily prayers and manual work they continued to practice their love for literature. They sang poetry in Italian, Greek and Latin, wrote letters and chronicles, composed books, nourishing their knowledge with the study of classics and pursuing intellectual relations outside the convent with many learned men of their time.<sup>21</sup>

From the old *beghine* of lay communities to the enterprising wealthy nuns of later monasteries, women found their way through social discrimination. They were capable of surviving marginalization by using and reversing to their advantage the same religious establishment that was relentlessly persecuting them. Were they really religious, devoted women, committed to a profound spiritual life? Many more findings of documents, chronicles and manuscripts will probably continue to puzzle our postmodern minds creating new questions and challenging our present awareness of the ever-changing shape of history.

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<sup>21</sup> Luciano Canonici. *Santa Lucia di Foligno. Storia di un monastero e di un ideale*. (Edizioni Portiuncola : S.Maria degli Angeli, 1974): 85-86.