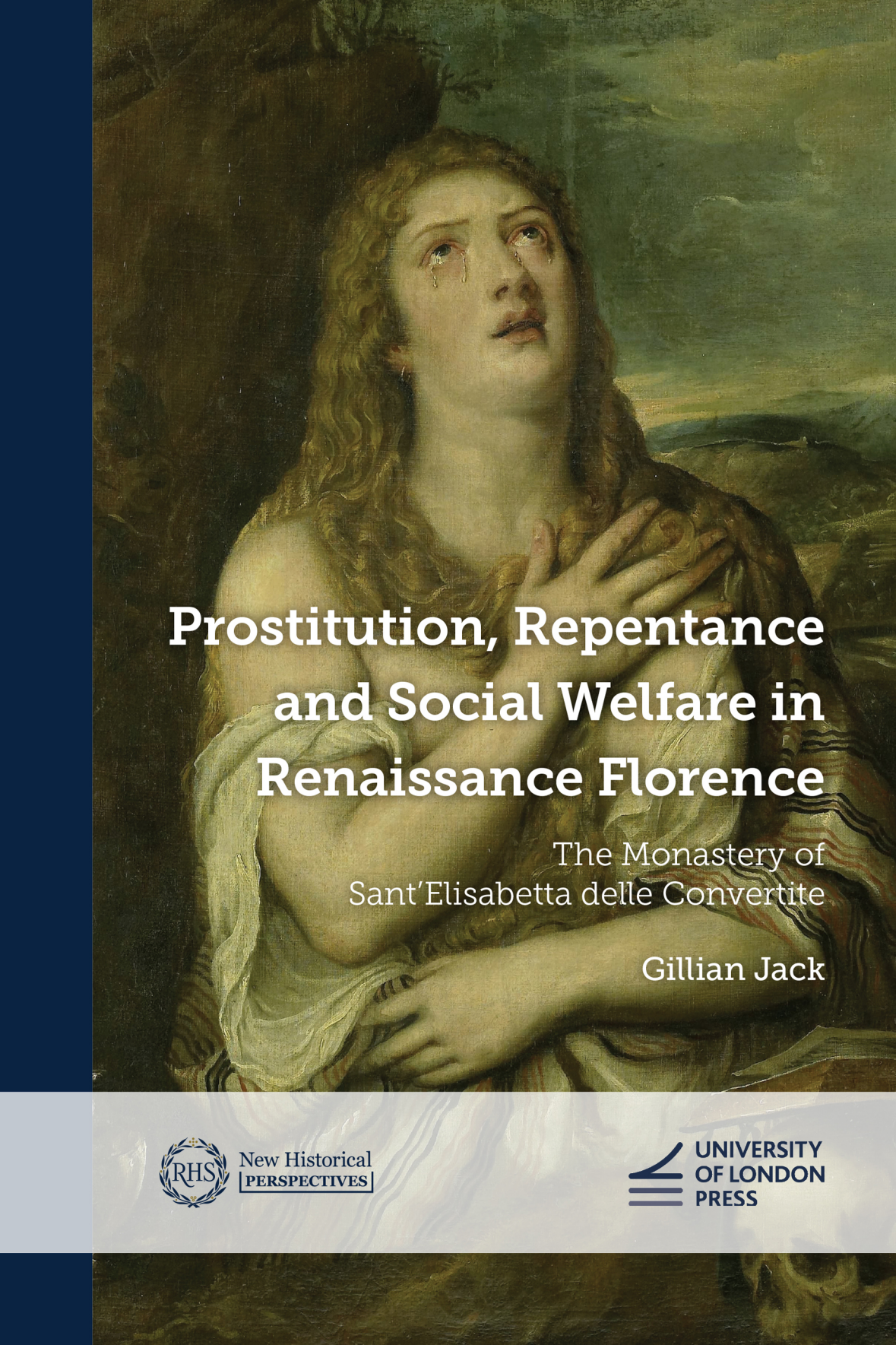




Prostitution, Repentance and Social Welfare in Renaissance Florence

The Monastery of
Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite

Gillian Jack



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For Benedetto

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>Notes and stylistic features</i>	xv
Introduction	1
1. Prostitution and repentance in medieval context	23
2. The foundation of Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite	45
3. Legalised prostitution and funding repentance	69
4. Municipal funding and increased interference	97
5. Making prostitutes pay for Sant'Elisabetta	121
6. Sant'Elisabetta, the law and exceptions to it	145
7. A new era of financial stability	167
Conclusion	191
<i>Appendix: The nuns of Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite</i>	201
<i>Bibliography</i>	211
<i>Index</i>	227

List of figures

- 4.1 Sandro Botticelli, *The Trinity with Saint Mary Magdalene and Saint John the Baptist, Archangel Raphael and Tobias*, c. 1490–1495. Tempera on panel, 215 × 192.4 cm, The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust) Photo © The Courtauld/Bridgeman Images. CC BY-ND. 104
- 4.2 Sandro Botticelli, *Saint Mary Magdalene Listening to Christ Preach*, c. 1484–1491, tempera on panel, 20 × 43.8 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection 1917, Cat. 44. CCo/Public domain. 105
- 4.3 Sandro Botticelli, *The Feast in the House of Simon*, c. 1484–1491, tempera on panel, 19.8 × 43.7 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection 1917, Cat. 45. CCo/Public domain. 106
- 4.4 Sandro Botticelli, *Noli Me Tangere*, c. 1484–1491, tempera on panel, 19.8 × 43.7 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection 1917, Cat. 46. CCo/Public domain. 107
- 4.5 Sandro Botticelli, *The Last Moments of Saint Mary Magdalene*, c. 1484–1491, tempera on panel, 18.3 × 43.8 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection 1917, Cat. 47. CCo/Public domain. 107
- 7.1 Route of the procession of the cross, 1621, with Sant’Elisabetta and the stopping points indicated. Detail of Map of Florence c. 1830, Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig via Wikimedia Commons. CCo/Public domain. 180

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and seemingly limitless patience. Finally, Gavin Inglis has learned more than he ever wanted or thought possible about prostitutes and nuns in Florence. Without him, none of this would have been possible.

AI has not been used in any part of the research or writing of this book.

List of abbreviations

Unless otherwise stated, all archival documents are in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze.

AAF	Archivio Arcivescovile di Firenze
AOIF	Archivio storico dell'Institut degli Innocenti, Firenze
ASF	Archivio di Stato di Firenze
BNCF	Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Firenze
CRSGF	Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse dal Governo Francese
Provv.	Provvisioni Registri

Notes and stylistic features

Dating

The Florentine year began on 25 March. In the text I have modernised dates to the new system in which the year begins on 1 January. I have retained Florentine dates in quotations and where relevant in the notes since old style dates are often used to identify the documents in the archive.

Money

Medieval and early modern Florentines used different monetary systems for coins and accounts. The gold coin, the florin, was used alongside the silver *denaro* and other silver coins for cash transactions. Ledgers were kept in ‘money of account’, divided into *lire*, *soldi* and *denari*. One *lira* = 20 *soldi* = 240 *denari*. The *lira* and *soldo* did not exist as coins. In the mid-thirteenth century, one florin was worth one *lira* but due to debasement and fluctuations in international bullion markets this correspondence did not last long. The changing value of the florin over the long period of this study makes comparisons difficult. Where it is useful, I have indicated the buying power of amounts described in the text to indicate their value.

Following the convention described by Richard Goldthwaite, I have noted these as fl. for florins, and £, s. and d. for *lire*, *soldi* and *denari* respectively.

System of references

Although Florentine archivists over the years have added folio numbering to many of the documents in their care, this is not always the case. When documents are clearly foliated, I have indicated page references. However, many of the documents from Sant’Elisabetta are not foliated. In the case of item 70 from the Sant’Elisabetta *fondo*, the Contratti, the sixteenth-century *procuratore*, Benedetto d’Albizo, numbered some, but not all, of the contracts. His system was to assign each contract numbers and letters (the first is A.No.1, then B.No.2 and so on until BB.No.93). I have therefore used his numbering as far as possible. I have indicated unnumbered contracts as following the closest preceding numbered

contract. For item 62, the *ricordi* of 1349–1622, I have supplied a numbering scheme.

Note on frequently used Italian terms

Bocche – literally ‘mouths’. Indicates the number of people who depended on an institution

Contratti – ‘contracts’

Convertite – literally, ‘converted women’. Women who had been prostitutes and converted to a Christian life in a monastic institution

Converse – lower status nuns

Operai – laymen who served as liaison between a monastic institution and the secular world

Pinzochere – lay female penitents who devoted themselves to the religious life within the secular world; unable or unwilling to take monastic vows. Similar to the Beguines of Northern Europe

Procuratore – a male religious who served as an agent for a nunnery, able to act on its behalf

Ricordi – ‘records’

Secolare – ‘secular’, someone not bound by monastic vows

Servaglie – servant nuns

Spedale – hospital

Velate – ‘veiled’, higher-ranking nuns

Introduction

Deep in the Oltrarno, as far from the tourist routes as it's possible to be in Florence, there is a church on a corner. From the outside, it is very plain and easy to miss. There is a small, graffitied and easily overlooked information board outside. The fence across the door is almost always locked, except on Sunday mornings. Then, members of the Georgian Orthodox Church gather to worship inside. The first time I ventured in, in 2014, the new congregation's icons rested on chairs against the walls around the room and the space felt as if Catholic and Orthodox were politely yet awkwardly trying to accommodate one another without treading on toes. Since then, I have made many more visits, and now the religious art has been mounted on the walls, and it increasingly seems like an Orthodox church within a Catholic shell. Alessandro Gherardini's *Mary Magdalene in Glory* looks down from the ceiling at the congregation below which, like the first community to worship there, is mostly female.

The congregation has always warmly and generously admitted me when their services finish so I can look around and be in a place that has taken up so much of my mental space for more than a decade. My interest lies with the building's earliest use, as part of a monastery for repentant prostitutes, known as Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite. For almost half a millennium, that chapel served women who had, in their previous lives, done work that was considered the most sinful and dishonourable work that they could do, and had subsequently dedicated their lives to penitence for that sin. To me, a non-religious product of Calvinist Scotland, that was an impossibly fascinating subject.

The chapel of Sant'Elisabetta is plain, even behind the rather glorious icons that now decorate it. There are some fifteenth-century frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Christ that the nuns would have seen on their way to and in the choir, but these are not visible to the average congregant. Some later frescoes are partially visible in the choir itself, again out of the sight of most. Gherardini's ceiling fresco, universally visible,

dates to around 1703. The women who lived at Sant'Elisabetta during the long period this book covers would not have known it.

When returning to Sant'Elisabetta, the subject of my doctoral research, with a view to turning it into a book, I decided to go further back than the thesis itself, to its initial inspiration. In 2011, some years after I graduated from the University of Edinburgh, I read Nick Terpstra's *Lost Girls: Sex and Death in Renaissance Florence*.¹ I picked up the book on a whim. I had remained interested in history but was out of the loop with anything beyond what was readily available in trade paperback (so, for the most part, increasingly trivial examinations of the minutiae of the Tudors' private lives). I had recently been on holiday to Florence and the premise of the book sounded intriguing: a home for abandoned girls, in which those girls were dying from unexplained causes. It remains one of my favourite works of academic history as it is not only impeccably rigorous in its research, but also accessible and engaging to those beyond the academy. It is now one of several books I recommend to my own students if they want to read some good historical writing.

Lost Girls mentions Sant'Elisabetta briefly. I had never heard of such a thing as a monastery for repentant prostitutes. It sounded impossibly interesting to me, and I assumed there would be lots of work to read about them. There was not. There was only Sherrill Cohen's excellent work on Sant'Elisabetta as a precursor to later women's refuges and shelters.² Cohen's assessment of Sant'Elisabetta starts in 1500 and her approach is heavily influenced by sociology. These are, of course, not flaws but I wanted to know about the women themselves and life in the monastery, and I wanted to know more about its origins. It seemed then so unusual and intriguing, and so it proved to be, though for different reasons to those I had initially imagined.

Sant'Elisabetta was once part of a thriving female monastic community in the Oltrarno, the part of Florence south of the river Arno. Across the street were the Clarisses at Santa Chiara and along the road from there, the Dominican tertiaries at the Annalena. Further north, towards the river, were the Augustinian sisters of Santa Monaca. However, Sant'Elisabetta was unique. It did not accept the daughters of wealthy citizens or even middling merchants. The women who took holy orders there had been public prostitutes. They had chosen to leave that profession and dedicate the remainder of their lives to repentance. It was something of a Hobson's choice: the life of a public prostitute in the medieval and early modern periods was one of danger and exclusion. Life in even the poorest and most ascetic nunnery may have been appealing in comparison. In Catholic theology, no sin was too great to be forgiven and so the Church facilitated the conversion of sinners. Those women

who converted from their sinful lives were known by a variety of names during this period: *repenties*, *penitenti*, *convertite*. It was as convertite that the repentant prostitute nuns of Florence came to be known, and the monastery itself was named Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite: Saint Elizabeth of the Converted Women. 'Convertite' can therefore refer to the monastery or the nuns themselves. For clarity, I use an upper-case C to indicate the institution, and a lower-case c to indicate the women who lived there.

As a monastery for repentant prostitutes, Sant'Elisabetta has not been considered as part of the conventional body of historical work on nuns. Sharon Strocchia's magisterial *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence*, however, does include it as part of the religious landscape of a city filled with nuns.³ Most other works on Florence's women religious only mention it in passing, if at all. It was an anomaly that left different records. Some Florentine nuns left behind personal writings or convent necrologies (books of the dead which contained biographies of the nuns who had lived there), the sorts of texts historians get very excited about. Those texts required nuns who were educated and literate, and over its first 300 years, Sant'Elisabetta had very few of those, though we can see that some of the nuns were literate and numerate.

Similarly, although there has been a great deal of work done on the history of prostitution, Sant'Elisabetta has not generally been included in that sector, where it is often wrongly dismissed as a retirement home for prostitutes who were too old to attract clients.⁴ The demographic information we have about the convertite at Sant'Elisabetta shows that they entered the monastery young, often in their twenties, so there is no basis to see it as a retirement home. Other convertite monasteries, particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, actively prevented their use as retirement homes by prohibiting entry to those over a certain age. Arguments about the toleration of prostitution in the medieval and early modern periods show a diversity of thought, with the same reasons being offered in one city in support of legalisation and in another for total prohibition. In Florence, those reasons are complicated by the presence of Sant'Elisabetta, as the city used it as a holy counterweight to a perceived permissiveness around sinful fornication.

In many ways Sant'Elisabetta was a monastery like any other in the city. Women entered, completed their novitiate, and then took solemn vows. They attended the daily offices and were nuns in every sense. However, it is vital to understand Sant'Elisabetta as also serving a vital social purpose and so the monastery also served a civic function. The Florentine environment at the beginning of the fourteenth century was a patchwork of institutions of varying sizes and purposes. Of particular relevance were the numerous homes for abandoned children and those

which provided shelter to women who, like the city's sex workers, found themselves without familial protection through issues such as widowhood, domestic violence and spousal abandonment. Women who lost their husbands, and children who lost their fathers, often found themselves in poverty. Children were particularly vulnerable if they had no remaining family able or willing to take them in. Widows similarly might be able to return to their family, but this was not always possible and could mean they would be pressured into a new marriage. If a woman were, her family might reclaim her dowry from her in-laws, but they could take custody of the children.⁵ A woman whose husband was excessively violent by the standards of the day would not be forced to stay with him, but the marriage could not be dissolved. This meant that neither of the two options available to women in general were available to her. She could not remarry, nor could she become a nun. She was left in limbo. Similarly, a woman who had been abandoned by her husband remained married to him until such a time as his death could be verified. This was virtually impossible to do when she did not know his location.

Catholic doctrine required good deeds. The faithful had to earn their place in Heaven, and charity was an important way to do so. *Caritas* [charity, often translated into English as 'love'] was the theological virtue that Paul describes as the greatest of the seven.⁶ The Gospel of Matthew relates Jesus's sermon on the Last Judgement which provided the basis for the seven Works of Mercy.⁷ These outline the deeds which will be rewarded: feeding the hungry; giving water to the thirsty; sheltering the stranger; clothing the naked; caring for the sick; visiting the imprisoned; to which was added, burying the dead. People practised *caritas* in renaissance Florence in all these ways. Often charity would be ad hoc or improvised, such as unplanned alms given to a passing pilgrim. At other times, formally organised, for example in confraternal groups dedicated to one or all of the Works of Mercy, or the establishment of an institution dedicated to providing residential care for those in specific unfortunate circumstances.⁸

Throughout this book I use the terms 'welfare' and 'social welfare' to cover myriad ways that people, from individuals to city authorities, sought to provide support and care to those deemed to be in need and deserving. It is a deliberately broad term to allow for the variations in the nature of the initiatives, and significant changes to the forms and organisation that they took over the long period this book covers. At the beginning of the period covered, welfare was haphazard, with plenty of ways for people to slip through the cracks. In the sixteenth century, particularly under Cosimo I (1519–1574), attempts began to rationalise and centralise welfare provision across the duchy and grand duchy.

Wealthy philanthropists or smaller, poorer, groups of concerned, pious citizens often responded to these individual crises with charity, often in the form of creating or donating to small homes established to shelter a particular vulnerable population. Children who were orphaned or abandoned might be left at a hospital. In 1445, the foundling hospital, the Ospedale degli Innocenti, opened to care for younger children. Smaller houses admitted *abandonati* or *abandonate* [abandoned boys or girls respectively] who were too old to go to a foundling home but too young to live independently.⁹ With the notable exceptions of the Innocenti, which was funded by a sizable bequest left by Pistoia merchant Francesco Datini, and the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, founded in the late fourteenth century by Folco Portinari, a banker and father of Dante's Beatrice, most of these institutions were small and their existence precarious. They relied on charitable donations, both in cash and in kind, which came from a mixture of local people, wealthy patrons and, sometimes, religious houses and churches. As homes for abandoned children were often established in poor areas to reduce costs, local donations were often of low monetary value. Wealthier benefactors might give more valuable gifts, but overreliance on an individual could leave houses vulnerable if that donor lost interest, found a new pet project or died. The donations on which these institutions relied were never guaranteed and rarely covered the homes' costs.¹⁰ The homes themselves as well as their donors were subject to financial hardship endured in the medieval and early modern periods. As costs rose, donations shrank, and so some homes closed during the very crises that increased demand for their services.

Sant'Elisabetta was subject to this hodgepodge pattern of giving. The nuns supplemented it with wages and other means of gathering donations. They undertook manual work in the silk industry to support themselves and the monastery. Wages were also available to older children living in group homes. Girls often became domestic servants outside the *abandonate* home, allowing them to earn money for a dowry and taking pressure off the house as they were fed and boarded outside. Boys, similarly, were apprenticed. Unlike smaller foundling and *abandonati* homes, the monastery had a chapel. Local people attended services there and gave alms to the nuns. Some left more substantial bequests, although the area was inhabited by immigrants and the poor, so local charity tended to be modest. The accounts that survive show numerous low value amounts collected from the *cassette* [alms boxes] from locals. The women who gave up sex work and entered Sant'Elisabetta additionally paid a dowry. This provided another sort of income that set the monastery apart from secular institutions, but in order not to deter would-be novices, dowries at Sant'Elisabetta were low. External donations to monastic houses

sometimes focused more on the glory of God than the feeding of inhabitants, and this can be seen during the chapel renovations at Sant'Elisabetta at the end of the fifteenth century. This allowed patrons to make permanent monuments to their benevolence in a way that providing necessary *spezi di vito* [living expenses] did not.¹¹

Beyond the chapel, the monastery of Sant'Elisabetta included buildings to the south and west, along both roads leading from the corner. These have now all turned over to other uses, from education to workshops. The house in which San Filippo Neri was born once stood next door and is commemorated by a plaque in what used to be Sant'Elisabetta's inner courtyard. The house became part of the monastery. These buildings have changed hands and purpose many times since 1808 when the monastery was suppressed by Napoleon's French imperial government.¹² By then, Sant'Elisabetta had been a feature of the Florentine religious and civic landscape for nearly 500 years. It was one of the most populous female monasteries in the city and, as this book will show, fulfilled an important civic role as well as a religious one. The history of Sant'Elisabetta, despite being well-documented in the archives, has been largely overlooked by scholars who have tended to consider the monastery as peripheral to both the history of nuns and of prostitution, and previously it has never been considered in its full historical context.¹³ In fact, Sant'Elisabetta was an integral part of both, and has an important place in the history of municipal responses to social welfare and civic morality. It is only by uncovering successive governments' involvement in Sant'Elisabetta in the late medieval and early modern periods that we can fully understand how the city attempted to manage both prostitution and welfare.

Sant'Elisabetta was neither the first monastery for repentant prostitutes nor the last, but it was uniquely long lasting. In the medieval and early modern periods others were found in Byzantium, then in France and all over the Italian peninsula. There was an order of repentant prostitute nuns in Germany, the *Ordo Sanctae Mariae Magdalenae de poenitentia*. Following these early enterprises, two distinct phases of establishing convertite monasteries are evident. The first phase began in the late thirteenth century and continued throughout the fourteenth century. The second phase began in the second half of the sixteenth century, largely in response to Catholic Reformation concerns about morality, and Jesuit zeal.¹⁴ Sant'Elisabetta is the only such institution that opened in the first phase and continued into and beyond the second. Few of the other convertite houses survived for as long as a century before they either closed or became ordinary nunneries. Its longevity means that Sant'Elisabetta uniquely allows us to make a long-term assessment of such an institution's civic role.

Sant'Elisabetta was established through an act of private charity but municipal involvement in the monastery began even before the building work was completed. A confraternity attached to the church of Santo Spirito, also in the Oltrarno district, believed that some of the city's prostitutes wanted to leave the profession but were unable to due to poverty. They created a monastery to offer the prostitutes a way out. The monastery's interaction with the civic government started before the building work commenced: permission was required to build it and, once granted, the city also donated stone for the fabric of the buildings. From this earliest point, successive city governments took an interest in Sant'Elisabetta, through significant administrative changes from republic to grand duchy. They donated to it, used it as a prison, controlled entry and funded it through a variety of means. The level of interest by Florentine administrators far exceeded what was shown to any other monastic institution in the city.

Three centuries on a street corner in the Oltrarno

In the field of Italian historical research, so ubiquitous are studies of Rome, Venice and especially Florence between the fourteenth and sixteenth century that it has become something of a historical cliché. For many years scholars have sought to widen their studies to include other towns.¹⁵ There is, however, good reason for a preponderance of studies of Florence, not least owing to the rich historical records preserved there and the importance of the city on the European stage. When researching convertite monasteries, the value of Sant'Elisabetta's records is unparalleled. Although there were such houses in most Italian cities big enough to support the business of prostitution during the medieval and early modern periods, most were short-lived. No other monastery for repentant prostitutes remained open and dedicated to that purpose as long as Sant'Elisabetta did: it operated for nearly 500 years and, importantly, functioned primarily (and almost exclusively) as a monastery for repentant prostitutes for all of that time.

Due to Sant'Elisabetta's unusual longevity, this book implements a long chronological scope in contrast to its restricted geographical one. It focuses primarily on Florence, but also looks to wider Tuscany, specifically at the Convertite in Pisa and Pistoia, and occasionally further afield. It covers a period of 300 years, from before the foundation of Sant'Elisabetta in the early 1330s, to the mid-seventeenth century. The book closes in the 1630s, after Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici was named the monastery's *procuratore* and the monastery became part of

the grand ducal administration. This event was, in many ways, the culmination of three centuries of interaction between Florentine authorities and the monastery. This *longue durée* allows Sant'Elisabetta to be put into fuller historical and social context. The increasing interest of civic authorities is visible over the longer term, and it becomes clear how this interest was a response to changing municipal approaches to prostitution and social welfare. In fact, it is only possible to show these developments over a long period of time. The book, therefore, is arranged chronologically, which helps to illustrate how Sant'Elisabetta, the regulation of prostitution and civic interest in the monastery and social welfare changed over time, and it will show that these factors were closely interlinked.

This book covers 300 years of the history of the city: 300 particularly turbulent years of wars, regime changes, revolts and plots. The city changed from a medieval republic to an early modern monarchy, though not in a smooth, easy or linear way. A political history of this period of Florence's past could easily run to several volumes. I have therefore had to keep the relation of politics to a minimum to prevent them taking over the whole book and the convertite, as ever, becoming an afterthought in their own history. I have related city events only as far as there was an effect on Sant'Elisabetta. I have omitted some of the important political changes because a brief mention would necessarily oversimplify and a longer one would become an unhelpful tangent.

Some of the political changes throughout the period, however, did make a substantial difference to Sant'Elisabetta. Most significantly, the city's changing approaches to the sexual economy. The book begins, and Sant'Elisabetta opened, at a time when prostitution was banned from the area within the city walls. Only when, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the law was turned on its head and a permitted brothel district was established in the city centre, did authorities begin to take an interest in the impoverished monastery on the outskirts of town. Legalisation prompted support for the convertite using existing and newly introduced city mechanisms. When, amid the moralising backdrop of Catholic Reform in the mid-late sixteenth century, the toleration of prostitution, advocated by the likes of Augustine, was questioned, the importance of Sant'Elisabetta to the city once again changed. At that point, the monastery for former prostitutes took on new significance as a place for the remission of sins and the cleansing of social pollution. This came with increasing municipal support. Ultimately, in the early seventeenth century, individual members of the ruling Medici family took a personal interest in Sant'Elisabetta, which led to its absorption into the grand ducal administration and, finally, financial stability. We thus see how changes to civic policy, directed by political and religious

change, changed attitudes to and support of Sant'Elisabetta over the three centuries.

The book begins with a broader geographic scope than later chapters and looks at the early history of monastic institutions for repentant prostitutes up to the thirteenth century. It shows that Sant'Elisabetta emerged from a long tradition of monasteries that provided a way out of prostitution, with conceptual precursors in sixth-century Byzantium, where the empress Theodora instituted the *Metanoia* ['repentance'].¹⁶ Procopius describes it as part monastery and part prison, and states that many of its inhabitants were there unwillingly and unhappily.¹⁷ More immediate precursors are found in twelfth-century France, where Robert d'Arbrissel founded a house at Fontevraud in the Loire Valley. This unusual triple monastery consisted of a house for men, one for noblewomen, a third for repentant prostitutes and a hospital for lepers, all under the authority of the abbess.¹⁸ Robert proved to be a controversial figure, not least because of his acceptance of former prostitutes.¹⁹ In the century following the foundation of Fontevraud in 1198, monastic options for prostitutes gained pace.

At the start of his reign, Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) reversed the previous canonical position on marrying prostitutes.²⁰ He not only allowed men to marry women who had been prostitutes but also encouraged it as an act of piety which would bring spiritual rewards in the form of a remission of sins.²¹ The intention was to bring unruly women under proper (male) control and harness that unbridled sexuality for its correct expression: the procreation of legitimate offspring.²² It also underlined the possibility of forgiveness of prostitutes' sins. The same year that Innocent altered Church policy, Fulk of Neuilly (d. 1201) founded a religious community for repentant prostitutes in Saint-Antoine-des-Champs in Paris, and while the religious and redemptive motivation is obvious, it is by no means clear that Fulk was responding to Innocent's actions.²³ Throughout the thirteenth century, in the south of France, more houses for *repentites* appeared with some regularity, though most were short lived and have left little record. In central Italy within the same time-frame, in cities such as Pisa, Viterbo and Rome, further houses opened and, often, closed down again.²⁴ In 1227, Pope Gregory IX sanctioned an order of nuns, the *Sorores Poenitentes Beate Mariae Magdaleneae*, which provided houses for repentant prostitutes in Germany.²⁵ This flourishing interest in redeeming prostitutes was deeply rooted in the popular penitential piety that followed the rise of the mendicants and was reinvigorated, along with the cult of the repentant prostitute *par excellence*, Mary Magdalene, by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.²⁶

This early period also saw the establishment of another Convertite house in Florence, Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello, also referred to

as Santa Maria Maddalena delle Penitenti, in the north of the city, from 1257.²⁷ The street on which the monastery was situated took its name and is still called Borgo Pinti: the street of the penitents. [Chapter 1](#) will also examine the religious and civic circumstances of Florence in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Prostitution remained illegal in the city throughout this period and the priors who governed the city attempted to restrict the practice to the lawless area beyond the walls. There is no evidence that they took any interest in the convertite of Borgo Pinti and, within seventy years, the convertite were replaced by nuns who had not been prostitutes, and subsequently they were moved out of the city altogether.

This early history establishes the monastery of Sant'Elisabetta in its historical context for the first time. Although it proved to be unique in many respects, it was simultaneously a recognisable part of the long tradition of establishing monastic institutions for the redemption of prostitutes. The Catholic Church had struggled with prostitution as it grappled with the conflicting issues of its inherent sinfulness and corrupting effect on society, and the belief that it was a lesser sin which prevented a greater one, along with acceptance of its inevitability, as argued by St Augustine and others. Convertite monasteries allowed the toleration of prostitution by offering women a way out and a means by which they could be redeemed. In Florence, this use of Sant'Elisabetta as a moral counter-balance to legalised prostitution, was taken much further than it was elsewhere. [Chapter 1](#) establishes that Sant'Elisabetta was the first truly successful monastic institution for repentant prostitutes.

[Chapter 2](#) looks at the particular circumstances in which Sant'Elisabetta was founded by the Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laude di Santo Spirito. This was a lay company which sang lauds at the house of Augustinian Hermit Friars, Santo Spirito.²⁸ The company was colloquially known as the Piccione ('the Pigeon') in reference to its use of the dove, symbolic of the Holy Spirit and tying it to the friary church of that name. The Piccione already operated a small *spedale* in Via Chiara and the site chosen for the new monastery was next door. It is quite likely that they saw the monastery as a way to kill two birds with one stone: to provide a refuge for unhappy prostitutes, and to ensure there was a supply of nuns to staff the *spedale*. This would explain the choice of name. Convertite nunneries were commonly named for Mary Magdalene, for reasons obvious enough. St Elizabeth of Hungary was a relatively new but popular saint (canonised 1235) who was mostly associated with hospitals and the care of the poor. She was not an obvious choice for repentant prostitutes.²⁹

Secular and semi-secular charity tended to focus on hospitals and local confraternities that provided welfare support to members and

sometimes non-members. The *spedale* attached to Sant'Elisabetta was part of a network of medico-social care, often more spiritual than medical in nature, particularly for pilgrims, the old and the destitute, as well as the sick.³⁰ In addition to this type of care, confraternities and lay religious companies like the Piccione provided other forms of support to members, their families and, in some cases, the wider local community. Widows, poor women and girls without dowries were often the focus of their efforts.³¹ The charitable care provided by confraternities in central Italy has been frequently studied by scholars, but we can only fully understand it if we consider Sant'Elisabetta as part of this context of secular welfare connected to confraternal charity. These connections, both to the lay confraternal group and to the major church of mendicant friars, shaped the way in which Sant'Elisabetta would function as a religious institution with a distinct secular purpose in subsequent centuries.

This chapter also argues that the initial donation of stone for the building of Sant'Elisabetta in 1330 foreshadowed later, more comprehensive support for the monastery, which would follow the priors' reversal of previous municipal policies related to the control of prostitution. However, between the donation of stone and the legalisation of prostitution, there is little evidence of interest in Sant'Elisabetta from the city priors, and for the first seventy-five years the monastery fulfilled numerous roles: as part of the local community, as an extension of the Piccione's charitable aims and, above all, as a place of redemption, with little interference from the city itself.

Chapter 3 charts the fifteenth-century development of new magistracies that had jurisdiction over moral matters, and the beginning of municipal support for Sant'Elisabetta. Of particular relevance to Sant'Elisabetta are the magistracies whose remits covered prostitution and male homosexual activity: respectively, the Ufficiali dell'Onestà (established in 1403), and the Ufficiali di Notte (established in 1432). The Onestà was responsible for registering prostitutes and enforcing the rules governing them after the establishment of the permitted brothel district in the centre of the city. The Notte was responsible for the prosecution of sodomy, by which was meant male homosexual activity, again in response to new legislation.³² Civic interest in Sant'Elisabetta is evident from the period immediately following the creation of these bodies, particularly in regard to the monastery's perilous financial situation. The monastery housed a large number of women, more than most other nunneries, but none of them had the connections to wealthy families who usually provided financial support upon which other nunneries relied.³³ The priors noted that the convertite had no or only poor relatives who were unable to support the monastery financially, leaving it in dangerous poverty.

The first solution proposed by the city to help ensure Sant'Elisabetta's survival was through the Ufficiali di Notte, who were required to supply food for the nuns. This obligation was later revised to order that money was to be sent directly to the monastery. The initial municipal strategy was, therefore, to harness the income from sodomy convictions to support Sant'Elisabetta rather than income from prostitution which may appear to be a more obvious choice. This may have been due to the Onestà generating less money than the Notte, but no account books from this period have survived.

Chapter 4 describes the significant changes to the city administration in the last decades of the Florentine republic and shows how interest in Sant'Elisabetta's perilous financial situation reflected those changes. The priors continued to provide civic funds to the convertite. In 1470, they ordered the Otto di Guardia, which had jurisdiction over some criminal and policing matters, to allocate a portion of the fees and fines they levied to Sant'Elisabetta. This was a similar arrangement to the one made with the Ufficiali di Notte some twenty-five years earlier and was supplemented by financial contributions to the monastery made directly from the Camera del Comune, which paid salaries and fees owed to those employed by the Signoria. These donations were made frequently but irregularly over a period of fourteen years in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Chapter 4 argues that this represented an unusual level of interest in Sant'Elisabetta and is not repeated for any other religious house.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the monastery undertook a significant renovation of its chapel, involving extensive building works and the installation of artworks by Botticelli. The altarpiece and predella panels were probably commissioned by the Arte dei Medici e Speziali, the guild of doctors and apothecaries that had taken over the role of *operai* [laymen who liaised between the monastery and the secular world] for Sant'Elisabetta in 1458. Despite this and other donations, the chapel renovation exacerbated the monastery's cash flow problems and led the abbess to agree to costly loans from some of the convertite nuns. This reveals something of the financial status of a small number of the convertite nuns, and their financial shrewdness as they were able to strike profitable deals for themselves, albeit at the expense of their own monastery. The building works complicated an already difficult financial situation for Sant'Elisabetta. Financial support for the monastery was attempted from both within and outwith but was ultimately unsuccessful.

Chapter 5 examines how municipal support for Sant'Elisabetta continued during the ducal period from 1532 to 1569. This period saw further extension of attempts to stabilise the finances of Sant'Elisabetta,

particularly under Cosimo I. In keeping with previous methods, the burden of this support was placed on groups of citizens: those fined by the courts, and later registered prostitutes, rather than the municipal treasury. This allowed the state to ensure financial support for the convertite without incurring costs. However, this support brought with it seemingly unexpected obligations, and for several years the Otto di Guardia took advantage of its role as a funder to use Sant'Elisabetta as an extension of the penal system, wherein they imprisoned several women and girls in the monastery.

In 1553, Cosimo instituted new legislation which provided support to Sant'Elisabetta while restricting who could be admitted to the monastery. The law required that Florence's prostitutes bequeath a quarter of their estates to Sant'Elisabetta on or before their deaths, and it empowered the *Ufficiali dell'Onestà* to enforce this requirement. However, the law added the caveat that were they to admit any woman or girl who had not been a prostitute in the city, the convertite would imperil this source of income. There is no evidence to suggest that non-prostitute entrants were common at Sant'Elisabetta prior to 1553, but the unusual step of legislating against this reveals the increasing involvement of the city government in the day-to-day running of the monastery in return for the provision of vital funding.

Chapter 6 argues that during the early years of the grand duchy, the relationship between Sant'Elisabetta and the city changed once again. The previous arrangements that provided municipally mandated funding from various magistracies and from registered prostitutes were replaced by a new model of support. The grand ducal authorities instead took direct control of the monastery as part of a wider movement to bring the provision of social welfare services within municipal control, which was begun by Cosimo I and continued by his successors. In particular, Cosimo II and his wife, the Archduchess Maria Maddalena of Austria, took a special interest in Sant'Elisabetta. The nuns made several direct appeals to Cosimo in times of need and received aid from him.

The late sixteenth century also saw changes in the city's management of prostitution. The central brothel district that had been established in 1403 was turned into a Jewish Ghetto in 1572, and prostitutes were forced out of the area. These changes marked a significant shift in Florence's approach to prostitution and to the Jewish community, which was, in part, a response to Counter-Reformation concerns about morality and the reinvigoration of Catholicism. In light of these changes, the statutes of the *Ufficiali dell'Onestà* were significantly rewritten shortly thereafter, making the funding of Sant'Elisabetta a much higher priority for the magistracy than it had been before.

In Chapter 7, an accounts ledger of Sant'Elisabetta survives from this period and provides a fairly comprehensive picture of the monastery's day-to-day income and expenditure between 1616 and 1619. Prior to this date, financial records for the monastery are patchy and incomplete. The wealth of detail from the 1616–1619 ledger shows steady expenditure but no source of regular, reliable income.³⁴ The income streams that the city had arranged, such as the quarter of prostitutes' estates, fluctuated greatly and did not provide either the reliability or the predictability necessary to stabilise the monastery.

With Chapter 7, the book concludes in the wake of the convertite formalising their relationship with Grand Duke Cosimo II by naming him their *procuratore*. This effectively made the monastery a state institution and brought its finances into the economic machinery of the Tuscan state, while leaving the day-to-day running of the monastery in the hands of the abbess and the religious *procuratore* who facilitated external business for her. Sant'Elisabetta thus became a recipient not only of the personal patronage of the Grand Duke, his wife and his mother, but also of permanent civic support in place of the ad hoc provision of relief from various bodies. An immediate change is evident from 1622, when the monastery's accounts were kept by the Grand Duke's *camerlengo* rather than one of the nuns.³⁵ Although Cosimo died soon after becoming the *procuratore*, his widow maintained a charitable interest in Sant'Elisabetta and in 1627, made a substantial donation of buildings and land.

This gift led to a puzzle. Down a side street that was once adjacent to the external wall of the monastery, there is a large plaque that commemorates Archduchess Maria Maddalena's donation of buildings to Sant'Elisabetta in 1627. This plaque is positioned so that few would see it, then or now. It features text in Latin and, curiously, Hebrew. It is the only such inscription in the city, with Hebrew alongside Latin, and the reasons for its inclusion are far from clear.³⁶ The Latin uses a clumsy pun while the Hebrew contains a far more sophisticated play on words that requires the reader to be familiar with a singular biblical use of the word *hēsed* [חסד]. Even in Europe's renaissance city *par excellence*, few people read Hebrew, and few of those that did would have passed this plaque on a side street in a poor section of town.

Another account book from 1626 shows that the wage labour undertaken by the nuns was expanded to a greater scale. A *nuova fabbrica* [new workshop] was built in or adjacent to the monastery garden. It is not clear exactly what the workshop would produce but it is likely that it was an expansion of the textile work the convertite had undertaken since the monastery's establishment in the fourteenth century. By this time, the day-to-day financial administration of the monastery

was undertaken by grand ducal staff who were motivated to find ways to make Sant'Elisabetta self-sustaining. The greater scale of labour that the workshop would allow can also be seen at this time at the Innocenti foundling hospital which also struggled to remain solvent.

Traces and fragments: Sant'Elisabetta in the archives

This book relies on a wealth of archival material, most of which is located in the Archivio di Stato of Florence. The archive of Sant'Elisabetta was moved wholesale to the state archives when the monastery closed. Initially, the monastery's collection went to the Archivio del Demanio del Dipartimento dell'Arno and then to the Archivio di Stato when it was instituted in 1852. The Sant'Elisabetta archive consisted of 107 units (reduced in 1839 to 83 units) in 13 *fondi* [folders]. The *fondi* are currently held as Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse dal Governo Francese, Numero 126, Sant'Elisabetta detta le Convertite di Firenze. This collection has preserved a snapshot of the documents held by the nuns in 1808.

The earliest document in the collection dates to 1349, while the most recent book, which seems to have been some sort of audit of the monastery as it closed, was damaged in the 1966 Arno flood and is unavailable to scholars. A large portion of the records of Sant'Elisabetta were not created by the convertite themselves but by the men who supported the monastery. These were usually male clerics who provided spiritual care and direction, the laymen sent by civic authorities to manage the monastery's secular affairs, or the male officers of the magistracies that had dealings with the nuns. Literacy among the convertite was low. There are only rare occasions when the literacy of a *convertita* is evident before the eighteenth century. In some cases, authorship of a text is acknowledged but mostly the records are anonymous. Padre Benedetto d'Albizo, the monastery *procuratore* from 1618 to 1621, made clear his extensive contribution to the volumes he compiled from the loose papers he found and for which he provided commentaries.

D'Albizo's hand is so much a feature of the records from Sant'Elisabetta that he and his inelegant handwriting became dear friends to me during the long period of research for this book. Although the records that underpin this work are varied in time and authorship, it was to d'Albizo's commentaries that I always returned. His compilations of the Sant'Elisabetta records are the backbone of this book, and his handwriting was the first palaeographical hand I ever really got to know. Even after a break of a few years, returning to his writings is a comforting way back into the world of late medieval and early modern manuscript, so familiar

are they to me now. My warmth towards this long-dead priest is not just because his handwriting has become so familiar, though, but the underlying sentiment that his writing reveals. It seems he had a deep affection for the nuns who were under his care during his short time as *procuratore*. My own fascination for the convertite developed into an admiration and affection for them, and I found this in d'Albizo's notes too.

It is difficult to explain this sense of warmth in d'Albizo's words. One of the wonderful and frustrating things about archives is that the historian, after some time working on a set of records, can come away with an impression of emotion from the past that is impossible to prove in a scholarly way, such as pointing to convenient quotations from the texts, or nice, clear-cut statements to support a hypothesis. Here, it is not too much of a problem because the priest's gentle affection is not a factor in the monastery's changing relationship with the world beyond its doors. It does not matter, for history, that he cared for them. I do not, therefore, have to prove to you that he did, but I hope you will take my word for it. The best I can point out to you is the frequency with which he referred to 'my nuns', and how he made sure to give the women credit for their own ideas and efforts. He never referred to their pasts: to him, they were his nuns, not former prostitutes. Upon entering Sant'Elisabetta, their histories were wiped clean and they became not harlots but holy women.

D'Albizo's contribution to this book is immense though of course he never knew it. He wrote that he undertook the work of compiling the records into new bound volumes because he found them to be *tutto guasto e male andato* [all damaged and badly ordered], but it is likely that he did this work because of the monastery's impending transfer to control by the grand ducal state, either because he was instructed to or by his own initiative. His volumes were intended for the use of those managing the monastery's secular affairs. He created two codices of *ricordi* and a volume of *contratti* during his thirty months as *procuratore*. The *ricordi* are general records and both have title pages with a print of Mary Magdalene. This image constitutes the entirety of the decoration in d'Albizo's books and, more generally, of the entire Sant'Elisabetta archive. These are functional records rather than illustrated manuscripts. The *contratti* contains all of the monastery contracts, with d'Albizo's commentary. These include records of various donations of land and farms. There is considerable overlap and cross-reference between the *ricordi* and the *contratti*.

D'Albizo's books are important because they collect numerous earlier documents, most of which are still in good condition, so it is difficult to know the extent of the disarray he found. He may have discarded very badly damaged papers, though in one case he chose to include a page, dated 1451, from which more than a third of the text is missing.

This suggests that he was not particularly selective on the grounds of physical condition. Unfortunately, his commentary gives nothing away about his editorial decisions, though a focus on financial information is evident. He seemed to have been especially keen to preserve contracts relating to land holdings and testamentary bequests. The codices are not paginated and, instead, D'Albizo assigned letters and numbers to the items which allowed him to cross-reference them. I have followed this system in the references for this book, and where a contract is not numbered, I have indicated that it follows a specific numbered contract.

The records preserved in the *ricordi* and *contratti*, however, are not solely financial. D'Albizo included lists of nuns resident in the convent at various points in time. These lists are often preserved when the nuns were signatories to a contract. They offer little detail beyond the names the women took on their monastic profession and it is not possible to be certain if they are complete. Charting the number of women who made Sant'Elisabetta their home at any given time can be problematic. Some lists include only the *velate* [the veiled nuns], while others count all of the *bocche* [mouths] that depended on the monastery, without specifying who has been counted. The most comprehensive list in the collection is the one compiled by d'Albizo himself in 1621 and which is divided according to the nuns' status (i.e. *velate*, *converse* and a small number of *secolare* who had not taken vows). This list was no doubt compiled to inform Cosimo II's administrators, who were preparing to take over the management of the monastery's affairs.

Much of what can be discovered about Sant'Elisabetta begins in non-narrative records such as accounts, inventories and contracts. Such records that survive provide important glimpses into the enclosed world of the monastery. An inventory of the *spedale* composed in 1444 does not only tell us how many beds were there, how much silverware, but also its condition and so the environment of care that was provided to those staying there. It also suggests the relationship between Sant'Elisabetta and the confraternity which founded the monastery was waning. Accounts from the late fifteenth century were preserved, most likely because they recorded the costs of the chapel renovation. While much of this is on the surface less than thrilling, by digging a little deeper, we can glean some fascinating insights into the workings of the monastery, its donors and patrons, and the involvement of nuns themselves in their new chapel. Later accounts from the early seventeenth century are fuller and allow us to recover further detail about the convertite's experiences in Sant'Elisabetta. For example, these accounts reveal more detail about food and wine bought, which in turn allow us to understand the dietary regime of the nuns. Records like this can reveal far more than initially

appears and by reading against the grain, historians can uncover a wealth of additional information.

There are also important records from outwith the monastery's own archive, including records from the city treasury and legislature, the *Ufficiali dell'Onestà* and *di Notte*, and elsewhere. The *Provvisioni*, records of the decisions made by the governing Signoria, are useful for legislative changes mostly related to prostitution. Another source of useful information not specifically on the convertite is *Acquisti e Doni* 291, 292 and 293, and these merit further discussion. These three *fondi* consist of the notebooks of Carlo Carnesecchi (1847–1914). He was a historian, archivist at the Archivio di Stato, and a member of the Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere, 'La Colombaria'. As well as numerous articles, Carnesecchi published various archival documents. His notebooks consist of summaries in Italian and transcriptions of cases that came before various judicial bodies such as the *Ufficiali dell'Onestà* and the *Otto di Guardi*, along with extracts from the *Provvisioni*. His interests as a historian were wide ranging, but women and prostitution across a broadly similar time period to the one described in this book seem to have been a particular focus of his attention. The content of his notebooks reflects this interest.³⁷ Although Carnesecchi's collection does not present a comprehensive picture of prosecutions, numerous scholars have relied upon his work as a faithful summary of individual cases.³⁸ Whenever possible I cross-referenced Carnesecchi's notes with the sources on which they were based and preferred the original, though I found his summaries to be reliable.

Beyond the Archivio di Stato, there are also documents related to Sant'Elisabetta in the Archivio Arcivescovile and the archive of the Innocenti foundling hospital, both of which are in Florence. The Florentine ecclesiastical authorities do not seem to have taken a great deal of interest in this nunnery. In fact, it seems like the bishop forced the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella, at the other side of the city, to perform the religious ceremonies at Sant'Elisabetta as a punishment. Even during the renewed zeal often seen in the years following the Council of Trent (1545–63), Sant'Elisabetta seems to have escaped much attention from the archbishop's office. The Innocenti holds a wealth of records from the institution and beyond. For example, the account books of the goldbeater Ridolfi, who employed the convertite to produce gold thread. This was fiddly and painstaking but not highly skilled work. The pay they received was less than nuns in other houses made through embroidery or through other, more refined skills.

The archival material on which the research for this book is based is thus a patchwork of material from a wide array of sources. The archive from Sant'Elisabetta itself is a vital foundation but records from various

city bodies, private and public, were needed to piece together more of the monastery's history. This provides a neat metaphor for one of the main arguments of this book: Sant'Elisabetta was an important part of Florence's civic landscape that left traces in myriad places: in statutes and government discussions; in the records of small confraternities and city-wide charities; and in the ledgers of private businesses. Some archival material was used directly for the information it was intended to record, but much was not. The women of Sant'Elisabetta were largely anonymous. In part, this was because they gave up their previous identities on entering the monastery, as all religious did, at least in theory. In part, it was because the men who created the records upon which we rely were more interested in the institution of the monastery than the individual lives within it, with perhaps the exception of Benedetto d'Albizo. This is a perennial problem for scholars of women who find their subjects more often written about than writing. However, we can find glimpses between the lines of the information that was considered worth committing to paper and parchment. All records tell us more than was originally intended, especially those about women. These fleeting glimpses can be combined to form a fuller picture of the nuns and their monastery, their lives and those with whom they interacted.

As is often the case for the period covered by this book, sources are plentiful but incomplete. There are enduring silences from Sant'Elisabetta. While we can occasionally gain a glimpse into the enclosed world of the nuns, more often what survives is evidence of their interactions with the wider world: accounts from those who employed the nuns, petitions from the nuns to the Grand Duke, women sent to Sant'Elisabetta by the Otto di Guardia. Day-to-day life for the convertite cannot easily be uncovered through their archive, although we can assume that it would have been in keeping with practices common to an Augustinian nunnery in terms of the divine hours and religious observances. We know about some of the work the nuns undertook and what they saw on the chapel walls. I have centred focus upon the convertite themselves whenever possible, though it is disappointingly infrequent. In want of that view inside the walls of the monastery, I have instead tried to build a picture of a bustling but perilous community of women, perhaps few of whom had any vocation for the religious life, but who became some of Europe's most unlikely nuns and, sometimes, thrived.

Notes

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Chapter 1

Prostitution and repentance in medieval context

*Dico vobis quod ita gaudium erit in cælo super uno peccatore pœnitentiam agente, quam super nonaginta novem justis, qui non indigent pœnitentia.*¹

[I tell you therefore that there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous men who do not need repentance.]

This chapter charts the development of Sant’Elisabetta’s predecessor institutions for the redemption of female sex workers across medieval Christendom. It reveals how an environment of lay penitential piety created the conditions in which an institution like Sant’Elisabetta could be established and flourish. It then assesses how prostitution was defined in Florence, compared to the wider European picture, immediately prior to the city’s major change in legislative approach in 1403 considered in [Chapter 2](#).

The monastery of Sant’Elisabetta delle Convertite was not the first of its kind. When it opened in 1332, it became part of a tradition of monastic institutions for repentant prostitutes, dating back to sixth-century Byzantium. A similar institution was founded in the twelfth-century Loire Valley. They then spread to southern France, across Germany and down through Italy, including Sant’Elisabetta’s immediate predecessor in Florence, Santa Maria Maddalena delle Penitenti. Sant’Elisabetta as a monastery for repentant prostitutes was not, therefore, an innovation either for the Catholic world or Florence specifically. Other similar institutions would follow, particularly in the late sixteenth century as Jesuits turned their zeal towards the reform of prostitutes. None would be as successful as Sant’Elisabetta.

Sant'Elisabetta emerged from this long tradition of monastic institutions that aimed to redeem fallen women. However, it proved unique in terms of longevity, dedication to its original aims and its integration into the network of social welfare over the succeeding centuries. The Florentine authorities' changing attitudes to how prostitution was managed and regulated in the city created the environment in which a lay religious confraternity perceived a need for a new monastery for repentant prostitutes in the first half of the fourteenth century. The confraternity in question was dedicated to singing lauds, but also ran a hospital and devoted resources to other pious charitable aims. The brothers' intervention came against a backdrop of mendicant and penitential piety which had developed in Western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This popular piety was often expressed by laypeople who devoted their lives to penance outside of, but sometimes linked to, monastic orders. Penitential piety was reinvigorated by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which contributed to the revival of the cult of Mary Magdalene, the Church's preeminent penitent. This in turn was an important factor which encouraged institutional solutions for prostitutes who wanted to leave that work and return to the Christian fold.

A more direct precursor to the establishment of Sant'Elisabetta was the changing civic legislation of prostitution in Florence. These changes were documented in the *Provvisioni Registri*, which recorded the deliberations and decisions of the city priors on agreed proposals (rejected petitions were not recorded). From the late thirteenth to the early fifteenth century, legislative approaches to prostitution in Florence changed considerably: from outright bans with potentially serious penalties for breaches, to legalisation and control. Significant statutes were written in 1319, banning the practice from the city and relegating it to an approved brothel beyond the walls. The city statutes were widely revised in 1324 but the regulations on prostitution remained largely unchanged. However, over the course of the fourteenth century, enforcement of the prohibitions was uneven and often lax, leading ultimately to tolerance and legalisation.

The early history of monastic institutions for former prostitutes

The earliest recorded monastic institution to offer a home to prostitutes who wanted to repent was in Byzantium. The historian Procopius of Caesarea (c.490/507–c.560s) ascribes the foundation of the convent of Metanoia ('Repentance') to the Empress Theodora in the 530s. In *On Buildings*, Procopius describes the Metanoia as a refuge from debasement and sin, its

creation an act of piety by the Emperor and Empress, who turned a palace into a convent.² Procopius presented the Metanoia as a sanctuary, a well-funded and pleasant place for women liberated from dissolution through the direct intervention of the imperial couple. However, his views on the Metanoia seem to have been more complex than *On Buildings* would suggest. In *Anecdota*, which he wrote without the intention of others reading it (indeed, it was not discovered until the seventeenth century), he describes the Metanoia as a monastic prison into which the poorest prostitutes were rounded up from the streets and imprisoned as punishment for their sinful lives. Some, he says, found the regime so intolerable that they threw themselves from the roof into the Bosphorus rather than remain incarcerated.³

These conflicting descriptions of the Metanoia raise the question of what 'repentance' meant for women in Byzantium. Justinian introduced monastic penance as a novel punishment for errant clergy and laity. Adultery and divorce were sometimes punished in this manner, however prostitution was not subject to those statutes despite its association with them as a sin of sexual promiscuity. This meant that penance could not be legally enforced for prostitutes.⁴ The Metanoia, therefore, offered space for women to voluntarily withdraw. However, while adulteresses and divorcees were sentenced to monastic penance for a specified time, prostitutes entered the Metanoia and took solemn vows that meant they could not leave. Hillner suggests that Procopius's contradictory descriptions of the Metanoia may reflect the uncertainty and confusion around Justinian's involvement in church matters as a way of punishing and managing social problems.⁵

The Metanoia was the first monastic institution for repentant (or perhaps not so repentant) prostitutes though it seems to have acted as a penal institution as much as a penitential one. Certainly, it was not immediately imitated. It was not until the Emperor Leo VI (886–917) that another such institution was established, also in Byzantium. It was followed by another during the reign of Emperor Michael IV (1034–41).⁶ Little is known about any of these three monasteries.

However accurate either of Procopius's descriptions of Justinian and Theodora's foray into turning prostitutes into nuns, they indicate that civic efforts to curb illicit female sexual activity by providing institutional alternatives to the sex trade within a religious framework had a long history before Sant'Elisabetta. Although there is nothing to suggest that the Byzantine institutions influenced those founded later in Western Europe, they offered a similar solution to the 'problem' of prostitution. The institutions that appeared in Europe from the twelfth century onwards lacked the punitive aspect described in the *Anecdota* but echoed Theodora's earliest policies by seeking a solution for those

women who wanted to leave prostitution permanently and devote their lives to repentance.

At the beginning of the twelfth century, the first monastic institution for repentant prostitutes was established in Western Europe. In 1101, Robert d'Arbrissel founded the community at Fontevraud in the Loire Valley, France. This consisted of a community of noblewomen, another of former prostitutes, one of men and a leper hospital.⁷ The presence of the community of repentant prostitutes has been questioned by historians who have suggested that rather than women paid for sexual services, the inhabitants were cast-off clerical concubines who found themselves homeless when their partners accepted clerical celibacy.⁸ However, this interpretation may overestimate the enthusiasm with which priests embraced the renewed call for abstinence of the eleventh century.⁹

Robert's mixed community was controversial and local senior clergy were highly critical of the presence of former prostitutes.¹⁰ Robert, however, sought to focus attention on the women's repentance rather than their previous sins. This pattern is visible in later monasteries for repentant prostitutes in Italy, where the women's acceptance as nuns overrode any lingering doubts over their moral integrity. Robert invoked the image of Mary Magdalene, the Church's exemplar of female repentance *par excellence*, forgiveness and redemption.¹¹ Many subsequent houses for convertite were dedicated to her and although Sant'Elisabetta was not, the Magdalene was occasionally and inaccurately included in the monastery's name.

At the end of the twelfth century, the new pope, Innocent III (1198–1216), reversed the previous canonical prohibition on marrying prostitutes.¹² Earlier Christian teaching condemned prostitutes and sexual immorality, without describing any route back to the Christian fold for such sinners.¹³ Innocent not only allowed men to marry women who had been prostitutes, he encouraged it as an act of piety which would bring spiritual rewards in the form of remission from sins: *ut omnibus qui publicas mulieres de lupanari extraxerint et duxerint in uxores, quod agunt, in remissionem proficiat peccatorum* [everyone who has drawn public women out of the brothels and led them into marriage, let what they did lead to the remission of sins].¹⁴ Marriage was a means by which unruly women could be brought under proper (male) control and their sexuality harnessed for its correct expression: the procreation of legitimate offspring.¹⁵

In the same year as Innocent III altered wider Church policy on the marriage of prostitutes, Fulk of Neuilly (d. 1201) founded a religious community for repentant prostitutes at Saint-Antoine-des-Champs in Paris, though it is by no means clear that Innocent's policy led directly

to this.¹⁶ Other houses followed, particularly in the south of France and Italy. Leah Lydia Otis has charted the earliest mentions of French houses, mostly through testamentary bequests.¹⁷ Outside the Île-de-France, the earliest was at Montpellier which was open by May 1204 although at some point between 1294 and 1301 it ceased to be a community for former prostitutes.¹⁸ In Italy, Pisa's *Sorores Repentite Hospitalis Santa Maria Magdalene de Spina* was open from 1240, followed by one in Viterbo in 1243 and houses in both Bologna and Messina in the mid-fourteenth century when the establishment of these monasteries gained momentum in both France and Italy.¹⁹

Robert d'Arbrissel and Fulk of Neuilly anticipated a wider trend in penitential piety encouraged by inclusion of confession in the sacrament of penance at the Fourth Lateran Council (1213–15).²⁰ Confession was not, of course, new, but its inclusion in the sacrament elevated it. Communities of lay penitents enjoyed renewed popularity and the focus on penance inspired popular devotion to Mary Magdalene.

Mendicants, *conversi* and the Fourth Lateran Council

From as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Italy, *conversi* (laypeople who attached themselves to monastic orders and served the professed religious) became increasingly common. The role offered a way for the devout unwilling or unable to take solemn vows to answer their religious calling.²¹ These people helped to further blur the boundaries between monastic, clerical and laity.²² Such devotional practices were popular among women, who chose to adopt the lay religious life individually or in groups. The beguines of northern Europe are better known than their Italian counterparts, the *mantellate*, *bizzoche* and *pinzochere* (*pizzochere* in Venice).²³ These women either chose not to or were unable to enter traditional monastic institutions. Communal life outside of the convent offered the solution to several problems they often faced. Most of the *pinzochere* were from poor or modest backgrounds and may not have been able to afford a monastic dowry. They could pool their resources, including earnings from employment and artisanal activities, while maintaining their good reputations and practising religious devotion.²⁴ Others were married and so could not take holy orders. Through groups of *conversi*, *penitenti* and *pinzochere*, laypeople found spiritual roles without permanently entering monastic institutions. They were particularly popular in northern and central Italy.²⁵ Although not prostitutes themselves, these women who were devoted to faith and penance, paved a way to penitence for women whose sinfulness required a more complete,

institutional, response. In Florence, there were several communities of *pinzochere*. A significant group were based close to the Franciscan church of Santa Croce (Via delle Pinzochere, which leads onto Piazza Santa Croce, takes its name from these communities). They formed between 1250 and 1260.²⁶

By the early thirteenth century, many laypeople had adopted a variety of spiritual and penitential practices while remaining in their own homes, often continuing to conduct business or employment.²⁷ The traditional division between *conversi* and *penitenti*, who had voluntarily assumed an ascetic life, had become blurred, and groups adopted communal living without affiliation to a monastic house.²⁸ This way of life proved, again, to be particularly popular with women who could not or did not want to join a nunnery. While men were often able to incorporate lay piety into existing guild and confraternal practices, these generally excluded women who instead created their own liminal, quasi-religious lifestyles.²⁹

The Fourth Lateran Council codified penitence in the Catholic Church and shaped how it was understood. Although lay confession was not new, Lateran IV added annual confession to a priest to existing requirements of contrition, satisfaction and absolution. In the name of uniformity, the council also prohibited writing new monastic rules and the creation of new orders.³⁰ This meant that the Dominicans, who had hitherto not followed a rule, had to choose either the Augustinian or Benedictine one.³¹ Dominic preferred the flexible Augustinian Rule that he himself had followed. In return, Innocent III confirmed the Dominicans' role as preachers.³² With penitence central to that preaching, lay groups of penitents, especially the female *pinzochere* in Italy, followed the preachers' exhortations to devote themselves to penance.

This widespread focus on penance linked the devout laity with the popular exemplar of penitence as a route to grace, Mary Magdalene, understood as the fallen woman redeemed by Christ. So complete was her redemption that she became Christ's intimate follower and the first disciple to witness the resurrection. As Katherine Jansen has shown, renewed focus on the sacrament of penance encouraged popular devotion to her as a saint, and vice versa.³³ The Magdalene had been a popular focus for devotion from the eleventh century but enjoyed renewed popularity in the wake of Lateran IV. As a symbol of penitence, she was a popular subject for Dominican sermons, and by the end of the thirteenth century, the order had adopted her as their unofficial patron.³⁴ The saint also acted as a model for repentant prostitutes, and many Convertite monasteries were dedicated to her.³⁵ The south of France was an important location for her cult and became the site of many early monasteries for repentant prostitutes.

The establishment of the mendicant orders at the beginning of the thirteenth century led to religious zeal, particularly among women. This was often expressed outside of the traditional bounds of the nunnery, instead in independent lay and semi-religious communities.³⁶ Some of these women, when part of more formal groups, adopted a rule for their life that covered, for example, their clothing and property. However, without a connection to a monastic house, they remained members of the laity and outside of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.³⁷ These lay penitents often wrote their own constitutions and statutes.³⁸ Some attached themselves, or tried to attach themselves, to local Augustinians, Dominicans or Franciscans. Some claimed to be part of the Franciscan Third Order, said to have been founded by St Francis (1181/82–1226) himself in 1221. However, the reality of the creation of the Third Order was more complex and contentious.³⁹

In practice, these individuals and groups had no canonical position and had not left the secular world. They were not nuns, but neither were they simply laypeople. Instead, they sat, sometimes awkwardly, in an uncertain place between the two. While some sought a connection with local religious, others refused affiliation to a religious order.⁴⁰ As Cardinal Protector of the Franciscans, Ugolino di Segni (1145–1241, later Pope Gregory IX), took some responsibility for the penitents who attached themselves to his order. Between 1221 and 1228 he composed the *Memoriale propositi*, which offered guidance on living a religious life in the secular world but did not go so far as to recognise its followers as religious.⁴¹ It was certainly not a new rule for a new order, which would have contravened the prohibition on that from Lateran IV. It was not until 1289 when Pope Nicholas IV signed the letter *Supra montem*, which established a rule for an ‘order of penitents’, that the Third Order of St Francis became part of the Church. However, it stopped short of making members officially recognised religious.⁴²

Regardless of their non-canonical position, some penitents were able to achieve reputations for great holiness. Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–31), canonised in 1235 by Gregory IX, was posthumously linked to the Franciscan Third Order: although she devoted the last years of her life to penitence under the instruction of her Franciscan confessor Konrad von Marburg, she was never a member of that order. In Florence, Umiliana de’ Cerchi (1219–46) was and is often described as a Third Order Franciscan associated with the friars of Santa Croce, though her precise position is unclear. Although she adopted the habit of the Franciscans, and was interred in Santa Croce, Umiliana was refused admission to the Franciscan house of Santa Maria in Monticelli and the Third Order was not established until sixty years after her death.⁴³ Her irregular status did

not impede either her reputation as a living saint nor the posthumous recognition of her holiness: she was beatified in 1694. In contrast, Margaret of Cortona (1247–97), another lay penitent linked with the Franciscans, was accepted by the order during her lifetime. She devoted her life to penance after the sudden death of her lover and donned the Franciscan habit after she had persuaded the friars of the sincerity and permanence of her conversion. Giunta Bevegnati, author of her *Vita*, went so far as to name Margaret ‘la terza stella concessa all’Ordine del mio diletto Francesco’ [the third star granted to the order of my beloved Francis] as an equal to saints Francis and Clare in the founding of the three orders of Franciscans.⁴⁴ Both Umiliana and Margaret were named as holy virgins in their *Vitae* as, despite both being mothers, they devoted the latter parts of their lives to chastity and had recovered that status through penance.⁴⁵

Houses for repentant prostitutes

Monasteries for repentant prostitutes followed Fontevraud and Sainte-Antoine-des-Champs from the second quarter of the thirteenth century, with increasing numbers established later in the century in southern France, Germany and Italy. This was a result of the increasing popularity of lay penitential piety and Magdalene devotion, and new incentives from Rome to rehabilitate prostitutes.

The Filles-Dieu in Paris, established in 1225 by the priest and later Bishop of Paris, Guillaume d’Auvergne, housed repentant prostitutes under the Augustinian Rule.⁴⁶ The house was supported by St Louis (1226–70).⁴⁷ The chronicler Jean de Joinville (1224–1317), a contemporary and intimate of the king, wrote decades after the events that the pious king had the house built and provided an annuity to help poor women out of prostitution, and followed this with additional houses for beguines elsewhere in his kingdom.⁴⁸ Joinville’s hagiographical biography presents Louis’s support for the Filles-Dieu as part of a wider pattern of pious giving.⁴⁹ The target in this instance was vulnerable women and the chronicler, like Procopius, identified poverty as the primary cause of their sinfulness. The pressures of poverty could be alleviated by the provision of shelter and sustenance. Previous sins could be remitted through conversion and penitence. Thus, the Filles-Dieu married civic and religious solutions to the problem of female prostitution. Louis’s provision for the house, echoing the support of Justinian and Theodora in the sixth century, illustrated interest in, and support for, these institutions by civic rulers. This would also be the case later in Florence, where

civic authorities intervened and financially supported Sant'Elisabetta in myriad ways from its foundation onwards.

The movement to offer institutional penitence to prostitutes was not limited to southern Europe. An order of nuns, the *Sorores Poenitentes Beate Mariae Magdalенаe*, provided houses for repentant prostitutes in Germany.⁵⁰ The order received papal sanction from Gregory IX in 1227, three years after its formation, with the recommendation that it too adopt the Augustinian Rule.⁵¹ In England, the Worcester White Ladies [*Albis Sororibus Wigorn*] were Benedictine nuns and penitents, and may also have been former prostitutes.⁵² This community was established before 18 June 1241, when the Close Rolls of Henry III record a donation of wine.⁵³ They seem to have been the only such community in England.

However, such houses were more successful in southern France and in Italy than elsewhere, with those in Italy seeming to have been longer lived. The earliest Convertite house in Italy was the Dominican *Sorores Repentite Hospitalis Santa Maria Magdalene de Spina*, founded in Pisa in 1240. One in Viterbo followed in 1243; Bologna in 1250; Rome in 1255; Florence in 1257; with Genoa and another in Pisa (the first had been suppressed in 1290) in the early fourteenth century.⁵⁴ Monasteries for former prostitutes were established throughout the Italian peninsula until the eve of the Black Death.⁵⁵

The first monastery for convertite in Florence was Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello, which became known as Santa Maria Maddalena delle Penitenti. A man named Rinuccio di Jacopo took a surety from a group of *pinzochere* and bought land and a house with which to build a religious community of women under the Benedictine Rule.⁵⁶ The eighteenth-century historian Giuseppe Richa dates Rinuccio's establishment to April 1256, quoting the earliest document pertaining to the monastery which records the sale to Rinuccio of *unam petiam terre, & vineam cum domibus posit in Popolo San Petri Maioris loco qui dictur Pinti* [a piece of land and vineyards with a house in the parish of San Pier Maggiore in the place called Pinti].⁵⁷ Davidsohn incorrectly dates the first mention of the *donne repentute* [sic] of Borgo Pinti to a testament dated 14 September 1261.⁵⁸ The document recording Rinuccio's purchase and quoted by Richa is in fact dated 28 March [*quinta kalends aprilii*] 1256.⁵⁹

Although Santa Maria Maddalena delle Penitenti was Benedictine, the community of *pinzochere* connected to the Franciscan church of Santa Croce undertook its administration and governance.⁶⁰ In 1319, the monastery ran into trouble due to the nuns' misbehaviour and so the bishop of Florence, Antonio degli Orsi, transferred the convertite to the Vallombrosian monastery of Santa Maria di Crespino north-east of the city.⁶¹ Shortly thereafter, the commune of Florence turned it over to

the Cistercian monks of San Salvatore di Settimo, and the convertite nuns moved to join the nuns of San Donato outside of the city to the west.⁶² This seems to have spelled the end of this community. The nuns' *ricordi* of 1360 gives no hint that any of the women were convertite.⁶³ While it is possible that they were but did not record it, this would be in stark contrast to the records of Sant'Elisabetta in which the word is found very frequently.

It has proved difficult for historians to establish the numbers not only of nuns but even of female institutions in Duecento and early Trecento Florence.⁶⁴ Trexler counted five female monasteries definitely active in Florence at the time of the Primo Popolo (1250–60) but did not include Santa Maria Maddalena, perhaps accepting Davidsohn's later date for its establishment.⁶⁵ However, the convertite at Borgo Pinti were thirty-two in number and so a significant institution among the half dozen or so nunneries in Florence in the mid-thirteenth century.⁶⁶ Trexler calculated that in 1336, some eighty years later, the average number of nuns per convent was only twenty-one.⁶⁷

There is no reason to think that Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite was established as a direct replacement for Santa Maria Maddalena after the latter ceased to house repentant prostitutes. However, a decade after the move of those convertite nuns, the confraternity which founded Sant'Elisabetta believed that there was an ongoing need for a similar institution in the city. Changes in municipal policy regarding prostitution in the fourteenth century may have had the unintended effect of encouraging women to undertake sex work by assigning extramural territory to an approved brothel, or at least created a perception of increased prostitution. However, poverty in the wake of the Black Death may have forced more women into prostitution than before.

Prostitution in Florence in the fourteenth century

Scholars of medieval and early modern prostitution face an initial problem of definition. It is rarely clear what a source means when it says *meretrix*. It could indicate a woman who sold sexual services for money, or a woman who was promiscuous without pay or a woman suspected of infidelity. Identifying a woman as a prostitute was often problematic for contemporaries, though several important medieval Christian thinkers tackled the question, often looking to Roman law as a model. For them, defining the *meretrix* was a key concern.

The jurist Ulpian (c.170–223) commented on the Augustan *Leges Iuliae* of 18–17 B.C.E. which defined the public prostitute, the *meretrix publica*, as a woman *corpore quaestum facientem* [making a profit with her body].⁶⁸

By this definition, a woman accused of being a public prostitute had to be proven to satisfy both criteria of promiscuity and profit. By contrast, St Jerome (c.347–420), in a letter to the Roman Christian Fabiola defined the prostitute when he discussed what sort of woman a priest should take as a wife. He excluded several categories of women as unsuitable: *Vidua est, cuius maritus mortuus est. Eiecta, que a marito uiuente proicitur. Meretrix, que multorum libidini patet* [The widow whose husband is dead. The outcast, who is thrown out by her living husband. The prostitute, who is available for the lust of many].⁶⁹ This required only that a woman was sexually available to many and dispensed with monetary recompense as a criterion.

While early Christian thinkers grappled with the question of what a prostitute was, they also struggled with her role in society. St Augustine (354–430) argued that were prostitutes to be repressed successfully, the result would be the disruption of the proper patterns of sexual activity: *Aufer meretrices de rebus humanis, turbaveris omnia libidinibus: constitue matronarum loco, labe ac dedecore dehonestaveris* [Remove prostitutes from human affairs [and] you have disturbed everything with lust: put them in the place of matrons, [and] you have dishonoured with decline and shame].⁷⁰ The views of Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) were particularly influential and echoed Augustine's position that prostitution was a necessary evil. However, the analogy, often ascribed to Aquinas, of prostitution being like a sewer in a palace, without which the palace would fill with filth, should be attributed instead to Ptolemy of Lucca (Tolomeo Fiadoni, d. 1327). Aquinas and Fiadoni were friends, and the latter continued Augustine's *De regimine principum*, directly referring to the earlier thinker: *Unde Augustinus dicit quod hoc facit meretrix in mundo quod sentina in mari, vel cloaca in palatio: 'Tolle cloacam et replebis fetore palatium, et similiter de sentina; tolle meretrices de mundo, et replebis ipsum sodomia* [Hence Augustine says that a prostitute functions in the world like a ship's bilge in the sea or the sewer in a palace: 'Take away the sewer and you will fill the palace with foulness, and the same with the ship's bilge; take away prostitutes from the world and you will fill it with sodomy'].⁷¹ This repeats the necessity of prostitution, but introduces the idea that it specifically prevents sodomy. While 'sodomy' strictly meant any sexual practice of which the Church disapproved, in this case, there is reason to think he meant male homosexual sex specifically. Fiadoni, as a native of Lucca and prior of Santa Maria Novella in Florence from 1300 to 1302, may well have had the typical Florentine use of the word in mind.⁷² The later regulation of prostitution in the city would assume this view.

By the early Middle Ages, the Latin term *meretrix*, which had indicated to the Romans a professional, public prostitute, was widely used

as a general insult. The word suggested a woman of loose morals and had lost its pecuniary associations.⁷³ Twelfth-century jurists such as Placentinus (d. 1192) returned to the Roman definition by stressing her financial motives (*qui palam corpore quaestum fecerit* ['[a woman] who openly makes profit from her body'], echoing Ulpian's third-century definition, almost verbatim.⁷⁴ Placentinus's definition was adapted to specify that the prostitute was a 'public' or 'common' woman, available to all, indiscriminate in her choice of sexual partners and belonging to no one. The public availability of the prostitute remained an important defining characteristic. She was thus a woman who did not belong to any individual man (father, brother, husband) but was available to all men.

In Florence, much of the medieval ambiguity was resolved by returning to the Roman definition that required both promiscuity and monetary gain. The fourteenth-century legislation that sought to facilitate women's exit from brothels defined *meretrices* as women *que prebeat corpus suum libidini pro pecuniario lucro vel questu* [who openly offer their bodies for lust for pecuniary gain or profit].⁷⁵ This means that Florence had an unusually precise and clear definition of *meretrice* when other contemporary areas rarely did, meaning that there is considerably less ambiguity in the documents that discuss prostitution and prostitutes in the city between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries covered in this book. The founders of Sant'Elisabetta also made clear that the women they intended to provide a refuge for were those *que hactenus corpus suum publice pro pretio numario meretricio more exposuerint indistincte cunctis petentibus* [who thus exposed her body publicly for a nummary price in the fashion of a prostitute without distinction for all who desire].⁷⁶ This makes clear that those Sant'Elisabetta was intended to support were working prostitutes and not simply women with tarnished reputations. It is this definition that authorities would turn to again in the mid-sixteenth century when they legislated to ensure that the monastery remained true to its original purpose.

In the late thirteenth century, Florentine law prohibited prostitutes from the city proper and tolerated them only beyond the walls. Some of the earliest surviving legislation makes clear the limits of municipal acceptance of the practice. The following document is undated but the notary who wrote it, Nero di Gozzi di Pelago, was active in the late thirteenth century: his earliest document is dated 1279.⁷⁷ Again, *meretrice* is defined by monetary gain: *meretricem publicam que palam prebeat corpus suum libidini pro pecuniari lucro vel questu* [a public prostitute who openly offers her body for lust for money or gain].⁷⁸ The provision outlines the ban on brothels and prostitutes working in the city, suburbs and territory of Florence with significant penalties for transgressions. Any brothel or

house in which a prostitute worked *nulla exceptione admissa, destruatur, et hedificium et hedificia deveniant in Comuni; et talis meretrix fustigetur, et puniatur leno qui retinuerit eas in libras ducentas fiorini piccoli pro qualibet meretrice* [without exception, shall be destroyed, and the building and buildings shall become the Comune's; and such a prostitute shall be flogged, and the pimp who retains her shall be punished [with a fine of] 200 pounds and five *fiorini piccoli* for each prostitute].⁷⁹

Prostitutes were prohibited from being closer to the city than one thousand *braccia*, approximately 580 m from the old walls (the new, wider circuit of walls was begun in 1284 but not completed until the 1330s). Suburban settlements beyond the walls also in large part fell within the prohibited zone. Many churches and monastic houses were also found within this extramural zone, although an additional forty *braccia* [approximately 58cm or 2 feet] buffer zone applied to religious buildings and ensured that even those which stood some distance from the walls had a small buffer against prostitution.⁸⁰

In January 1319, the Signoria reiterated rules on where brothels could be located. The priors reopened the question in response to noise complaints about prostitutes arguing in the streets. They specifically mentioned the disturbance this caused to the religious, which may have been intended to indicate that prostitutes were living and working close to churches and monastic houses in defiance of the regulations. The 1319 ruling echoed the previous prohibitions but defined zones more clearly. As well as a prohibited area around the city walls, brothels could not be located beside city gates or on the main streets leading to them. This was implied but not stated in Gozzi's record from the late thirteenth century that prohibited brothels from a wide area around the walls which would, of course, exclude the gates. This new legislation sought to clean up the city by severely restricting prostitutes' physical presence within and close to the walls: *nec extra civitatem seu dictos muros, vel fossas prope aliquam ecclesiam per quinquaginta braccia, nec prope aliquam stratam publicam per duecenta braccia* [neither outside the city or the said walls, or the ditches, nor near any church up to fifty *braccia*, nor near any public road for two hundred *braccia*].⁸¹ The record goes on to specify the public roads as many of the major arterial streets into and out of the city. This suggests that brothels were often found on these thoroughfares. One particularly notable example is the *stratam dominarum de Faventia* [the road of the 'Ladies of Faenza']. This refers to a community of Vallombrosian nuns, the 'Ladies of Faenza', on the west side of Florence, beyond the walls, where the Fortezza da Basso now stands. The text mentions the nuns rather than the Porta a Faenza at the same location, in contrast to the other places named (for example, the Porta Pinti,

Porta San Niccolò), perhaps indicating particular issues with prostitutes working too close to the nunnery.

Six years later in 1325, the priors prepared revised compilations of the city statutes, including provisions to deal with prostitution. These statutes repeat, almost verbatim, the provisions on prostitution and brothels of January 1319. They again described prostitution as offending God and diminishing civic honour (*deus offenditur et honori detrahitur civitatis*, exactly as in 1319) and codified severe penalties for it and connected activities like procuring. The new penalties were significantly harsher than previously; in addition to higher monetary fines, the new laws prescribed more extreme corporal punishments. Procurers and brothel-owners were to be fined between £200 and £500, an increase from the uniform £200 fine of 1319. A person convicted of selling a woman into prostitution would be fined £1,000, commuted to death by burning if not paid within ten days.⁸² These were huge sums of money: Nicholas Terpstra calculated that £200 would have paid for five masons for a year in the 1290s.⁸³ Prostitutes would be whipped for a first offence and branded on the right side of the face if convicted a second time (the latter does not appear in earlier legislation). Anyone found holding a woman in prostitution against her will was to be fined £1,000, which would be commuted to burning if not paid within ten days. A second conviction for such a crime was automatically punished with burning.⁸⁴ The inclusion of these severe punishments may indicate the priors' determination to tackle prostitution in the city, or at least to be seen to do so. Physical punishments such as whipping were not uncommon penalties for prostitution in the late medieval period, but facial branding was an unusually extreme punishment typically reserved for heretics.⁸⁵

The new laws did not deny space in the city to prostitutes altogether, however. Although they were generally prohibited from entering the city, on pain of whipping, they were permitted to enter on Mondays after the ninth hour: *quibus diebus lune possit intrare, ire, stare ac esse per civitatem pro necessitatibus suis, semper tamen a meretricio abstinendo* [on Mondays they may enter, come and be in the city for their own needs, always, however, abstaining from prostitution].⁸⁶ Legal records from the years following 1325 indicate that although prosecutions were brought against women who defied the legislation, those cases which were pursued tended to have additional, complicating factors such as proximity to a religious house or additional or related criminal activity. However, the presence of prostitution within the city walls was accepted as inevitable.⁸⁷

The 1325 statutes made a single exception to the spatial regulations on brothels. Prostitution was to be permitted outside the walls, specifically at a newly purchased location known as Campoluccio. The statute

stated *Et quod mora et retentio meretricum et postribuli non prohibeatur nec intelligatur esse prohibita per presens statutum in loco qui dicitur Campoluccio prope Mugnonem extra muros civitatis Florentia* [And that delay and retention of prostitutes and brothels cannot be prohibited nor understood to be prohibited by the present statute in the place called Campoluccio, near the Mugnone outside the walls of Florence].⁸⁸ Richa described this location as *fuori della Porta a Faenza* [outside the Porta a Faenza], which must have been close to the Vallombrosian nuns that the 1319 statute sought to protect, a further indication that this was an area of established prostitution. Davidsohn described Campoluccio as close to the Humiliati convent of Ognisanti, which was by the Mugnone, a tributary of the Arno, to the west of the city.⁸⁹ Silvio Berti points to a document dated 26 May 1264 that details the sale of land in the parish of San Lorenzo, in the area of Campoluccio, confirming the location more accurately to the *prati* [meadows] beyond the walls, further north than Ognisanti and beyond the Porta a Faenza as according to Richa.⁹⁰

Campoluccio had originally been earmarked for a different outcast population. The site, or an adjacent one, had been identified as the location for a new leprosarium, San Lazzaro, in 1294 to allow the commune to move this other unclean population from the sacred zone within the walls.⁹¹ The segregation of lepers was required by the Third Lateran Council in 1179. Florence was not alone in treating prostitutes and lepers in much the same manner.⁹² However, the leprosarium's opening date is uncertain. All the dates suggested by historians (from 1332 to 1338) are later than the proposed use of the site as the city brothel.⁹³

The site offered the priors a convenient balance between the need to prevent prostitutes from working within the city, and the more pragmatic view that the sale of sex was to some extent inevitable. To banish the authorised location to one too far from the city would only serve to encourage intramural prostitution. Campoluccio was extramural but it was on or close to one of the arterial roads. To comply with the 1319 provision, it needed to have been built at least two hundred *braccia* from the Porta a Faenza gate, but this was a trivial distance of a little over 100 m, meaning the brothel would have been readily accessible from the city, for resident men and those visiting.

Despite its location beyond the walls and the association with lepers, the proposed brothel at Campoluccio conversely gave Florentine prostitutes a place in society. They were afforded a location in which they were permitted to work, exempt from the regulations prohibiting brothels and free from the threat of severe physical punishments. The designation of the Campoluccio site to a municipally approved brothel close to the city, combined with popular penitential piety and the closure of the Convertite

monastery at Borgo Pinti, may have created a perception of the need for another such institution in the city. The priors who had previously removed prostitutes and burned down brothels now designated an area nearby and allowed the women to enter the city every week.

Conclusion

Medieval monastic institutions for repentant prostitutes had conceptual precursors in late antique Byzantium, but more immediate roots in the rise of the mendicant orders and penitential piety of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Formal and informal groups of lay penitents appeared, particularly in Italy, some of which attached themselves to mendicant orders. Although rooted in the secular world, they dedicated their lives to religion, sometimes eschewing even legitimate, procreative sex within marriage, and adopting the habit of a religious order. Their voluntary adoption of asceticism and the devotion of their lives to penance was part of a wider movement of penitential piety encouraged by the codification of the sacrament of penance by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

Innocent III had reversed previous ecclesiastical rules on the matter and encouraged men to marry former prostitutes. Fulk of Neuilly arranged several such marriages before finding a solution which did not rely on the willingness of individual men to make such a commitment. Following the example of Peter d'Arbrissel at Fontevraud at the beginning of the twelfth century, Fulk established a lifelong, institutional solution to the predicament of repentant prostitutes who lacked prospective husbands. With this background in popular penitential piety, monasteries for repentant prostitutes began to appear in French and Italian towns with increasing regularity from the mid-thirteenth century. Prostitutes' sinful profession led to civic legislation which required them to remain outside of the sacred zones delineated by the city walls, however, the Convertite monasteries would bring the repentant back into the heart of that zone. There, they could swap the identifying signs they wore to separate them from the rest of society with a nun's habit: similarly intended to separate them from other women. The voluntary repentance of the city's prostitutes was an important part of civic piety.

In Florence, the first monastery for convertite, Santa Maria Maddalena delle Penitenti, was established in Borgo Pinti in 1257 and like many such institutions at that time, existed through the pious convictions of a layperson. Also, like many at this time, it was short-lived. By the early 1320s there was no longer a monastic alternative to prostitution in Florence. Although municipal regulations banned prostitutes from the

city, with limited access to conduct their business, the permitted brothel at Campoluccio just beyond the walls facilitated their continued presence nearby. Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite was probably not intended as a direct replacement for Santa Maria Maddalena, but pious citizens may have been conscious of the lack of such an institution in a city in which municipal policy effectively encouraged prostitution.

Sant'Elisabetta was not a unique response to the question of repentant, or potentially repentant, prostitutes in medieval society. However, it proved to be unusual in both its longevity (forcibly closed in the early nineteenth century) and its dedication to its original purpose as a refuge for repentant prostitutes when similar institutions transformed into nunneries for non-prostitute women. Both of these factors were facilitated, in part, by the involvement of the Florentine civic authorities.

Notes

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2. Procopius, *On Buildings*, trans. H. B. Dewing (Loeb, 1940), 75–7.
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5. Hillner, 'Monastic Imprisonment in Justinian's Novels', 233–4.
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10. Fiona J. Griffiths, 'The Cross and the Cura Monialium: Robert of Arbrissel, John the Evangelist, and the Pastoral Care of Women in the Age of Reform', *Speculum* 83, no. 02 (2008): 306; Keiko Nowacka, 'Networks of Ideas, Networks of Men: Clerical Reform, Parisian Theologians and the Movement to Reform Prostitutes in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century France', *Studies in Church History Subsidia* 14 (2012): 55–66.
11. Griffiths, 'The Cross and the Cura Monialium', 324.
12. 'Decretalium D. Gregorii Papae IX Compilatio', in *Corpus juris canonici emendatum et notis illustratum* (Rome, 1582), 2:X.4.1.20; Nowacka, 'Networks of Ideas, Networks of Men: Clerical Reform, Parisian Theologians and the Movement to Reform Prostitutes in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century France', 64.
13. Hillner, 'Monastic Imprisonment in Justinian's Novels', 231.
14. Letter of Innocent III dated 29 April 1198, quoted in André Simon, *L'Ordre des Pénitentes de Ste Marie-Madeleine en Allemagne au XIII^e siècle* (Imprimerie et Librairie de l'Oeuvre de Saint Paul, 1918), 3.

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15. Brundage, 'Sex and Canon Law', 44.
16. Constance H. Berman, 'Dowries, Private Income, and Anniversary Masses: The Nuns of Saint-Antoine-Des-Champs (Paris)', *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 20 (1993): 3.
17. Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 73–6.
18. Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 73.
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20. Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Nicaea I to Lateran V* (Sheed and Ward, 1990), 1:245–46; Norman Tanner and Sethina Watson, 'Least of the Laity: The Minimum Requirements for a Medieval Christian', *Journal of Medieval History* 32, no. 4 (2006): 395–423.
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22. Duane J. Osheim, 'Conversion, Conversi, and the Christian Life in Late Medieval Tuscany', *Speculum* 58 (1983): 369.
23. Katherine Jane Gill, 'Penitents, Pinzochere and Mantellate: Varieties of Women's Religious Communities in Central Italy, c. 1300–1520' (PhD diss., Princeton, 1994); Jennifer McFarland, 'Ties That Unbind: Proximities, *Pizzochere*, and Women's Social Options in Early Modern Venice', *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 24, no. 2 (2021): 242.
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26. Papi, 'Mendicant Friars', 91; Richard C. Trexler, 'Celibacy in the Renaissance: The Nuns of Florence', in *The Women of Renaissance Florence* (Pegasus, 1998), 7; George W. Dameron, *Florence and Its Church in the Age of Dante* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 46, 263.
27. The magisterial G. G. Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatis: confraternite e pietà dei laici nel Medioevo*, 3 vols (Herder editrice e libreria, 1977) remains the fullest study of lay penitential piety at this time.
28. Thompson, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes, 1125–1325*, 69–76.
29. Alison More, *Fictive Orders and Feminine Religious Identities, 1200–1600* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 4–5.
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42. More, *Fictive Orders*, 38–9.
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44. Quoted in Schlager, 'Foundresses of the Franciscan Life', 165.
45. Schlager, 'Foundresses of the Franciscan Life', 165.
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57. Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie istoriche delle chiese fiorentine divise ne'suoi quartieri* (Viviani, 1756), 9.300.
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63. CRSGF 233 (San Donato), 103, Ricordi (1360).
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65. Trexler, 'Celibacy in the Renaissance: The Nuns of Florence', 7.
66. 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*, vol. 97 (Librairie Droz, 1987), 73.
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84. Caggese et al., *Statuti II*, II, 244–7.

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Chapter 2

The foundation of Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite

Carlo di Tommaso Strozzi (1587–1670) recounted the establishment of Sant'Elisabetta in his *Raccolta di Memorie, Fondazione, e Padronati di diverse Chiese, Monasteri, Spedale Compagnie e similie*. The handwritten manuscript in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze describes the foundation of the religious institutions of the city, and noteworthy developments in their history: changes such as those at the monastery on Borgo Pinti, for example. The work is undated but the handwriting suggests it was written in Strozzi's old age in the mid-seventeenth century. Although the source is much later than most of the events it describes, earlier records support its accuracy both for Sant'Elisabetta and other monastic institutions. Strozzi was an antiquarian and began the collection of papers which now constitutes the extensive Carte Stroziane in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze.

A questo Monastero di S. Elisabetta delle Convertite dell'Ordine di S. Agostino da servire per le Meretrici Convertite con licenzia del Cardinale Giovanni del titolo di S. Teodoro l'anno 1329 in Via Chiara vicino alle Mura vecchie della Citta di Firenze fu dato principio da Capitane della Compagnia di Maria Vergine del luogo de frati di S. Spirito de Firenze con riservo del Padronato a medesimo Capitani e della correzione e riformaione di esso insieme con la confermazione della Badessa a frati di S. Spirito et acciocche si potesse fabbricare un abituro per le Monache e un Oratorio competente il Comune di Firenze l'anno 1333 concede facolta che si potesse disfare delle Mura vecchie della Citta e servirsi di quelle pietre in opera tanto pia.¹

[The monastery of St Elisabetta delle Convertite of the Order of St Augustine, to serve for converted prostitutes with licence from Cardinal Giovanni of San Teodoro, was given its beginning in the year 1329 in Via Chiara near the old [city] walls, by the Captains of the Company of the Virgin Mary of the friary of the friars of Santo Spirito of Florence, with the reservation of the Patronage to the same Captains and of the correction and reform of it together with the confirmation of the Abbess to the friars of Santo Spirito; and so that an abode and appropriate Oratory could be made for the Nuns, the Commune of Florence in the year 1333 grants that some of the old Walls of the City could be dismantled and made use of those stones for so pious a work.]

In 1329, Cardinal Gian Gaetano Orsini (1285–1335) gave permission to the Captains of the Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi di Santo Spirito to establish a monastery for repentant prostitutes in Via Chiara, near the old walls of the city.² The Compagnia was a *laudesi* company, responsible for singing lauds at Santo Spirito, the Augustinian friary church in the Oltrarno district south of the river. The confraternity was made up of local men and as its emblem used the dove, symbolising the Holy Spirit, to link them to Santo Spirito. It came to be known as the Piccione [the pigeon] as a result. Its focus, in addition to singing, was local charity. In the early fourteenth century, the Captains of the Piccione believed that there were prostitutes in and around Florence who were trapped in that work, prevented from leaving by inescapable poverty. This echoes statutes from the same time which described women trapped by debt. The men of the Piccione sought to make a charitable provision that would provide care of these women's souls as well as their bodies.

There was certainly a need for the Piccione's charity in the early fourteenth century. Although Florence enjoyed a period of relative political stability at the beginning of the century, as the conflict between the Guelf and Ghibelline factions temporarily calmed, and the fortunes of the great banks of the Bardi and Peruzzi families enjoyed their zenith, for many ordinary Florentines, it was a period of acute hardship. From the 1310s onwards, the effects of the Little Ice Age began to be felt. This global cooling between 1250 and 1850 led to floods and crop failures. The Arno burst its banks several times doing significant damage, including washing away the Ponte Vecchio, Ponte Santa Trinita and Ponte alla Carraia in November 1331. Poor harvests brought immigrants to the city from the *contado* around it, seeking food and employment. To make ends meet, some families may have set a mother or daughter to work in prostitution.

Alongside these difficulties, the fourteenth century brought significant political turmoil before and after the Black Death of 1348. The city lurched between episodes of despotism, oligarchy and short-lived popular governments. These regime changes were rarely smooth. Extant records make it difficult to tell what effect these changes had on Sant'Elisabetta. Some were perhaps too brief to make a lasting impact, and it is likely that men in power had little time to consider a handful of poor nuns on the south side of town, and so they, like other nuns in the city, were left to manage their own affairs.

Prostitution and the city before legalisation

Despite the seriousness with which authorities considered prostitution and related activities, as indicated by the harsh penalties and the attempts to extricate women seen in the 1325 legislation, the laws seem to have been inconsistently enforced. Prostitutes found working anywhere within the city walls were, in theory at least, to be sent to work in the Campoluccio brothel.³ In practice, action was only taken in cases of egregious breaches, and the proposed brothel may ultimately never have been established.

Only four years after the legislation to establish the brothel at Campoluccio was put in place, a petition dated July 1329 throws its existence into question. The petition was submitted to the Capitano del Popolo, as the most senior military and judicial official of the popular faction which dominated government (the *popolo*). The Capitano del Popolo was a non-Florentine elected to serve a one-year term in place of the Podestà (one of the major officials of the Florentine criminal law system, an elected foreigner who oversaw the investigation and prosecution of serious crime).⁴ His council (the *consiglio*) consisted of representatives of each *gonfalone* of the city, the military companies who policed the neighbourhoods, and from the twenty-one guilds.⁵

The people of the parish of San Lorenzo in the north-west of the city, not far from the site of Campoluccio, sought the help of the Capitano to resolve problems caused by 'inhonestate mulieres meretrices' [dishonourable prostitute women] and their 'impudici acti et mores' [shameful acts and habits].⁶ The petition was an appeal to the most senior levels of the justice system. The locals wanted to evict prostitutes working in their neighbourhood and requested that a new brothel be built. Even though the Campoluccio brothel should have been nearby and the solution to their problems, the petitioners made no reference to it. The Consiglio del Capitano del Popolo agreed the citizens' proposal by a vote of 136 for and

only 23 against on 27 July. The decision repeated the idea that had inspired the Campoluccio site: *'eligere illos bonos viros quos voluerint de populo Sancti Laurentii, ad inveniendum locum in dicto populo extra muros novos civitatis Florentie habilior pro ipso postribulo et ad ipsum postribulum retinendum'* [to elect those good men as they would from the parish of San Lorenzo to find a place outside the walls of the city but in the said parish more suitable for the brothel and to retain it for the brothel].⁷

This request for a brothel to be built outside of the new walls but still in the parish of San Lorenzo reveals three things about the situation of prostitution in 1329. Firstly, it indicates that work on the brothel proposed in 1325 had not started. The 1329 decision states that men would be selected from the parish to identify a suitable site for a new brothel, indicating that the Campoluccio location had been abandoned and no municipal brothel created. The request and agreement however indicate that a municipally approved brothel, outside of the walls, remained the preferred solution. Such an arrangement would allow the priors to maintain the moral integrity of the city within the walls, while facilitating the inevitable presence of and access to prostitutes.

Secondly, the existing ban on prostitution within the walls meant that the 1329 petition was intended to transfer the practice to a more appropriate area. In effect, the women would not be moved a great distance away, but their absence would preserve the sanctity of the area inside the walls, in contrast to what was permitted and tolerated beyond.⁸ The area deemed suitable had to be outside of the sacred precinct enclosed by the walls, which literally and figuratively defined the city. Prostitution would be kept largely out of sight to all but those who sought it out. It was to be limited to the area close to but outside of the city proper, in a place where other activities perceived as necessary but distasteful took place: leper care; executions; the burial of Jews. It also meant that the women, and their immoral activities, were to be placed beyond the protection and security provided by the walls while their male clients were able to return to the untainted city.

Thirdly, the proximity in which the new brothel was to be located indicates that although the Consiglio and the people of San Lorenzo wanted to keep prostitutes outside of the walls and away from good people and, no doubt, from religious buildings (in this case, the historic church of San Lorenzo), they did not want to prevent the activity altogether or to move it far from the city. This is in keeping with the ambivalent view of prostitution seen in the writings of Augustine and Aquinas: that prostitution was a necessary evil which prevented greater sinfulness, a view that was echoed by the Florentine authorities explicitly at the beginning of the fifteenth century. However, in 1329, the authorities only tacitly acknowledged the usefulness or inevitability of prostitution when they chose to

move the women to an area only just beyond the city limits. In not moving them further away, the people of the parish of San Lorenzo ensured that prostitutes continued to be accessible to men and to provide the service of protecting good women from the unwanted sexual attentions of unmarried men. The palace sewer could continue to function.

Two years later, the citizens of nearby Pistoia looked for a similar solution to the unwelcome presence of prostitutes in their neighbourhood. The Pistoia *provvisioni* (decisions of the city government) of 26 March 1331 recorded that 'una larga parte dei cittadini pistoiesi' [a large number of Pistoian citizens] had petitioned to have recently built brothels moved from residential areas.⁹ Pistoians, like the Florentines, did not want brothels next door, but they did not seek prosecution of the women themselves. The Pistoia Commune seems to have also accepted the inevitability of prostitution and chose to create a civic benefit from it. More than half a century before Florence would institute a similar policy, Pistoia began to tax its prostitutes. The tax is referred to in the *provvisioni* of 21 November 1343. The entry sets out how various taxes were to be used to cover the payments to various officers of the Commune. Numerous taxes are listed, including the wine tax, excise of flour and small animals, taxes on bread, butchers, beasts, the *bocche* of the *contado*, on contracts, on domestic beasts, and finally on prostitutes.¹⁰

Citizens of Florence and Pistoia wanted to keep prostitution out of their neighbourhoods, without persecuting the sex workers themselves and while making sure sexually available women were still available and accessible. This reveals the deeply ambiguous position of prostitution, and by extension, the prostitute herself, in renaissance society. The Church Fathers had struggled with the contradictory role of prostitution as both hazard to morality and safeguard against wider immorality, similarly, people tended to see women who engaged in prostitution ambivalently. As discussed earlier, '*meretrix*' was widely used as an insult and attempts were made to restrict and repress prostitution. However, in practice, people understood there to be a significant moral grey area. We see evidence of this if we look at the case of Angela, wife of Nofri di Francesco. The case came before the Giudice degli Appelli in 1398. Angela was accused of being a prostitute without wearing the required signs. Her neighbour Bartolo Gadini gave evidence on the basis of *fama* that it was 'generally believed in the city of Florence . . . that she was and is a public prostitute.'¹¹ In many courts, *fama* was accepted if several people would testify that something was generally known to be the case.¹² Further testimony revealed that Angela's neighbours had recognised prostitution as being a primarily financial issue, and one which might be resolved by local charity. They had offered to give her bread each week so that she did not

have to do sex work. Although Gadini and her other neighbours wanted Angela to stop sex work, their response was to tackle what they believed to be the root cause of it, rather than seek to involve the courts. The latter path was open to them: Angela was breaking the law. This reveals that although people may not have liked prostitution in their neighbourhood – it often brought young men who made a noise and created a disturbance – they did not automatically condemn the woman doing it. This case only came before the courts because Angela, unrepentant, told her neighbours that she would only give it up if they furnished her with two florins a week in addition to the bread. They declined, and went to court.

The foundation of Sant'Elisabetta

Just as Angela's neighbours had offered her a way to give up prostitution, the founders of Sant'Elisabetta sought to provide a means by which any woman in Florence could leave prostitution. The founders were the captains and members of the *laudesi* company of Santa Maria delle Laude di Santo Spirito. It was one of several lay religious organisations tied to a church and responsible for spiritual devotions and vernacular hymns in the city, in this case at the Augustinian friary church of Santo Spirito. These types of confraternal groups also fulfilled important charitable functions such as providing proper burial for the dead, managing bequests and giving alms. The date of the group's foundation is uncertain but it existed by 1322 and was most likely formed between 1270 and 1290 when other *laudesi* companies were established in the city.¹³ Santo Spirito is the great friary church of the Oltrarno district: the area south of the river Arno. Across the river, removed from the seat of government and most of the administration of the city, the Oltrarno was largely populated by the poor and immigrants. As urban immigration rose, the Oltrarno became one of the first stopping points for new residents of the city travelling from the south.

There is a pious legend about the foundation of Sant'Elisabetta which is occasionally repeated in modern scholarship but cannot be dated any earlier than the eighteenth century.¹⁴ The legend describes how the figure of Simone Fidati da Cascia (1280x1295–1348) inspired with his sermons the Captains of the Piccione to take action. Fidati was a well-known and popular preacher who spoke in several cities in central Italy, including Florence. He was born into a noble family in Cascia (now in the province of Perugia) and joined the Augustinian order after his studies. As an Augustinian, Fidati may have been connected to Santo Spirito while in Florence. Members of the Piccione may have listened to his preaching.

However, his association with Sant'Elisabetta seems to be a later invention: an attempt to link the house to someone with a reputation as a holy man (Fidati was beatified in 1833, after the first appearance of this legend).¹⁵ The Piccione did not mention him in their earliest letter to the priors, though were it true it may have been persuasive, nor in their 1621 copy of the letter to mark the confraternity's reestablishment, though it may have added gravitas. Carlo Strozzi did not link Sant'Elisabetta to Fidati in his late seventeenth-century account of the monastery's creation. In fact, Fidati's connection to Sant'Elisabetta appears first in Giuseppe Richa's account written in the 1760s and seems to be little more than a pious foundation myth.¹⁶ He relates a story that during renovations, an incorrupt body was discovered under the main altar in the chapel of Sant'Elisabetta. Owing to its priestly robes and penitential accoutrements (chains and a cilice), the miraculous body was popularly (or perhaps by Richa alone) identified as Fidati, who had died of plague in Florence in 1348. Richa admits that doubt was cast on this identification at the time, and in fact Fidati's remains are interred in the Basilica di S. Rita in his native Cascia. Whether or not the Piccione were moved by the charismatic preacher, their motivation as they described it, fits into this wider pattern of lay piety and penitence which is in keeping with Fidati's preaching themes.

Whatever the extent of Fidati's role, the true architects of Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite were the Piccione. In the late 1320s and early 1330s, they looked to increase their charitable work further by realising the plans for which they had obtained ecclesiastical consent in 1329. The confraternity already ran a small *spedale* at the southernmost edge of the city, right next to the walls, on Via Chiara. Again, the exact date of this foundation is not known but it was established before Sant'Elisabetta. Now the captains of the Piccione sought to heal another city sickness. In a letter to the priors, they wrote that they knew there were many women in Florence who had fallen into prostitution and through poverty were unable to escape.¹⁷ The letter is dated, in a different hand, only with 'delibat[] die xviii' [considered on the nineteenth day] without indication of the month or year and has been added to the Provvisioni documents separately. It comes immediately after decisions made on 24 May 1330. The next entries appear after several blank pages and are dated 1333.¹⁸ A copy of the letter was made in 1621 to commemorate the refoundation of the Piccione. The gloss to this letter adds the date of 19 July 1332 to the letter and 20 and 21 July for the approval of the priors.¹⁹

The Piccione proposed a solution to the trap of poverty and prostitution: a monastic refuge where these women could devote the rest of their lives to penitence for their great sin. They would build it on

land they already owned, next to the *spedale* and near the Porta di Giano della Bella.²⁰ This was an area in transition in 1330. The Porta di Giano della Bella was part of the old city walls which were being dismantled as a new circuit of walls had been being built in the Oltrarno from the 1320s. The corner of Via Chiara and Via del Campuccio, where Sant'Elisabetta was to be built, had been a peripheral zone immediately next to the walls but would be considerably less so after the new walls extended the city to the south and west.

The captains of the Piccione did not innovate in their solution to the problem, as they perceived it, of women trapped in prostitution. They did not need to look as far back as sixth-century Byzantium, or even twelfth-century Fontevraud, of course, just to Borgo Pinti at the other side of their own city where such a monastery had operated a decade earlier. Although it is not clear that the Piccione decided to establish a new Convertite as a direct response to the loss of Santa Maria Maddalena delle Penitenti, since its closure Florence had been without a monastery of that nature although they were present in other Italian cities such as Pisa, Rome and Genoa.²¹ Pisa was a neighbour, rival, enemy and occasional ally, so local pride may have played a part. While the pious brothers of Santa Maria delle Laude never stated that their aim was to replace the Borgo Pinti house, Florence had been without a monastic alternative for prostitutes who wanted to leave the profession for a few years while the city's nearby rival had one, and the captains believed that there was a need for such an institution in their great city. They certainly believed that numerous Florentine women were effectively trapped in prostitution because there was no longer an institution to which they could escape. They explained their reasons for establishing the new monastery in a letter to the city priors:

quod cum plures et varie mulieres que hactenus corpus suum publice pro pretio numario meretricio more exposuerint Indistincte cunctus petentibus. Divina inspirationem redierint ad penitentiam et destiterint et desistere intendunt a facinoribus supradictis querentes agere penitentiam et dei misericordiam de commissis. Et per ipsos Capitaneos sollicite intenditur circa inpendendum eisdem mulieribus auxilium et favorem ut in bono proposito conserventur et ipsorum devotio continue recipiat incrementum.²²

[Since many and varied women who hitherto had exposed their bodies in public for a price, prostituting indiscriminately to all who asked, by Divine inspiration will have returned to penitence and will have ceased and intend to desist from the aforesaid evil deeds, seeking to do

penance, by God's mercy, for what they have committed and through the same Captains, intends, about offering help to those women and favour, so that they may maintain this good intention, and that devotion may attain continuous growth.]

This view that women found themselves trapped in prostitution, unable to leave of their own volition, echoes that expressed in the legislation of January 1319 which also aimed to facilitate women's exit from brothels.²³ The confraternity went a step further than the legislators by providing not only for a woman's removal from the brothel, but also for her spiritual welfare afterwards. While the priors had sought to solve the immediate problem of debt which trapped the women, it did little to ensure that poverty or exploitation did not force them back into the same situation again later. By offering a permanent, monastic, alternative to the situation which led those women into prostitution, the captains sought to ensure that the women who left prostitution, did not relapse into a sinful life.

The Piccione's letter to the Signoria seeking permission to build their monastery attests to the prior existence of their *spedale* on Via Chiara. It would seem likely that the location for the new monastery was chosen so it could be an extension of the hospital and that the nuns could staff it. The new monastery probably took the name of the saint to whom the existing *spedale* chapel was dedicated. Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–31) was a relatively new saint, canonised by Gregory IX in 1235, and was associated with hospitals, with many already dedicated to her by the 1330s.²⁴ If the Piccione had chosen to dedicate their *spedale* to her too, and then to establish a monastery next door, with a view to the nuns running the hospital, naming the monastery after the chapel saint makes sense. Elizabeth of Hungary was a penitent who dedicated her adult life to asceticism, but she was not otherwise associated with prostitutes nor with the Augustinians (rather with the Franciscans). I have not found any other Convertite monastery dedicated to St Elizabeth and other historians' work on the cults of Hungarian saints in Italy has not revealed a more compelling reason for the dedication.²⁵

The problem of poverty was widespread in late medieval Florence and contemporary definitions and attitudes merit attention here. Those who experienced *povertà* included a wide range of people, and contemporary authorities did not always draw sharp distinctions between groups. The 'poor of Christ' were the deserving poor, among them the blameless victims of hardship, such as accidents that led to physical disability. This group also included pilgrims and the religious poor such as mendicants.

Another group was made of those whose poverty was relative rather than absolute. They were often referred to as the *poveri vergognosi* (the shamed poor) and included anyone from nobles to middling merchants who lacked the resources to live in the state to which they had once been accustomed. Unable to bear the shame of begging, this group were considered particularly deserving of charity.²⁶ Another category, the miserable poor, contained those who were destitute, without food or belongings. This group is the most easily recognisable as 'the poor' and they were able to take advantage of public charity, given by institutions such as Orsanmichele (see later in this chapter), churches or obtained by begging. At the furthest end of the poverty spectrum were the outcast poor, whose condition was considered of their own making due to their evil lives. Gamblers, vagrants and prostitutes were in this category, despite the fact that, for some at least, their evil lives had been caused by poverty in the first place.

Poverty was common even among those in regular employment. Women were particularly vulnerable to dangerous poverty, through widowhood and abandonment as discussed in the previous chapter, and because they had fewer earning opportunities than men, lower pay, and in times of economic downturn, were the first to lose their jobs.²⁷ The precarious existence of the poor could easily lead to short-term prostitution, to make ends meet. Women alone, or married to men who were either unemployed or did not earn enough to support their families, may have had little alternative to selling their bodies. Even those employed may not have been able to make ends meet, particularly in times of crisis and heightened food prices. The *poveri vergognosi*, who were too proud to beg or accept public alms, and occupied by preserving the outward appearances of their higher status, were certainly too proud to resort to sex work. In fact, Archbishop Antonino of Florence (1389–1459) argued that Mary Magdalene could not have been a *meretrice* because she was '*ricca e nobile*' [rich and noble], which meant that her family would have prevented such a sin.²⁸ It is the working and the indigent poor, those who experienced or approached *egestas* [a lack of food and basic resources], who concern us here. After available resources of poor relief, from familial loans to confraternal charity, were exhausted, sex work may have been the only remaining option.

As well as the location of the *spedale*, the Oltrarno was an obvious place to locate a new monastery for repentant prostitutes. Although the surviving legal records which inform us about early fourteenth-century prostitution in the city indicate the presence of prostitutes on the north side of the Arno, in the parish of San Lorenzo and around the Palazzo

della Signoria specifically, prostitution occurred south of the river too. The area was poor and much of the population was made up of rural immigrants, labourers, artisans and artists.²⁹ The fourteenth century saw rising pressure on the costs of living, so it is likely that some women, in response to increasingly constrained circumstances, engaged in prostitution to make ends meet. Widows who had insufficient means to feed themselves and their families, and few options, may have prostituted themselves or their daughters.³⁰ Women and girls may have undertaken sex work, either voluntarily or under pressure from male relatives whose income no longer stretched far enough to support the family and needed to be supplemented. The varied circumstances, all exacerbated by poverty, which could lead to temporary or longer-term prostitution, were all abundant in the Oltrarno.

The widespread poverty of the Oltrarno is evident in the activities of another local confraternity. Some such groups only supported their own members but others, such as the Compagnia delle Brucciate [the Confraternity of the Roasted Chestnuts], based at the Church of San Frediano, also gave alms to the local poor more generally. The Brucciate was formed in late 1323 and restricted its almsgiving to the parish. Henderson has shown that the district was in great need throughout the fourteenth century and that between the Brucciate and city-wide charities, alms were given to households in all the major streets in the area, each containing inhabitants in severe need.³¹

Through the activities of the Brucciate, we can gain an important insight into confraternal charity in the neighbourhoods of the Oltrarno in the fourteenth century. Sant'Elisabetta stood on the northern limit of the parish of Ferza; its neighbours on the other side of Via San Benedetto (Via del Campuccio) were on the southernmost edge of the parish of San Frediano, in which the Brucciate operated. The two parishes were very similar in most respects. Indeed, in 1368 the Brucciate altered its statutes to include in its remit the whole ward of the Green Dragon and to draw its captains not only from San Frediano but also from the parish of Santa Maria Verzaia. This lay beside and beyond the city walls at the Porta San Frediano, at the western edge of the city and into the surrounding *contado*. This too was a poor neighbourhood, occupied largely by peasants, low-paid artisans and unskilled labourers, for whom financial hardship was familiar.³²

As well as the likely presence of prostitution in the area, locating Sant'Elisabetta here was a practical solution regardless of the *spedale*. It was close to Santo Spirito, the church in which the Piccione was based, and the friars from which would provide *cura monalium* to the new nuns, performing the religious offices at Sant'Elisabetta, hearing confession

and burying the dead. The Augustinian prior general Gregorio da Rimini recorded the arrangements for Sant'Elisabetta in 1358, and the nomination of specific friars who would attend. The friars required authorisation to enter the monastery. Gregorio recorded the absolution of Friar Phylipo who had been imprisoned for going to Sant'Elisabetta 'contra mandatum' [against our command]. The reason for his misbehaviour is not noted.³³ The friars continued to perform mass and other services for the convertite in the subsequent centuries.

The specific area selected for Sant'Elisabetta offered other practical advantages. Land at the edges of the city was cheaper and there was more room to build, especially after the old walls were dismantled. The number of women who became nuns rose in the early fourteenth century and many nunneries took advantage of the cheaper land at the outskirts of the city, close to the new walls.³⁴ This was especially true of mendicant communities of both sexes.³⁵ Some women's houses relocated from outside the walls for the added protection offered inside. Nunneries were often close together. For example, in the north of the city, there was a proliferation of nunneries on Via San Gallo, a long street leading to a city gate of the same name. In the south, Via San Pier Gattolino and the surrounding area, which included Via Chiara, similarly became a hub for nunneries, though the houses there tended to be less wealthy and prestigious than those on Via San Gallo.

Building Sant'Elisabetta does not seem to have been a lengthy process, suggesting that much of the fabric of the buildings which were to form the monastery was already in place. As we have seen, the earliest surviving record of the Piccione's intent to create the institution dates to 1329. In response, the Commune gave the captains permission to use stone from the recently demolished old walls and gates. The Piccione's letter of 1332 makes clear that they had identified the land on which the monastery was to be built, that they already owned it and that it was next to the *spedale*. They sought additional support from the priors to complete the monastic buildings to house the nuns. The complex was likely always intended to include the *spedale* chapel and possibly other buildings owned by the Piccione, but these details are not specified.³⁶

The date which Sant'Elisabetta opened its doors and accepted the first entrants is not clear. The letter from the Piccione to the Commune does make clear that the monastery did not yet have any residents in July 1332. The next extant record, a discussion of the Signoria preserved in the *provvisioni* of 24 September 1333, explains that the abbess and nuns of Sant'Elisabetta were undertaking sewing work to support themselves.³⁷ This places the opening sometime after July 1332 and before the end of

September the following year. If Strozzi is correct that the city granted the Piccione permission to use the stone in 1333, this does not necessarily preclude an earlier opening. We know that some of the buildings were already in place so if any could function as a dormitory, the monastery could have opened before the completion of the building work.

The records of Sant'Elisabetta are quiet immediately after its foundation, a period which includes the years 1338 to 1348 that Gene Brucker described as a 'decade of disaster' for Florence.³⁸ This was a period of change and crisis for the city but the effects on Sant'Elisabetta can only be speculated upon. For example, the effect of the dictatorship of Walter of Brienne, the Duke of Athens, between September 1342 and his overthrow only ten months later in July 1343, is unknown. Although his reign has been characterised as one of rigorous law enforcement, the chronicler Giovanni Villani (1280–1348) described the dissolute duke establishing and profiting from his own brothel in the city.³⁹ This may have introduced a period of permissiveness which reduced the number of prostitutes who decided to leave their profession and take the veil at Sant'Elisabetta; or conversely, that the increased number of licit prostitutes led to increased admissions to the monastery. We have no information on prostitution or Sant'Elisabetta with which to assess this. On the other hand, we can with some certainty assume that the 1348 plague had a significant effect on the Convertite as it did on the city as a whole. Another chronicler, Marchionne di Coppo Stefani (d. 1385) wrote that the priors declared that 96,000 people had died between March and October 1348.⁴⁰ There is no reason to think that Sant'Elisabetta was uniquely unscathed.

Despite the lack of evidence from the earliest years of Sant'Elisabetta's existence and the difficulty in building a picture of how the monastery functioned then, we can discern how it fitted into a wider pattern of poor relief, penance and charity in the first half of the fourteenth century. The monastery's roots were in the confraternal charity which was the cornerstone of late medieval philanthropy. It also drew on its links to the medieval hospital which provided care and shelter. It is more than likely that the Piccione's *spedale* provided shelter and spiritual services, perhaps including pilgrims on their way through the city on their way to or from Rome. Medical care was often a secondary concern at small hospitals like this and more commonly found in larger institutions such as Santa Maria Nuova on the other side of the Arno.⁴¹ This hospital was founded in 1288 and gradually expanded over the centuries. In 1329 there was an important extension of the women's cloister (the religious role emphasised by the adoption of the language of religious buildings).

Other monasteries for repentant prostitutes in Tuscany

Like the monastery's predecessor on Borgo Pinti, Sant'Elisabetta's two contemporary Tuscan counterparts both proved to be comparatively short-lived. In nearby Pistoia, two friars appealed for permission to create a monastery for repentant prostitutes in August 1334, following the donation of a house with a courtyard and some land from a woman named Bice who sought to remedy her own sins with a pious bequest.⁴² Like Sant'Elisabetta, Santa Maria Maddalena delle Convertite was located close to the city walls. On 22 March 1335, the city council agreed to donate one hundred *lire* for the restoration of Madonna Bice's house and other building work.⁴³ More funds, this time fifty *lire*, were sent to the abbess on 19 June 1335 in response to her petition so that the construction work could be completed.⁴⁴ The *provvisioni* of Pistoia describe several years of funding and support for Santa Maria Maddalena due to its extreme poverty, while other monasteries did not benefit from municipal support. The experience of poverty in the Pistoia Convertite parallels that of Sant'Elisabetta. However, unlike the latter, Santa Maria Maddalena did not survive. The suppression of this house has been dated to between 1383, when records show that it was visited by Bishop Andrea Franchi, and 1441, when it was not included in the list of Bishop Donato de' Medici's round of visitations.⁴⁵ However, the closure can be dated more precisely. Bishop Donato wrote to Sozomeno da Pistoia on 10 October 1438 requesting that he join him on a visit to the Convertite where, rumour had it, two of the nuns were pregnant.⁴⁶ This scandal may have precipitated the closure of the struggling monastery.

The second Tuscan contemporary of Sant'Elisabetta was the Convertite of Fiesole, 8km north of Florence. The monastery operated in the small, hilltop town overlooking Florence from 1345, but in 1377 moved to the city, to the Ospedale di S. Gherardo on Via San Gallo, where there were a number of monastic institutions.⁴⁷ It was administered by the *Fraternità di Maria Vergine della Pietà* of Fiesole, a company established for the purpose. However, the company was dissolved in 1378 and the monastery along with it after only a year on Via San Gallo.⁴⁸

Santa Maria Maddalena of Pistoia closed after around a hundred years and the Fiesolean Convertite after less than half that time. It is difficult to establish what was so different at Sant'Elisabetta in the fourteenth century that meant that it survived without municipal support when the others failed. Certainly, both the Fiesolean and Pistoian houses struggled economically. The latter made numerous appeals to the city council

for financial support and seems to have managed to survive until these requests began to be refused. The Fiesolean house could not outlive the liquidation of the fraternity established to manage it.

Numbers and location may have been driving factors for both these failed houses. Florence had a significantly higher population than the two smaller towns. This undoubtedly meant more business for prostitutes. Florence was a trading centre too, so there were always high numbers of visitors to the city: merchants, tradesmen and labourers from the *contado* and further afield. The records of the fifteenth century magistracy which managed legal prostitution in the city show that a significant portion of prostitutes' clients were not native Florentines, based on complaints made by and against the women.⁴⁹ Almost three quarters of the clientele which appeared in the sentencing records were not from Florence. Of course, there may have been higher rates of prosecution of foreigners than locals which mean the figures are not entirely representative. There was a significantly larger market in Florence than Pistoia and Fiesole. The latter in particular could likely only have sustained business for a few women in irregular prostitution. More prostitutes in and around Florence meant more women who might repent and a greater population which might donate alms to the monasteries.

This theory is supported by the fact that Sant'Elisabetta had a consistently higher population than most other female monastic houses in the city. The earliest record indicating the population of Sant'Elisabetta is from 1368 when the bishop of Florence distributed a large bequest to several male and female religious houses. It lists eighteen women's houses, holding a total of 202 nuns. Sant'Elisabetta had the highest population at twenty-five women.⁵⁰ The Pistoia Convertite, on the other hand, had only seven residents, including the abbess, in 1383.⁵¹ We do not have numbers for the Fiesolean Convertite. It is worth noting that not only was Sant'Elisabetta much larger than Santa Maria Maddalena, but one of the Sant'Elisabetta nuns named in 1368 was Soror Daria Vanis from Pistoia which may suggest a reluctance to go to her hometown Convertite.⁵²

Sant'Elisabetta and the city in the fourteenth century

The first record that survives regarding Sant'Elisabetta outside of the city council records is a notarised contract from Orsanmichele, dated 9 May 1349. Orsanmichele was the largest distributor of charity in Florence. It was originally a *laudesi* company like the Piccione, founded in 1291, and became the focus of huge numbers of pious donations when an

image of the Virgin was linked to miracles. A former grain store in which the image was located was rebuilt between 1337 and 1359 and turned into a church in 1380.⁵³ The company developed a system of almsgiving which split recipients into two groups: those it knew by name and recorded in its ledgers, who received a few *soldi* each on average; and the *poveri a minuto*, the unnamed poor who came every Saturday to receive a handout of a few *denari* each. The captains of Orsanmichele also distributed alms throughout the city and attempted to focus on those areas which were in the greatest need, based on the local knowledge of the captains who were selected from each quarter of the city. In the Oltrarno, the alms were focused on Borgo San Frediano and Via San Pier Gattolino. These were the main thoroughfares into the city from the west and south respectively and were places where the immigrant poor would have first settled on arrival. Via San Pier Gattolino led directly to Via Chiara and Sant'Elisabetta.

The 1349 contract is preserved in the *contratti* [contracts book] of Sant'Elisabetta and records a significant donation from Orsanmichele. It included a farm with a house in the parish of San Sepolcro di Monticelli, and various pieces of farmable land in the surrounding countryside.⁵⁴ The contract obliged Orsanmichele to act as conservator for the land and this established an ongoing relationship between the captains and the monastery. The workable land offered a potential source of income for the monastery. The parcels of land would be rented out and payment made, in full or in part, with produce. This was a common arrangement in the fourteenth century but left the monastery, like the poor in general, at the mercy of the weather and harvests, and short on cash. This would become increasingly difficult to manage as the population of Sant'Elisabetta grew and rents paid in kind were insufficient to feed the nuns. This shortage of cash, which continued throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was at the root of Sant'Elisabetta's financial difficulties.

A small number of other contracts detailing property acquired by Sant'Elisabetta survive from the later fourteenth century. In 1368, Ser Naldino di Nicholo degli Altorniri made a testamentary bequest of a significant amount of land in the parish of San Salvatore (in the hills to the south of the city). As in the case of the earlier donation of land from Orsanmichele, the greater part consisted of farmland, including a house and several additional parcels of arable land. In January 1375, Mona Lucia di Cechi of Perugia, then living in the parish of San Martino a Cozzi, south of Florence in the Val di Pesa, sold a house there with its contents to Suora Caterina di Gherardi di Martello di Pisa, a nun at Sant'Elisabetta. This house remained in the possession of Sant'Elisabetta until 1566 when the nuns' ownership was disputed.⁵⁵ These were all properties which

could be rented out, generating income (in cash or in kind) to support the Convertite. The evidence suggests that by 1368, Sant'Elisabetta owned three farms, a house and various plots of arable land but although this certainly would have provided an income, it was not guaranteed and not necessarily sufficient to provide for the largest female religious community in the city.

The priors of the city continued to struggle with the issue of prostitution to the mid-fourteenth century. A Podestà statute of 1355 reproduced virtually word for word the law of 1325.⁵⁶ However, the later text omits any mention of the brothel at Campoluccio, further evidence that it was either short-lived, gone within thirty years of being proposed or, more likely, never built. Despite the reiteration of the same prohibitions and penalties for prostitution, in practice, prosecutions were only pursued when there was a complicating factor such as proximity to a church or the endangerment of children. After the 1340s, the Podestà did not prosecute any cases of simple prostitution, only those in which there were additional crimes or complicating factors.⁵⁷ For example, in 1357, the *provvisioni* recorded that prostitutes had been evicted from their homes close to the monastery of Sant'Orsola.⁵⁸ Action was taken in this case due to the women's proximity to the nuns despite prostitution being prohibited anywhere within the walls. Another case was discussed by the priors in 1365. Relatives had reported the widow Mona Dada to authorities because, they claimed, her dishonest life put her two young daughters in danger. The girls were removed from their mother's care, but no action was taken against Mona Dada for her own illegal prostitution. Although the legislative position of prostitutes did not change, by the mid-century, women were not being prosecuted for prostitution alone, reflecting a degree of ambivalence on the part of the authorities.

The Florentine justice system showed a degree of sympathy to vulnerable women trying to make ends meet, however, it was not inclined to show leniency to others who profited from prostitution. A particularly egregious case came before the courts in 1370. Antonio di Ser Piero da Napoli had been convicted of multiple crimes in 1366, including holding his sister Masella in the brothel of the Malacucina in Florence and taking her earnings. The Chiasso della Malacucina had been the main centre of illegal prostitution in the city since at least the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁵⁹ Antonio was once again before the magistrates, this time asking for his case to be reconsidered and the penalty reduced. Authorities believed that Antonio had profited to the tune of 500 *lire* from the 300 men who had availed themselves of Masella's services.⁶⁰ Masella's unhappy career illustrates two important points about prostitution in Florence in the latter half of the fourteenth century. Firstly, that prostitution persisted

despite prohibitions and the threat of severe penalties, and that authorities were sometimes aware of active brothels. Secondly, that although Antonio had been convicted of various crimes in 1366, only those related to prostituting his sister were described during the 1370 reconsideration of his case. This suggests that these were considered the worst crimes and the reason for the length of his sentence. This follows the authorities' traditional hard line on pimping and procuring even during periods when they took a generally more permissive approach to prostitution itself. Indeed, in 1366 there was no action taken against the illegal Malacucina brothel or against Masella herself, who magistrates considered more a victim than a criminal. There is no indication that the courts sought to punish her despite the repetition of existing legislation made at around that time.⁶¹

Another concern which was acted upon was prostitutes' proximity not only to churches, as in the case of Sant'Orsola, but also to the seat of municipal government and in 1377, the priors banned prostitutes from living around the Palazzo della Signoria, the seat of the city's republican government.⁶² Prostitution was perceived as having a contaminating effect that could not be tolerated in areas of sacred or civic significance. The Signoria was, of course, an area to which visiting dignitaries would come and this prompted action to prevent shame being brought on the whole city. Again, prostitution was not permitted anywhere inside the walls, but this was only enforced in areas of religious or secular importance.

In 1378, the Signoria made further attempts to control prostitution by giving the Ufficiali della Grascia authority over prostitutes.⁶³ This body was primarily concerned with food supply but also regulated the activity of artisans and labourers who did not work in guild-regulated professions.⁶⁴ The Grascia's role in prostitution control was chiefly ensuring that prostitutes did not ply their trade close to religious buildings and municipal institutions. This change in the control of prostitution signalled a change in attitude towards it.⁶⁵ Up to then, the Podestà had overseen the enforcement of the prostitution legislation, however inconsistently it did so as it increasingly saw this as a less pressing issue. Moving control to a civic from a criminal magistracy indicates that city authorities were increasingly of the view that prostitution was not a threat to public order but more an unsavoury public service and commercial activity, in a similar manner to slaughterhouses and tanneries. This would also explain the low level of prosecutions.

A sumptuary statute of 1384 confirms that the ban on prostitution within the walls had been unofficially abandoned. As it was, the existing law banished prostitutes to the area beyond the walls, allowing them to enter the city on only two days of the week as long as they

did not work while they were there. This prohibition was forgotten in the sumptuary legislation which sought instead to segregate prostitutes through distinguishing dress.⁶⁶ This brought Florence into line with some other Italian cities where various measures were taken to ensure that prostitutes were easily and immediately identifiable. The Florentine legislation banned them from wearing *pianelle* [high-heeled slippers], but required them to wear gloves at all times and a small bell on their hats, so that not only were they visibly distinguished from decent women but also audibly.⁶⁷ This allowed prostitutes to enter the city unimpeded, provided they followed the clothing requirements, while ensuring that they remained separate from the rest of the citizen population.

Conclusion

Like most medieval cities, Florence found that legislation banning prostitution was easier to write than to enforce. During the fourteenth century, a slow move towards toleration can be seen. Officials ignored prostitution that was practised away from religious and municipal institutions, even when it was not otherwise hidden or particularly discreet. Only cases of egregious violations of the laws, such as that of Antonio and Masella, were pursued, while a blind eye was turned to straightforward cases. The unwillingness of magistrates to try cases without complicating factors indicates an unofficial attitude of toleration in the second half of the fourteenth century. This would culminate in official policy at the beginning of the fifteenth century which established the *Ufficiali dell'Onestà*, issuing in a new era of legalised and controlled prostitution inside the city walls.

This period of Sant'Elisabetta's history is often obscured by the paucity of surviving sources. Those few records which do survive give only a glimpse of the life and functioning of the monastery. This is certainly the product of the ravages of time and the vagaries of survival but may also reflect a paucity of records created in the first place. There may simply have been few donations or bequests of sufficient size to be worth recording, few purchases of land meriting notarised contracts. If internal records were kept at this time, they may have been lost to floods, or the paper and parchment later sold to boost the monastery's meagre coffers.

However, an important factor in the lack of early records is that the civic authorities took little interest in it while prostitution was illegal, generating few municipal records of Sant'Elisabetta after the letter of 1332

until the end of the fourteenth century. The city was subject to several regime changes: the despotism of the Duke of Athens in 1342–3; rule by the Popolo in 1343; oligarchy in 1348; a brief popular government after the Ciompi Revolt of 1378–82 which was in turn overthrown and replaced by oligarchy once again.⁶⁸ During this tumultuous period, the twenty-five poor former prostitutes in Sant'Elisabetta did not gain the attention of the city's rulers. This would change in subsequent years. Civic authorities would use Sant'Elisabetta in a variety of ways so that it became a vital social institution. The legalisation of prostitution in 1403 marked the beginning of a change in the relationship between Sant'Elisabetta and the city.

Notes

1. Carte Stroziane, Terza Serie, Pezzo 233, 'Raccolta di Memorie, fondazione, e Padronati di diverse Chiese, Monasterie, Spedale, Compagnie, e simili, fatta dal Senatore Carlo di Tommaso Strozzi', fol. 34v.
2. Robert Davidsohn, *Forschungen zur Geschichte von Florenz* (E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1908), 422. Davidsohn accepts Strozzi's information regarding Cardinal Orsini, citing another copy of the latter's history of Florentine churches from the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze.
3. Romolo Caggese et al., eds, *Statuti della Repubblica fiorentina II. Statuto del Podestà dell'anno 1325*, II (L.S. Olschki, 1999), 244–5.
4. Laura Ikins Stern, *The Criminal Law System of Medieval and Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), xi.
5. John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence 1200–1575* (Blackwell, 2008), 67.
6. Laura de Angelis, ed., *I Consigli della Repubblica fiorentina. Libri fabarum XIII e XIV (1326–1331)* (Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, 2000), 275–6. Quotation of Provv. 25, fol. 54r–v.
7. Angelis, *Consigli della Repubblica fiorentina*, 275–6. Quotation of Provv. 25, fol. 54r–v.
8. Paula Lois Spilner, 'Ut Civitas Amplietur – Studies in Florentine Urban Development, 1282–1400' (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1987), 116; Nicholas Terpstra, 'Sex and the Sacred: Negotiating Spatial and Sensory Boundaries in Renaissance Florence', *Radical History Review* 2015, no. 121 (2015): 74–5.
9. Giampaolo Francesconi et al., eds, *Le Provvisioni del Comune di Pistoia (Sec. XIV)*, vol. 1 (Pistoia, 2015), 32.
10. Giampaolo Francesconi et al., eds, *Le Provvisioni del Comune di Pistoia (Sec. XIV)*, vol. 2 (Pistoia, 2015), 488–9.
11. Gene Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence; a Documentary Study* (Harper, 1971), 191–2.
12. Thelma S. Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail, eds, *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe* (Cornell University Press, 2003).
13. Blake Wilson, *Music and Merchants – The Laudesi Companies of Republican Florence* (Clarendon Press, 1992), 33, 37.

14. For example, the story is briefly retold, without a source, by Sherrill Cohen: Sherrill Cohen, *The Evolution of Women's Asylums since 1500: From Refuges to Ex-Prostitutes to Shelters for Battered Women* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 37.
15. Frances Andrews, *The Other Friars: The Carmelite, Augustinian, Sack and Pied Friars in the Middle Ages* (Boydell, 2006), 129.
16. Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie storiche delle chiese fiorentine divise ne'suoi quartieri: 9. Quartiere di S. Spirito* (Viviani, 1761), 89.
17. Provvisioni Registri 26, fol. 9r.
18. Provv. 26, fols 8r–9r.
19. Acquisti e Doni, 45, Capitoli della Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laudi di Santo Spirito, 1621.
20. Provv. 26, fol. 9r.
21. Katherine L. Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 180.
22. Provv. 26, fol. 9r, 19 May 1332; also quoted in Acquisti e Doni, 45, unnumbered first pages.
23. Acquisti e Doni, 293, Provvisioni del 9 gennaio 1318. See [Chapter 1](#).
24. John Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul* (Yale University Press, 2006), 212.
25. Ottó Gecser, *The Feast and the Pulpit: Preachers, Sermons and the Cult of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, 1235–ca.1500* (Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi Sull'Alto Medioevo, 2012), 42.
26. For the *poveri vergognosi* in Italy up to the mid-sixteenth century, see Richard C. Trexler, 'Charity in the Defense of Urban Elites in the Italian Communes', in *The Rich, the Well Born and the Powerful: Elites and Upper Classes in History* by Frederic C. Jaher (University of Illinois Press, 1973); Samantha Hughes-Johnson, 'The *Poveri Vergognosi*: Fallen Nobility or an Ethical Abstraction Operating within the Boundaries Set by Poverty?', *Confraternitas* 28, no. 1 (2017): 3–15.
27. Olwen Hufton, 'Istruzione, Lavoro e Povertà', in *Monaca Moglie Serva Cortigiana: Vita e Immagine Delle Donne Tra Rinascimento e Controriforma* (Morgana Edizioni, 2001); Brian Pullan, *Tolerance, Regulation and Rescue: Dishonoured Women and Abandoned Children in Italy, 1300–1800* (Manchester University Press, 2016), 6.
28. Antoninus and Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Lettere di Sant'Antonino precedute dalla sua vita scritta da Vespasiano Fiorentino* (Tipografia Barbera, Bianchi e c., 1859), 113 quoted in Trexler, 'Charity in the Defense of Urban Elites in the Italian Communes', 71.
29. Nicholas A. Eckstein, *The District of the Green Dragon: Neighbourhood Life and Social Change in Renaissance Florence* (L.S. Olschki, 1995), 25–7.
30. Isabelle Chabot, 'Widowhood and Poverty in Late Medieval Florence', *Continuity and Change* 3, no. 02 (1988): 295.
31. John Henderson, 'The Parish and the Poor in Florence at the Time of the Black Death: The Case of S. Frediano', *Continuity and Change* 3, no. 02 (1988): 250–51.
32. Henderson, 'The Parish and the Poor'.
33. Gregorio da Rimini, *Gregorii de Arimino O.S.A. registrum generalatus: (1357–1358)*, ed. Alberic de Meijer, *Fontes historiae ordinis Sancti Augustini* (Institutum Historicum Augustinianum, 1976), 182–3, 318. With thanks to Frances Andrews for alerting me to this mention of Sant'Elisabetta.
34. Sharon Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 5.

35. George W. Dameron, *Florence and Its Church in the Age of Dante* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 45.
36. Provv. 26, fol. 9r.
37. Provv. 26, 56r.
38. Gene A. Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society, 1343–1378* (Princeton University Press, 1962), 3.
39. Giovanni Villani, *Cronica*, ed. G. Porta (Einaudi, 1991), 1438.
40. Marchionne di Coppo, *Istoria Fiorentina di Marchionne di Coppo* (1778), Rubric 635a.
41. Brian Pullan, 'Support and Redeem: Charity and Poor Relief in Italian Cities from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century', *Continuity and Change* 3, no. 02 (1988): 188.
42. Rita Feri, 'Il monastero di Santa Maria Maddalena o delle Convertite, Pistoia', *Bullettino storico pistoiese* a. XCIX, no. 3a s. n.XXXII (1997): 56.
43. Francesconi et al., *Provvisioni di Pistoia*, 1:181.
44. Francesconi et al., *Provvisioni di Pistoia*, 1:194.
45. Feri, 'Il monastero di Santa Maria Maddalena o delle Convertite, Pistoia', 61.
46. Guido Zaccagnini, 'Introduzione', in *Sozomeni pistoriensis presbyteri. Chronicon Universale (AA. 1411–1455). Raccolta degli storici italiani dal Cinquecento al Millecinquecento. Nuova edizione riveduta ampliata e corretta*, XVI, by Giosue Carducci and Vittorio Fiorini, *Rerum Italicarum scriptores* (Lapi, 1908), xvi.
47. *Provvisioni Registri* 65, n.d., fols 106r–107r.
48. Anna Benvenuti Papi, 'In Castro Poenitentiae': *Santità e Società Femminile Nell'Italia Medievale* (Herder, 1990), 74.
49. Richard C. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution in the Fifteenth Century: Patrons and Clients', in *The Women of Renaissance Florence* (Pegasus, 1998), 46.
50. Capitoli, Appendice 27, Registro Di Atti Di Processo e Di Mandati Fatti Di Monache Di Alcuni Monasteri Fiorentini, 1368, fols 2v–3r.
51. Feri, 'Il monastero di Santa Maria Maddalena o delle Convertite, Pistoia', 61.
52. Capitoli, Appendice 27, Registro Di Atti Di Processo e Di Mandati Fatti Di Monache Di Alcuni Monasteri Fiorentini, fol. 3r.
53. Henderson, 'The Parish and the Poor', 251.
54. CRSGF 126, 70 Contratti 1349–1621, A. No. 1.
55. CRSGF 126, 70 Contratti, B. No. 2.
56. Giulio Rezasco, 'Segno Delle Meretrici', *Giornale Ligustico* Anno 17 (1890): 164; Maria Serena Mazzi, *Prostitute e lenoni nella Firenze del Quattrocento* (Saggiatore, 1991), 197.
57. Lynn Marie Laufenberg, 'Women, Crime and Criminal Law in Fourteenth-Century Florence' (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2000), 369.
58. Provv 45, fol. 57r-v.
59. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution', 41.
60. Provv 58, fol. 158r-v.
61. Stern, *The Criminal Law System of Medieval and Renaissance Florence*, 4.
62. Acquisti e Doni, 292, Provv 42.
63. Ufficiali poi Magistrato della Grascia 1, fol. 28r.

64. Ann G. Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 28.
65. Terpstra, 'Sex and the Sacred', 87 n. 17.
66. Rezasco, 'Segno Delle Meretrici', 165.
67. Rezasco, 'Segno Delle Meretrici', 165.
68. Patrick Lantschner, 'Revolts and the Political Order of Cities in the Late Middle Ages', *Past & Present* 225, no. 1 (2014): 3–46.

Chapter 3

Legalised prostitution and funding repentance

The first quarter of the fifteenth century was a turning point in Florence's regulation of public morality.¹ Legislation was drawn up in 1403 that transferred responsibility for prostitution from the Grascia to a new magistracy set up for the purpose, the Ufficiali dell'Onestà. The Onestà were to enforce new regulations intended to control the city's sexual economy. This was followed by further attempts by the priors to legislate morality. After the Onestà, they set up three more new magistracies: one to oversee nunneries, one to prosecute male homosexual activity and one to investigate corruption in public office. The new legislative approach to prostitution and other matters of morality heralded a new era of civic interest in the monastery of Sant'Elisabetta, beginning in the middle of the century. This brought with it civic funding to support the convertite, but at the price of increased interference by the secular authorities, which is the focus of this chapter.

The legalisation of prostitution

The move to legalisation in the fifteenth century can be seen as a culmination of the tacit acceptance seen in the fourteenth. The aborted plan to create a municipal brothel at Campoluccio in the 1320s meant that illicit prostitution within the city walls continued. However, in 1403 the priors decided to reconsider the principle by creating an alternative municipal brothel, this time inside the walls.² This was an important distinction and brought permitted prostitution into the city proper and made the fifteenth-century legislation far more successful than previous attempts

to control the sex trade. Firstly, it allowed authorities to manage prostitution where the women and their clients already were, rather than forcing them into another area only to watch the practice creep back. Secondly, it allowed them to supervise the designated zone directly by locating it centrally and in the open and placing their offices nearby.

The new brothel seems not to have been a single building but rather a compound in which prostitutes were required to live and work.³ The brothel district was located in the centre of the city between the Palazzo della Signoria and the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. It was therefore right in the heart of the city, directly between the seats of civic and religious life, proximity to which had been such a concern in the previous century. Prostitution had been, to greater and lesser extents, accepted as inevitable in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; the change brought about in 1403 was to make a practice that had been quietly tolerated into one that was actively facilitated.

The central and visible location for the new brothel district suggests more than simple convenience though. Historians have questioned the true marginality of sex workers in late medieval and early modern cities.⁴ Many women who undertook this work did so because the structures of family and marriage upon which women usually depended had broken down, leaving them in dangerous precarity. We have seen that already by this time, Florentine legislation recognised the driving factor as poverty and not women's propensity for sin. For some women, prostitution offered the most financially lucrative form of work available to them as women's jobs were typically lower paid and more precarious than men's. Natal and marital families may not have provided sufficient financial security and could break down. This left women vulnerable and outside of the expected social structures. For other women, sex work offered a degree of independence difficult to achieve otherwise. It allowed them to earn and to remain in control of their earnings, as pimps were consistently prosecuted and banished. This too left women beyond the control of a husband, brother or father. Even when this was the situation preferred by one of the women, it left her on the margins of a society that was designed to prevent female independence. The restriction of prostitution to the area beyond the walls literally and figuratively put the prostitute on the margins. The relocation of the permitted area to the centre changed that marginality, at least in the literal, physical sense.

The new Florentine strategy was markedly different to the various legislative approaches to prostitution other northern and central Italian cities adopted in the period. Most similar was fourteenth-century Ferrara which permitted prostitution with strict spatial limitations within the city walls, controlled by the existing Ufficio delle Bollette (office of tariffs

and licences).⁵ In Venice at the same time, prostitution was tolerated but not facilitated. There the Signori di Notte had investigated sexual matters including rape and infringements of the rules governing prostitution, alongside other, non-sexual, crimes such as theft, assault and desertion from galleys, since the mid-thirteenth century.⁶ Failed attempts to expel prostitutes from the city in 1266 and 1314 led to an alternative strategy of containing prostitution in a designated zone by the Rialto from 1460.⁷ As their Florentine counterparts had, the Venetian authorities approved a brothel district in a central location, not far from the seat of civic power. Closer to Florence, Pistoia passively permitted prostitution and taxed prostitutes.

The new Florentine legislation was explained not as a move to bring the inevitable practice of prostitution under the control, and taxation, of the city, but as a measure to counter male homosexual activity. The founding statutes of the Onestà state unambiguously the new magistrates' role: '*Nefandi facinoris ipsique nature contrarij et enormis criminis putredinem abhorrentes, quale est vitium sodomiticum, et volentes in hoc pro extirpatione huiusmodi criminis in augmentum aliorum ordinamentorum possetenus providere . . . et quilibet eorum, tempore iuramenti eorum officii teneantur et debeant nominatim et expresse jurare prosequi sodomitas*' [Abhorring the stench of the nefarious [and] unnatural evil and enormous crime which is the vice of sodomy, and wishing to extirpate this type of crime, to establish an augmentation of other ordinances . . . and each [office-bearer] at the time of swearing their oath of office are bound to namely and explicitly swear to prosecute sodomites].⁸ By 1403 the Signoria of Florence was concerned that the city population had not recovered as quickly as others from the ravages of the Black Death.⁹ Many blamed the low marriage rate. The average age for first marriage was thirty-four years old for men in Florence, which was unusually high.¹⁰ Additionally, a not insignificant portion of men remained lifelong bachelors. All of these unmarried men without legitimate children, the priors believed, were further discouraged from marriage by a combination of the availability of male sexual partners, and women's extravagant and expensive taste in clothes. The early fifteenth-century legislators set out to make marriage a more appealing prospect to men.

The Ufficiali dell'Onestà were therefore established not because prostitution was seen as a problem that required municipal intervention, but as a response to what the priors believed was the more pressing problem: male homosexual activity, which they saw as bringing ruin and dishonour to the city. It was the 'vice of sodomy' that prompted the formation of the Onestà, and which is prominent in its founding text. The same text was repeated in 1415 when the statutes were revised, underscoring

that sodomy, not heterosexual fornication, was still the crime the Onestà was designed to curb.¹¹ While the background to this was to increase the population by encouraging marriage, and especially earlier marriage, the priors were also acting to reduce the city's widespread reputation for male homosexuality. The Bolognese nobleman and chronicler Matteo de' Griffoni (1351–1426) blamed the devastating Arno flood of 1333 on sodomy that went unpunished in Florence: *'Et dictum fuit comuniter per omnes quod hoc fuit iudicium Dei propter magna peccata Florentinorum et maxime propter horrendum et inefabile [sic] peccatum sodomiticum, quod fortiter regnat in eis'* [And it is said that it was common for all that this judgement was made by God because of the great sin of the Florentines and most of all for the horrible and unspeakable sin of sodomy which reigns strongly in them].¹² In 1376, the Mantuan emissary to Avignon, Cristoforo da Piacenza, reported that Pope Gregory XI (1370–78) had referred to the two most abominable sins, for both of which the Florentines had predilections. The first, the Pope said, was usury, but the second was *'ita abominabile [sic]'* [so abominable] that he dared not say it.¹³ It was certainly sodomy to which he referred.¹⁴ In law, the crime of sodomy held the same status as that of murder and its abolition, the magistrates claimed, would free the city and its inhabitants 'from all commotion, wars ended, plague abolished, enemy plots curbed, and its cities turned towards good government and praiseworthy conduct.'¹⁵

Designating a brothel district in the city made a group of women sexually available to Florentine men and so the priors turned to the second issue dissuading those men from honourable marriage: expensive fashions. In 1406, they authorised the election of a body to revise the existing sumptuary laws, and again in 1420 and 1427.¹⁶ In 1433, the priors complained *'quod non est nature conforme ut tantis sumptuosis ornamentis se hornent cum ipsi homines propter hoc desstant [sic] a matrimonii copula propter incomportabiles sumptus'* [it is not in conformity with nature that [women] adorn themselves with such expensive ornaments when on account of this men may cease [making] the marriage bond on account of the insupportable expense].¹⁷ Imposing sumptuary restrictions on particularly women's clothing would, they hoped, bring this expense to within acceptable limits and would no longer deter men from marrying. Attempts to control and restrict women's clothing went back at least as far as 1345 in response to the extravagant dress which had become fashionable under the Duke of Athens' brief rule.¹⁸ However, the repeated revisions and authorisation of *gabelles* through which the rich could evade the regulations show that control of clothing and other displays of wealth was easier in theory than practice.

The Ufficiali dell'Onestà were tasked with filling the brothel by recruiting prostitutes from outside of Florence. Recruiting Florentine women was self-defeating if honourable marriages were the aim of the endeavour. A roll-call of the women working in the brothel district taken on 9 May 1436 indicates the women's varied origins. As well as numerous northern Italian cities, such as Venice, Trieste and Padua, a wide range of foreign countries was represented. Women were described as being from France, Flanders, Brabant, Prussia and Greece.¹⁹ We cannot know with certainty that these names truly represent the women's origins, or if they had simply adopted names which sounded exotic or which reflected a stereotypical trait they possessed (e.g. blonde women claiming to be from northern Europe). In September 1436, the recruitment of foreign women became official Onestà policy. The Ufficiali were tasked with '*conducendo et conduci faciendo feminas et meretrices ad civitatem florentinam*' [bringing and causing women and prostitutes to be brought to the city of Florence].²⁰

Prostitution in Florence was, as Richard Trexler described, 'an institution of the *sanus publicus*' that contemporaries believed had an important social function.²¹ Its facilitation was based on encouraging heterosexuality. Ultimately, the priors sought to increase marriage rates and population on the one hand by redoubling their efforts against sodomy, and on the other, by facilitating men's access to sexually available women, encouraging those men to turn from the pleasures of homosexual intercourse to those of heterosexual intercourse, and then to exercise that pleasure within marriage. The prostitutes employed for the latter purpose were not the intended brides: this was not meant as civic assistance for the remission of sins promised by Pope Innocent at the end of the twelfth century. The prostitutes were there to serve the civic purpose of encouraging men to marry other, good, women and hence to increase the legitimate birth rate. They acted as a counter-measure to a sin graver than fornication and considered not only a crime but also a threat to the city itself.

That prostitutes were now employed in the service of the city's bigger project of increasing the population had the effect of a public and societal role for them. This placed them in a position of playing a central part in governmental strategy without fully removing their marginality. They remained subject to social exclusion and limitations on the places they could live and work. They did, however, gain some important privileges and entitlements that will be discussed below and which some other Florentine women may have occasionally envied.

While prostitution was brought into the centre of the city, it was only permissible in the designated brothel district and unlike previous geographical restrictions, this was enforced. For example, in 1407, the widow

Antonia, nicknamed La Gazzella [the gazelle], was prosecuted for keeping a '*publicum postribulum et meretrices, eorum corporea prebens libidini pro pecuniario lucro*' [a public brothel and prostitutes, their bodies offered in licentiousness for pecuniary gain].²² It is unlikely that this prosecution would have been brought before 1403 as Antonia's brothel was not close to a religious house nor did it pose danger to a minor. In 1407, her brothel was still outside of the authorised area, but this was no longer tolerated. The legal civic brothel area paradoxically led to tighter controls on prostitution than the outright ban had.

The legalisation of prostitution did not have an immediate effect on Sant'Elisabetta. The new policy changed the site of toleration from outside of the city to its heart, but prostitution remained a dishonourable activity from which decent women had to be protected. Legalisation in no way remitted its sinful nature and Sant'Elisabetta continued to serve as a place of repentance for those who sought it. There is no indication in municipal records that the 1403 legislation led to civic interest in Sant'Elisabetta in the first half of the fifteenth century. Nor is it possible to assess the monastery's financial circumstances at that time, and whether the monastery was in the precarious financial position it would later claim, since so few records from the monastery survive from the early fifteenth century. However, the new municipal approaches to both prostitution and sodomy would lead to the monastery receiving municipal funding later in the century.

The Officiali dell'Onestà

English language studies of Florentine prostitution in the last thirty years have understood the change in policy of 1403 in terms heavily influenced by the work of John Brackett, who argued that the Onestà ultimately aimed to exploit prostitutes to fund Sant'Elisabetta.²³ However, the financial contribution made by the women registered with the Onestà was low, even after increases and the much later introduction of wealth brackets for fees owed. The Onestà's income from registered prostitutes had first to pay the magistrates' salaries and expenses, leaving little profit: only a token gesture towards civic funding. Critically, the connection between the Onestà and Sant'Elisabetta was not established until the mid-sixteenth century. Instead, the Onestà fulfilled a more pragmatic role in the city's moralising project: facilitating access to sexually available women, collecting enough revenue from them to cover the costs of registering them and managing the locations of sex work. All of this was done, according to the Onestà's founding statutes, to counter male homosexual

activity (*'sodomiticum'*), not to solve the problem of prostitution, nor the city's financial worries, nor to shore up Sant'Elisabetta.²⁴ We can only view the Onestà as cynically financially exploitative if we take that view of all taxation.

The Onestà's statutes were encoded at its inception and are dated to its establishment on 24 April 1403.²⁵ These were updated first in 1415 and at several times over the following centuries until 1747.²⁶ The magistracy operated through a mixture of incentives and enforcement. In addition to requiring registration and punishing unregistered women working in the city, it offered certain benefits to induce prostitutes to register. This allowed it to maintain some control of the sex trade, but often in tension with the women who worked in it. Only registered women were allowed to work as *meretrici* inside the walls of the city: a doubtlessly larger market than that of the traditional areas to which tolerated but not officially sanctioned prostitution was relegated. Indeed, the brothel district was located at a market, the Mercato Vecchio, where meat was already bought and sold.

Fees and registration

Registration with the Onestà meant the purchase of a short-term licence to work as a prostitute in the city. This necessitated repurchase every few weeks to maintain that status.²⁷ Ending a prostitute's registration was more difficult and simply not purchasing further licences did not remove a woman from its rolls. Other workers could resign their professional memberships at will: a baker could cease to be a baker with little to impede him; but a woman who ceased to pay for licences and stopped working as a prostitute remained listed as one. Registration conferred a persistent identity as a prostitute for those women. Brackett has argued that this identity was both negative and public and therefore prostitutes resisted registration.²⁸ This was likely the case for women who took up prostitution in the short term as a stopgap or temporary measure to make ends meet in times of hardship. Registration assumed long-term employment as a prostitute in the brothel and was neither helpful nor appealing to women who planned to stop doing it as soon as they could. For such clandestine prostitutes, the registration fees did not convey sufficient additional benefits to those they enjoyed as 'decent women'. By hiding their prostitution activities, they were able to ignore the sumptuary and spatial restrictions imposed on registered prostitutes.

The Onestà thus served to professionalise prostitution and make it a recognised and regulated economic activity within the city. From the

beginning, the statutes that legalised prostitution did so only for women registered and clandestine prostitution remained illegal. This acted to restrict the profession to those who paid their dues to the officers, in effectively the same way as traditional guilds restricted practice of their professions to their own members. Although somewhat more complex for the Onestà, it reflected similar principles.

Inducements

Registration with the Onestà created a group of professional women, a group from which men were excluded as male prostitution was never permitted. These women were uniquely placed in Florentine society, with some useful privileges that were not available to any other women. They often lived outside of the control of husbands, fathers or other male relatives, as procuring of any sort remained illegal and pimps were prosecuted. The city, in the form of the Ufficiali dell'Onestà, did not step in to fill that void of patriarchal control, and prostitutes retained an unusually high level of independence even after registration. The Onestà's rules brought with them a raft of inducements to register, and the women's independence is nowhere more apparent than their access to legal resources.

The most significant benefit of registration with the Onestà was access to legal redress in the Onestà court. While the Ufficiali dell'Onestà could proceed against a prostitute *ex officio*, prostitutes themselves could bring cases to the Onestà court and appear before it as plaintiffs, defendants or witnesses. They became the only women in Florence who could bring legal action on their own behalf, without the intercession of a male intermediary. All other women needed to obtain the consent of a *mundualdus*, a male guardian who acted on their behalf, usually a relative, to enter legal contracts, and a *procurator*, who required legal knowledge, if they were to be involved in judicial processes.²⁹ This was a significant break with tradition: Florentine statute insisted that a woman required a male guardian to approve her legal transactions because she lacked the 'legitimate *persona* to act in law.'³⁰

The decision to dispense with the requirement for registered prostitutes to have a male legal agent act on their behalf was practical: few, if any, would have had appropriately qualified male relatives, and pimps may have tried to use the position to disguise their illicit role. However, prostitutes were not the only women who found themselves in the former situation. Pragmatic or not, the effect was to confer upon prostitutes a legal personhood that other Florentine women did not have and had no way of gaining. The records of the Onestà court demonstrate that the

women took advantage of their unique legal status.³¹ They made complaints and brought cases against one another and in significant numbers against pimps and customers.³²

Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the role of the Onestà was modified, with some powers increased, others restricted, in attempts to find an effective way to manage prostitution. Decades of tacit toleration and weak enforcement of the pre-1403 regulations meant that some of the city's prostitutes had become ungovernable, accustomed as many were to living beyond male control. In the longer term, the prostitutes' unwillingness to fully obey the Onestà is reflected in some of changes made to the regulations. For example, when it was found that the women could not be corralled into living and working exclusively in the brothel district, the rules were adapted to allow them to live on certain other streets throughout the city. In 1425, the Onestà magistrates were given powers to arrest those with outstanding fees and fines. In 1460, along with freeing registered prostitutes from foreign creditors, the Onestà also freed them from some of the traditional sumptuary legislation. They no longer had to wear the hood and bells synonymous with the profession in Florence since the previous century.³³ The Onestà may have seen this as a way to allow the prostitutes to make themselves more attractive to the men they were supposed to be luring away from homosexual relationships.³⁴ Freeing the women from foreign creditors may have helped to reduce the instances of women forced into prostitution by poverty, without depriving Florentine creditors. Successive governments thus used both repression (penalties for those who failed to register) and encouragement (the benefits of registration) to try to make prostitutes register and come under the Onestà's control.

Rather than an engine of exploitation of Florence's female prostitutes, the Onestà aimed to curb male sodomy by facilitating heterosexual sex by sacrificing the virtue of a relatively small number of women in the interests of the salvation of many men and of population growth. In 1436, this sacrifice of virtue was refined again. Although in 1403, the priors had taken the attitude that legal and managed prostitution in the city was preferable to an unenforceable ban, it was quite another thing to contribute to the corruption of Florentine women. They therefore tasked the Ufficiali dell'Onestà with recruiting foreign women to fill the brothel: '*conducendo et conduci faciendo feminas et meretrices ad civitatem florentianam*' [bringing and causing women and prostitutes to be brought to the city of Florence].³⁵

The Onestà was not created to solve the city's fiscal problems, nor to ensure Sant'Elisabetta's economic survival. The establishment of the financial relationship between the Onestà and Sant'Elisabetta was

established much later: the Signoria did not originally intend that the taxation of prostitutes would fund the Convertite. In fact, the Florentine authorities sought several other ways of funding Sant'Elisabetta through other magistracies throughout the fifteenth and into the sixteenth centuries, only looking to the Onestà 150 years after it was introduced. Instead, the Onestà was primarily concerned with overseeing licit prostitution in the city and enforcing the delimitations imposed by the statutes: to facilitate the accessibility of heterosexual sex while preventing it from getting out of control.

The money collected from the prostitutes was insignificant and is better considered taxation on professional membership than an attempt to make a meaningful contribution to city coffers. It has parallels with the guilds which governed other trades in the city, though it did not represent its members in the way that the trades guilds did, nor consult with them. It did this by using features of the guild model. Guilds provided collective strength to those who lacked the supportive power of a wealthy family, and groups which were inadequately represented in civic life used the guilds to advance their interests.³⁶ The Onestà's innovative approach was a development of the city's earlier attempts to manage prostitution. Prior to the institution of the Onestà, the Grascia had governed Florentine prostitution before the 1403 legislation.³⁷ It also had jurisdiction over other artisans and labourers who did not work in guild-related professions.³⁸ This indicates a shift in attitude in the last quarter of the fourteenth century to consider prostitution as a low skilled trade, but a trade nevertheless.³⁹

In 1409, the priors ordered the statutes of the city be revised and rewritten, a process which concluded in 1415.⁴⁰ The revisions were naturally wide-ranging and included all of the statutes of the Ufficiali dell'Onestà. Indeed, Maria Serena Mazzi argues that the Onestà only became fully operational in 1415.⁴¹ The relevant revised legislation was copied into the Onestà's own statute books, in both Latin and Italian.⁴² The new statutes reiterated the purpose of the Onestà: '*inhonestas magis per minus remove cupientes*' [desiring to remove a greater shamefulfulness with a lesser].⁴³ Although the text does not specify the nature of the *inhonesta magis*, it must be understood as sodomy. This had been the justification given in 1403 for the first municipal brothel and the priors continued to attempt to eliminate male homosexuality throughout the fifteenth century.

Evidently, the priors believed that the Mercato Vecchio brothel was achieving some success in this respect because they decided to expand the legalised brothel system, and again, justified this with the same

reasoning of replacing a greater sin with a lesser one. In order to facilitate access to sexually available women further, in 1415, they agreed to fund the building of two additional brothels: '*Ordinare seu ordinari seu fieri facere duo loca publica, videlicet duo postribula in civitate Florentie ultra postribulum ad presens in civitate predicta existens*' [To order or have ordered, or to have built two public places, namely two brothels in the city of Florence, in addition to the brothel at present existing in the city].⁴⁴

The proposed locations for the new brothels were close to the churches of Santa Croce in the east and Santo Spirito on the south bank of the Arno, where they believed prostitution could be '*pallietur*' [better concealed]. They specified that the brothels should be hidden for the honour and decency of the city and their neighbours. Unlike the Mercato Vecchio brothel, these new locations were on the outskirts of the city, close to gates (the Porta alla Croce and the Torre della Zecca in the east, and the Porta San Niccolò and the Porta Romana in the south). These were areas where immigrants settled and through which visitors to the city would pass.⁴⁵ The phrase used by the priors is revealing: these areas were selected because prostitution could be concealed there. This is despite the areas being close to major entry and exit points of the city, and may indicate that these liminal zones, between city and countryside, populated with newcomers and foreigners, and on the peripheries of the sacred zone delineated by the walls, were busy and chaotic places where good (wealthy) Florentines rarely lived and in which unsavoury activities could continue unnoticed. The provision goes on to allocate the substantial sum of 1,000 florins '*pro perfectione et edificatione ac ordinatione*' [for finishing, building and regulating] the new brothels.⁴⁶ Despite this, neither of the two new brothels were ever built. The reason is not known; they are simply not mentioned again. The Mercato Vecchio remained the only place in which prostitution was permitted until the mid-sixteenth century.

While some of the Onestà's regulations softened over time, often in response to prostitutes' unwillingness to conform, others hardened. In 1463, the penalties listed for blasphemy, fraud, theft or engaging in sex acts *contra naturam* were increased to include the use of the newly installed pillory outside the Onestà office.⁴⁷ By then, the offices were located on the ground floor of the rectory of the church of San Cristoforo, opposite the Baptistry, and a more prominent location than previously.⁴⁸ While Brackett argued that the pillory was an attempt 'to strike terror into the hearts of prostitutes' and evidence that the Onestà was struggling to effectively control prostitution, this discounts some important parallels.⁴⁹

Only five years earlier, in 1458, Por Santa Maria, the silk workers' guild, had introduced a pillory for delinquents.⁵⁰ This form of punishment was not common in Florence but magistrates were at liberty to use it: there was a pillory at the Mercato Vecchio.⁵¹ The Ufficiali di Notte, tasked with enforcing the sodomy laws, also made use of it for various offences.⁵² While the Por Santa Maria pillory has been interpreted as evidence of declining relations between guild authorities and its workers, it was not a tool of terror. Indeed, the Onestà likely resorted to it for similar reasons as the consuls of the silk workers' guild: those subject to its punishments were too poor to pay a fine.⁵³

Public punishments were not unusual for blasphemy convictions, although typically a fine was imposed in the first instance. If the fine was not paid in the allotted time, the guilty party was stripped naked and whipped. Similarly, theft carried fines first, but capital punishment for non-payment and for recidivists. In the late fourteenth century, prostitutes made up a significant portion of the women charged with blasphemy before the secular courts.⁵⁴ Registered prostitutes were not, therefore, subject to more severe punishments than other Florentines, but were sometimes treated more leniently by the Onestà court, with the pillory replacing public whipping and hanging. The first instance of the use of the Onestà pillory was not until 1483 and was to punish a man who had beaten a woman.⁵⁵ It was not, then, a means by which to terrorise prostitutes into good behaviour at all, but with its milder penalties, may have acted as another inducement to register.

The Onestà attempted to control the business of prostitution by enforcing several restrictions on it. In requiring registration and conformity with the regulations on location, dress and hours of business, the Onestà conferred duties upon registered prostitutes.⁵⁶ The licences sold by the Onestà were in effect registration fees for the professionalisation of prostitution. They also offered benefits to those who registered, which were supplemented as time went on. Registered prostitutes could bring cases before the Onestà court and appear before it as a plaintiff, witness or defendant. Records show that the women took advantage of this right, making complaints against pimps, customers and one another.⁵⁷ This access to legal redress provided prostitutes with a level of legal protection unique among Florence's female population, the rest of which was only rarely able to appear as a witness and never permitted to bring a case on her own behalf. The Onestà thus provided an important benefit and level of protection, establishing its duty towards those who registered in a parallel manner to that of professional guilds. It controlled the legitimate practice of the profession just as guilds monopolised the professions that they managed.

Further legislation of morality in the early fifteenth century

The Onestà was the first of four new magistracies instituted in the early fifteenth century with jurisdiction over matters of morality. The Onestà were followed by the Conservatori dell'Onestà dei Monasteri in 1421 (to preserve the honour of the city's nuns); the Conservatori delle Leggi in 1429 (primarily tasked with investigating corruption in office); and the Ufficiali di Notte in 1432 (to prosecute male homosexual activity).⁵⁸ Three of the new offices (not including the Conservatori delle Leggi) were part of a strategy which ultimately sought to increase the population through marriage and legitimate offspring. Prostitution provided a licit opportunity for men to be (hetero)sexually active before marriage, which was necessary to support a system of late first marriage for men. The prosecution of sodomy was the inverse of this: a stick to its carrot. It aimed to eliminate homosexual behaviour which threatened marriage and birth rates. Even nuns and the preservation of their honour ultimately supported the aim of increasing the population. Nunneries served to reduce the number of daughters a family was required to dower, allowing a lower number of better marriages and so facilitating endogamy.⁵⁹

The priors took a further step to facilitate legitimate marriage, and by extension to increase the birth rate, by creating the Monte delle Doti in 1425. This fund was intended to serve two purposes: to stimulate marriage rates by offsetting the expense of a girl's marriage; and to finance the public debt. The Doti allowed fathers to make an investment which would mature after seven and a half or fifteen years to provide a dowry for their daughters. The fund initially discouraged monastic placements by paying the return only if the girl consummated a marriage. Monachization defeated the Doti's primary aim. Similarly, the investment reverted to the civic treasury should the girl die before marriage.⁶⁰ Partly as a result of these limitations, the Doti was not initially successful, with only two deposits made in its first year and no further deposits until 1429.⁶¹ It was only in 1433 that the fund became a popular way for families to manage the costs of dowering daughters. Public disinterest was resolved after a series of reforms: after April 1433, investors were able to recover their deposit if the girl died prematurely; and after 1437 deposits were also refunded for girls who became nuns.⁶²

In 1432, the city established the last of the four moral magistracies: the Ufficiali di Notte.⁶³ These men were charged with the prosecution of sodomy. Sodomy could refer to any number of sexual practices deemed 'contrary to nature' but the Notte were expected to concentrate their

efforts on sexual activity between men. Their aims ran parallel to those of the Onestà. The Notte were established as a response to calls for more efficient prosecution of sodomy from the beginning of the fifteenth century. The existing judicial apparatus had failed to tackle homosexual behaviour and the few prosecutions that were brought prior to 1432 were often unsuccessful.⁶⁴ The new legislation to be enforced by the Notte was more lenient than before. First offences were punished by fines of fifty florins, increasing with subsequent convictions. This was a huge sum, but a significant reduction from the previous penalty of £1,000.⁶⁵ So stiff were the earlier penalties, in fact, that they had the effect of discouraging denunciations as many believed them to be too severe, particularly since failure to pay the hefty fine within ten days would lead to execution by burning.⁶⁶ The new regime overseen by the Notte, with its reduced penalties and more efficient bureaucracy saw prosecutions and convictions soar. Rocke estimates that in the seventy years in which the Notte operated, between 15,000 and 16,000 individuals were implicated in the crime of sodomy, and 3,000 convicted.⁶⁷ This was pragmatism at work and should not be misconstrued as tolerance.⁶⁸ Reducing penalties and offering immunity from prosecution to those who turned themselves in was not because of changing attitudes to male homosexual behaviour; but to better allow officials to control an activity that they recognised they could no more eradicate than they could prostitution. Regardless of the stated aims of the original legislation, in practice, a similar tactic was adopted for sodomy: since prohibition had failed, the Signoria sought instead to control and tax.⁶⁹

Both the Onestà and the Notte were radical breaks with previous legal approaches to their respective targets. They were both, however, in keeping with previous uneven enforcement of legislation which was seen by some as overly severe or impractical. In both cases, the practices were illegal and subject to harsh penalties, but prosecutions were rare. The new magistracies took parallel, if contrasting, approaches. The Onestà sought to control prostitution by legalising it and requiring compliance by registered prostitutes on a variety of matters. The Notte sought to counter sodomy by reducing penalties, and in so doing, encourage denunciation and self-denunciation in what Rocke describes as 'its strategy of "benevolent" but more effective control.'⁷⁰ It was a pragmatic response to the preceding decades of unofficial tolerance, designed to limit the practice more efficiently. Sodomy ultimately proved to be as impossible to eliminate as prostitution, but priors felt strongly enough that the previous low levels of prosecution should not lead to legalisation and zoning but to a revised and more efficient approach to prosecution.

Sant'Elisabetta and the Piccione spedale

It took some years before the effects of these new civic policies were felt at Sant'Elisabetta. The Convertite in its first hundred years received little attention from the municipal authorities. The nuns continued to operate the spedale under the auspices of the Compagnia di S. Maria delle Laudi. The most detailed evidence that survives about the spedale is an inventory from 1444. Then, the Piccione still ran the hospital, though they referred to it as the *ispedale delle Convertite*.⁷¹ The convertite had been providing day-to-day care for the Piccione's spedale for over a century by the time this inventory was taken and it establishes almost everything we know about the nuns' provision of sociomedical care.

The inventory lists the goods and possessions of the hospital room by room, starting with the spedale itself, through the portico, the *saletta*, the *spedalingo's* [hospital overseer or manager] room, the kitchen and finally the sacristy. This indicates that it was of moderate size, with twelve beds, of which only three were *buono* but all of which had mattresses, blankets and linen. The contents of the spedale itself are predictably mostly bedding but there are also *chandelieri* [candlesticks], and altar dressings for the *tabernacholeto* [little tabernacle]. The *spedalingo's* room was modestly furnished; there are a few items, and some are described as *vecchio e rotto* [old and broken]. Similarly, the kitchen contained a *cassonaccio . . . vecchio* [an old, poor quality chest] and a *forzieraccio vecchio* [an old, poor quality strong box].⁷² The religious items and furnishings of the spedale proper (the area in which patients would rest) are not described as being in poor condition but there is an overall impression from the inventory that, behind the scenes, in the kitchen and *spedalingo's* room, fittings were old and decaying. The sacristy was well-furnished but modestly so: there was a chalice and paten of silver, but the other items are made of wood and cloth without indication of value.

While this document provides a useful view of the contents and furnishings of the hospital in 1444, it also raises several questions. The Piccione do not give a reason for taking stock at that point. It may have been routine, though no other such inventories survive; it may have been done because there was no, or no up-to-date, inventory of the company's possessions there; it may have had a specific but undisclosed purpose. The inventorying of goods did not immediately precede the sale of the hospital to Sant'Elisabetta as this happened some sixty years later. The inventory shows that a *spedalingo* was employed, meaning that the convertite did not manage the hospital independently of the Piccione at that time.

By 1444, however, the only link between the Piccione and the monastery they founded on Via Chiara that can be discerned is the spedale.

There is no indication in the records of either the company or the Convertite of any ongoing relationship beyond the running of the hospital. Within a century, then, the relationship between Sant'Elisabetta and its founders had waned or broken down, likely contributing to the former's difficult financial situation in the fifteenth century and beyond. An absence of patrons, and the financial stability they brought, left the crowded monastery in need of aid if it was to survive.

The beginning of civic funding of Sant'Elisabetta

The start of the city's interest in Sant'Elisabetta can be dated with some precision to 1447, over forty years after the legalisation of prostitution. The facilitation of the conversion of prostitutes was, therefore, fundamentally separate from the municipal sanctioning of prostitution in the city. The former was a religious exercise, the latter a function of civic policy: a profession that served the Florentine state. In 1447, however, the city began to take a direct interest in the monastery for former prostitutes. The city had previously acquiesced to requests from nuns in need though on a less systematic basis than it would for Sant'Elisabetta. In 1442, the abbess of Le Murate, Scholastica Rondinelli, repeatedly petitioned the Signoria for aid. She was successful in obtaining a grant worth 30 *lire* to cover the cost of communal gabelles. In 1450, she persuaded the priors to increase this to 150 *lire*. However, this was not money paid to Le Murate directly; it was an accounting exercise that transferred funds from one city account to another.⁷³ The Signoria seemed content to agree measures that made no or only notional difference to their bottom line.

Although the Onestà predated the Notte and had a more obvious connection to the Convertite as the former controlled the profession from which the latter's inhabitants were drawn, it was the Notte that first had a formalised financial relationship with Sant'Elisabetta. From 11 March 1447, the Ufficiali di Notte were obligated to send a portion of the fines collected to the Convertite, along with donations of flour, meat and wine. The priors' decision to provide this income to Sant'Elisabetta was reproduced in the monastery's own records, copied verbatim from the Provvisioni, indicating its importance to Sant'Elisabetta.⁷⁴ This means of supporting Sant'Elisabetta was extended in 1455: it was agreed that because many of the men who owed fines to the Notte were poor, three quarters of their outstanding debt would be forgiven if the remaining part was paid to the Convertite.⁷⁵ Three years later in 1450, the Notte was allowed to renegotiate all the debts it was owed if it gave the proceeds to the monastery.⁷⁶ The Onestà and the Convertite did not form a similar relationship until 1553.

The financial arrangement in which profits from the Notte supported Sant'Elisabetta allowed the city authorities to use the proceeds of sin to serve their wider moralistic aims. Prostitution served the city by, ultimately, encouraging marriage, but fornication was sinful and it was in the priors' interests to support an institution that offered prostitutes a means by which they could leave sin and dedicate their lives to repentance. As male homosexuality was not tolerated, there was no equivalent institution for repentant male sex workers, but using a significant portion of the Notte's income to fund the Convertite allowed it to also serve the city. The money from the Notte was the first instance of Sant'Elisabetta receiving civic funding after the initial donation of stone in the 1330s. The model of diverting money from a magistracy to the Convertite would continue in different forms until the first half of the seventeenth century. In 1447 the Florentine authorities began concerted efforts to ensure that Sant'Elisabetta survived and stayed true to its original purpose of reforming prostitutes.

The same day as the Notte was instructed to start sending money to Sant'Elisabetta, the civic priors authorities appointed the Captains of Orsanmichele to be the monastery's *operai*.⁷⁷ The records of Orsanmichele show that these decisions were taken simultaneously and not coincidentally. The reason given is explained as: '*religiose et devote mulieres moniales que dicuntur delle Convertite sunt valde indigentes*' [the religious and devout monastic women who are called 'of the Convertite' are very much in need].⁷⁸ Sant'Elisabetta was to be assigned some of the fines raised by the Notte, and to be overseen by Orsanmichele, '*pro conservatione dicti monasterii*' [for the conservation of the said monastery].⁷⁹ Orsanmichele, as we have seen, began its relationship with Sant'Elisabetta in 1349, perhaps even earlier, when it made a significant donation of land to the new monastery.⁸⁰ The 1447 decision to make the captains lay administrators of the monastery put Sant'Elisabetta under the direction of Florence's most important almsgiver. Combined with the money and victuals that the Ufficiali di Notte were to send, this was the first significant attempt by the Signoria to support the Convertite directly.

The use of the proceeds of crime to fund an institution in need must have been considered sufficiently successful as to merit repetition. In 1456, the city priors ordered that an additional 10 per cent be added to the fees payable by prisoners which was to be sent to the Ospedale degli Innocenti.⁸¹ The Innocenti was in a similar financial situation to Sant'Elisabetta as regards solvency, and similarly, the priors did not want to see that important institution fail. The Innocenti appealed to the Signoria again in 1460 in words which echoed Sant'Elisabetta's pleas: the hospital was struggling due to the great number of children who had been left there. As with Sant'Elisabetta, support was given.⁸²

Silk work at Sant'Elisabetta (or, the city helps those who help themselves)

The money that made its way to Sant'Elisabetta from the Notte was not the nuns' only income. As well as some rents and donations, there is evidence from later in 1447 that the convertite were employed by Tommaso di Luigi Ridolfi's company. Ridolfi was a *battiloro*, a gold beater who manufactured gold leaf and the thin sheets of gold and silver that were used to make gold and silver thread for expensive fabrics.⁸³ The *battilori* relied on the silk trade and were members of the Por Santa Maria guild (also called the Arte della Seta in recognition of the influence of the silk manufacturers).⁸⁴ The silk trade was expanding in the 1440s, when Ridolfi employed some nuns at Sant'Elisabetta, and the expansion continued into the second half of the fifteenth century.⁸⁵ It was common for *battilori* to employ nuns. They supplied them with skeins of silk thread and thin sheets of gold that the nuns cut into fine strips. These strips were then painstakingly wound around the silk thread to make the valuable metallic thread. Occasionally, the *battilori* would pay a *forbichaio* [scissor-smith] to go to nunneries and sharpen the sisters' scissors.⁸⁶ Up to three quarters of the gold thread produced in Florence was made by nuns.⁸⁷

Ridolfi's account book starts in November 1447 and shows continued employment of nuns until it ends in 1450.⁸⁸ He contracted out this work to a number of houses: Sant'Elisabetta, Le Murate, Santa Monaca, the Portico (Santa Maria della Disciplina), San Miniato, San Martino, San Gaggio and the 'suore di Ripoli' (San Jacopo di Ripoli on Via della Scala in the west of the city). The majority of his business was with the nuns of Le Murate, Santa Monaca and Sant'Elisabetta, who undertook 33 per cent, 16.9 per cent and 11 per cent respectively.⁸⁹ Le Murate and Sant'Elisabetta were obvious choices for Ridolfi: both were large and so presented a potentially significant available workforce. Le Murate housed 36 nuns in 1439 and 124 by 1456.⁹⁰ Ridolfi did not record any work contracted to non-religious women and instead seems to have preferred to employ nuns. He gave work to nuns of various orders, across the city rather than local to his shop on Via Pellicceria near the centre, with no reasons given for his selection but was likely led by the practicalities of business and available labour.

It is not clear when Ridolfi's employment of the convertite began. His records at the end of 1447 do not suggest that it was a new arrangement so it quite possibly began before the priors' financial intervention in March of that year. This suggests that although their manufacture of gold thread was a more lucrative source of income than other unskilled or semi-skilled

work available to the Sant'Elisabetta nuns, such as spinning silk thread, it was not sufficient to keep them.⁹¹ The funding from the Notta, including as it did food and wine, was intended to supplement their wage labour and not to replace it. There are no records of the convertite working like this between April 1450, when Ridolfi's surviving account book ends, and the mid-sixteenth century, when a similar account book from another *battiloro* records his employment of the convertite. However, it is likely that the nuns continued to undertake the production of gold thread in the intervening period.

The origins of the fifteenth-century convertite nuns: foreign prostitutes and local women

A contract of 27 June 1459 lists the nuns at Sant'Elisabetta.⁹² Seventeen women were in residence at that time and the list indicates possible places of origin for nine of them. Of the nine, four were from Florence and one from Santa Maria Impruneta (about nine kilometres south of the city); the remaining four were from outside of the city. The abbess, Suora Elisabetta Giovanna was from Flanders. A further two nuns, Suore Piera Giovanna and Chiara Giuglielmi are noted as 'de Francia' and the fourth, Suora Angela Cechi, is described as 'de Castro Sancti Johannis', probably Castro San Giovanni in the Valdarno, about fifty kilometres from Florence. This means that in 1459, almost a quarter, perhaps more since we do not know where eight women were from, of the nuns at Sant'Elisabetta were not native Florentines. The list is, of course, indicative of the women's origins and does not conclusively prove where they came from, but if it is accurate, there was a high level of non-Florentine women.

When compared to the origins of prostitutes working in Florence in the mid-fifteenth century, there is a correlation. Although no register of prostitutes survives from this period, other records show that in the early years of the brothel, the women who worked there were mostly born outside of Florence.⁹³ This changed over the course of the fifteenth century but indicates that the initial stage after the new legislation, prostitution immigration was common in Florence. Many of the immigrant prostitutes were from Northern Europe, particularly Germany and the Low Countries, although this dropped from 13.6 per cent in 1436 to only 6.5 per cent in the period 1451–61. Abbess Elisabetta may have been a member of this group prior to taking the veil at Sant'Elisabetta. There is no further surviving biographical information about her that sheds light on how and when she arrived in Florence or at Sant'Elisabetta. The two French

convertite suggest a similar correlation: French women made up between 9.3 per cent and 20 per cent of the women in the brothel in the first half of the century.⁹⁴

These numbers broadly reflect the population at Sant'Elisabetta in as far as it can be ascertained with the few records that survive indicating the women's origins. There was, though, a higher proportion of Florentine women at Sant'Elisabetta than there was working as prostitutes in Florence. This may indicate that a significant number of women returned to their native city after working as a prostitute elsewhere. The relatively high number of women from Flanders and France at Sant'Elisabetta also indicates that the monastery had kept true to its original purpose of providing a monastic refuge from prostitution, rather than admitting large numbers of non-prostitute women. Similar houses often faced influxes of girls from modest mercantile backgrounds as monastic dowries at Convertite monasteries tended to be lower than those of other houses. This could cause problems for the houses as their purpose became diluted.⁹⁵

The constitutions of Sant'Elisabetta permitted one type of entry other than repentant prostitute though.⁹⁶ In the instructions for the election of a new abbess, there is allowance for a nun from a different Augustinian monastery to be brought in to fulfil the role if a Sant'Elisabetta nun cannot be selected. This practice may be how a small number of 'noble and gentlewomen' came to be resident in the monastery for repentant prostitutes. Benedetto d'Albizo, Sant'Elisabetta's *procuratore* in the early seventeenth century, compiled a list of such women who had entered Sant'Elisabetta between 1455 and the date of writing, 1620: '*Nota di tutte le monache Nobili, et Gentildonne che si ritrovavano nel nostro venerando Monistero sotto il titolo di Sta Elisabetta Regina di Ungheria, et di Sta Maria Maddalena detto delle Convertite*' [Note of all the nuns [who were] nobles and gentlewomen that were found in our venerable monastery under the title of St Elizabeth, Queen of Hungary, and St Mary Magdalene, called the Convertite].⁹⁷ D'Albizo lists forty-three women but it is unclear if this list is complete. The earliest are Abbess Alessandra, a '*Donna di Gran fama di santita e visse in questo santo Uffitio circa anni 22 p[er] che stavano a vita*' [lady of great fame for holiness and lived in this holy office around twenty-two years because she stayed for life] and Suora Eufemia, who both arrived in 1455. Before 1455 either no well-born women entered Sant'Elisabetta or their names had been lost by 1620. There is then a gap of almost thirty years before the next name on the list, Suora Jacopa di Taddeo Gaddi in 1482. It is difficult to draw many conclusions regarding these well-born women based on D'Albizo's list due to the low number over a long period of time. Abbess Alessandra may have moved to

Sant'Elisabetta from another Augustinian house to become abbess under the terms laid out in the constitutions, and Suora Eufemia arriving in the same year may simply be a coincidence. However, if any of these women came from another religious house, D'Albizo did not mention it in his list.

Also in 1455, the monastery made new financial arrangements with other institutions. The hospital of Santa Maria Nuova was '*obbligato al nostro monasterio di dare ogni anno in perpetuo per un certo legato fiorini uno l'anno, e staia 12 grano ogni anno*' [obligated to our monastery to give every year in perpetuity for a certain bequest one florin a year and twelve *staia* of grain every year].⁹⁸ The text is preserved in a later copy in the monastery's *ricordi*, which refers to other records for more detail, but these have not survived and so the details of the bequest that led to Santa Maria Nuova providing Sant'Elisabetta with annual money and grain is unknown. The same year, the monastery noted that it had to pay Santo Spirito for performing the divine office for two feasts, those of St Elizabeth and St Mary Magdalene. An account book from Santo Spirito for the end of the century shows the relationship between the friars and the Convertite continued. The nuns paid for various services, mostly celebration of the feasts of St Elizabeth of Hungary and St Mary Magdalene. In 1495 and 1498, the nuns paid for services for the feast of St Sebastian, patron of the plague-stricken.⁹⁹ There was a minor outbreak of plague in 1497–8 but this period was otherwise relatively free of epidemics.¹⁰⁰

Pages from a fifteenth-century *ricordi* incorporated into D'Albizo's seventeenth-century volume show a variety of rents received, such as that on the monastery's farm at San Martino, or the farm at Castel Fiorentino (both in the countryside to the south of the city). The latter paid in produce: grain, spelt, nuts and peas. An account from the same section, undated but also clearly part of the 1455–6 accounts, lists an inheritance of two and a half *staia* of grain, and three and a half *staia* of beans.¹⁰¹ These sorts of arrangements – bequests, donations and rents due – continued throughout the period, and were recorded in similar, fragmentary form. Many refer to other now-lost account books but indicate that the nature of these transactions remained essentially the same: small amounts of money paid and owed; much of the monastery's income was in the form of grain and produce from its tenant farmers. This was still a common practice and not unique to Sant'Elisabetta, but with low financial resources and no wealthy patrons, the nuns of Sant'Elisabetta were particularly susceptible to this variable income, dependent as it was on crop yields.

These fragmentary records give us a glimpse of the complex financial interactions between Sant'Elisabetta and other institutions. Income that the nuns received, in cash or in kind, had to cover the necessities of life and

also fund the performance of religious ceremonies which had to be conducted by male religious. It highlights the nature of the monastery's income: as well as the portion of the Notte's fines, which would have been irregular sums determined by the level of prosecutions and fines paid, the monastery received a patchwork of rents, bequests and charitable donations to supplement the nuns' earnings, all of which were subject to fluctuations beyond the monastery's control. The position of Sant'Elisabetta therefore remained somewhat more precarious than other monasteries as income, both in cash and in kind, fluctuated month to month, quarter to quarter, and without the familial networks upon which other nunneries could call in lean times.

The surviving records do not provide evidence of Sant'Elisabetta receiving charitable contributions through their *operai*, the Captains of Orsanmichele. This, of course, does not mean that none were received, but on 9 October 1458, the priors transferred responsibility for the Convertite to the Arte dei Medici e Speziali.¹⁰² The guild of doctors and apothecaries was tasked with the '*cura, gubernatio et protectio et defensio*' [care, governance and protection and defence] of Sant'Elisabetta.¹⁰³ This change had the effect of transferring the lay governance of Sant'Elisabetta from religious, charitable bodies removed from municipal government (first the Piccione, then Orsanmichele) to a secular group involved in city governance as a major guild. The guilds also ran charitable organisations with religious purposes, but this was secondary to their secular functions.

Conclusion

Throughout the fifteenth century, the priors of Florence attempted to legislate moral matters with the ultimate aim of stimulating population growth. This programme began in 1403 with the legalisation of prostitution, within a demarked zone at the centre of the city. This was a radical departure from previous policies which had banished prostitution to areas beyond the walls. The Ufficiali dell'Onestà were established to register prostitutes and manage the city's sexual commerce. In order to do this, they adopted a model which provided incentives to register as well as the threat of prosecution and fines for those who worked as prostitutes without registering and buying the necessary licences. The priors applied the same principle of establishing magistracies with direct responsibility to other areas of moral concern: the honour of nuns, homosexual activity between men and corruption in civic office. Only the Onestà offered advantages to members; the others functioned as traditional judicial bodies.

This was a transitional period for Sant'Elisabetta. The nuns continued to operate the Piccione's spedale, providing care to the poor and to

pilgrims. However, the relationship between the monastery and the confraternity seems to have waned, leaving the nuns without a long-term patron. The incomplete accounts from the middle of the fifteenth century reveal a patchwork of donations, most of them irregular or one-off. The convertite, like many other nuns in the city, undertook paid work to support themselves. However, this income does not appear to have been sufficient to keep them and combined with the absence of a stable patron or patronage network to draw upon, Sant'Elisabetta remained in a precarious financial situation of significant enough concern to prompt the civic authorities to intervene.

The new moral magistracies were in their lasting forms by 1433 but the new approach would not directly affect Sant'Elisabetta until the middle of the century. The priors' interest in Sant'Elisabetta is evident from March 1447, when the Ufficiali di Notte were required to turn over a portion of their fines and gifts of victuals to the Convertite, and the Captains of Orsanmichele were made *operai* of the monastery. This municipal involvement in Sant'Elisabetta set a precedent that developed and increased in subsequent years. The expansions of the provision of financial support from the Notte, and the move to draw Sant'Elisabetta closer to municipal authority by handing over its lay governance to one of the major guilds, demonstrates an increasing civic interest in the monastery which was not evident prior to the middle of the fifteenth century and which continued in various forms for the next 200 years.

Notes

1. Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 19; Sharon Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 172–3.
2. Ufficiali dell'Onestà, 1, Statuti 1403–1597, fols 3v–15v.
3. Richard C. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution in the Fifteenth Century: Patrons and Clients', in *The Women of Renaissance Florence* (Pegasus, 1998), 41–2; Nicholas Terpstra, 'Sex and the Sacred: Negotiating Spatial and Sensory Boundaries in Renaissance Florence', *Radical History Review* 2015, no. 121 (2015): 76.
4. Erik Spindler, 'Were Medieval Prostitutes Marginals? Evidence from Sluis, 1387–1440', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire* 87, no. 2 (2009): 239–72.
5. Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, 'The Topography of Prostitution in Renaissance Ferrara', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 60, no. 4 (2001): 403–4.
6. Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 4–5.
7. John K. Brackett, 'The Florentine Onestà and the Control of Prostitution, 1403–1680', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 24, no. 2 (1993): 297; Guido Ruggiero, *Binding*

Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance (Oxford University Press, 1993), 48–9; David Chambers et al., eds, *Venice: A Documentary History, 1450–1630* (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 120–23.

8. Onestà, 1, fol. 18r.

9. Maria Serena Mazzi, *Prostitute e lenoni nella Firenze del Quattrocento* (Saggiatore, 1991), 157–9; Sherrill Cohen, *The Evolution of Women's Asylums since 1500: From Refuges to Ex-Prostitutes to Shelters for Battered Women* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 43; Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution', 32.

10. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (Yale University Press, 1985), 210.

11. *Statuta populi et communis Florentiae: publica auctoritate, collecta, castigata et praeposita anno salutis MCCCCXV*. (Michaellem Kluch, 1783), 3:41.

12. Matthaei de Griffonibus, 'Memoriale Historicum de Rebus Bononiensium', in *Rerum italicarum scriptores: raccolta degli storici italiani dal cinquecento al millecinquecento*, XVIII, Part 2, by Giosuè Carducci and Vittorio Fiorini (S. Lapi, 1902), 43; see also Mazzi, *Prostitute e lenoni*, 146–7.

13. Arturo Serge, 'I dispacci di Cristofaro da Piacenza, procuratore mantovano alla corte pontificale', in *Archivio storico italiano*, 5th series (Florence, 1909), 43:85.

14. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 3.

15. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 20. Quotation from the Giudice degli Apelli e Nullità, 79.

16. Ronald Eugene Rainey, 'Sumptuary Legislation in Renaissance Florence' (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1985), 652–3. Rainey's thesis remains the most comprehensive account of sumptuary legislation in Florence from the fourteenth to sixteenth century.

17. Rainey, 'Sumptuary Legislation in Renaissance Florence', 763. Transcript of Deliberazioni del Signori e Collegi, Ordinaria Autorità 42, fol. 5v–6r.

18. Rainey, 'Sumptuary Legislation in Renaissance Florence', 80.

19. Miscellanea Repubblicana, 33/6, 1436, fols 4v–5v.

20. Misc. Repubblicana, 33/6, fol. 13v.

21. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution', 34.

22. Acquisti e Doni, 293. Quotation from Prov. 97.

23. Brackett, 'The Florentine Onestà and the Control of Prostitution, 1403–1680', 273–300.

24. Onestà 1, fol. 18r.

25. Onestà, 1, fols 3r–15v.

26. Onestà, 3, Statuti 1577–1754.

27. Onestà 1, fols 3r–4r.

28. Brackett, 'The Florentine Onestà and the Control of Prostitution, 1403–1680', 273.

29. Thomas Kuehn, 'Cum Consensu Mundualdi: Legal Guardianship of Women in Quattrocento Florence', *Viator* 13 (1982): 311.

30. Biagio di Marcone (mid-fourteenth century) quoted in Thomas Kuehn, 'Cum Consensu Mundualdi: Legal Guardianship of Women in Quattrocento Florence', *Viator* 13 (1982): 310.

31. Misc. Repubblicana, 33/6; Ufficiali dell'Onestà, 2, Condanne 1441–1523.

32. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution', 52.
33. Onestà, 1, fol. 14v.
34. Rosita Levi Pisetzky, *Storia del costume in Italia* (Istituto editoriale italiano, 1964), 2:173. Statutes from Lucca explained freeing prostitutes from some sumptuary rules as this made them more attractive and so they acted as a better counter-sodomy measure.
35. Misc. Repubblicana, 33/6, fol. 13v. Entry dated 28 September 1432.
36. John M. Najemy, 'Guild Republicanism in Trecento Florence: The Successes and Ultimate Failure of Corporate Politics', *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (1979): 55–7.
37. Ufficiali poi Magistrato della Grascia 1, fol. 28r, October 1377.
38. Terpstra, 'Sex and the Sacred', 87 n.14.
39. Ann G. Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 28; Terpstra, 'Sex and the Sacred', 75.
40. Lorenzo Tanzini, 'Gli statuti fiorentini del 1409–1415: problemi di politica e diritto', *Reti Medievali Rivista* 3, no. 2 (2002): 9.
41. Mazzi, *Prostituite e lenoni*, 200–10.
42. Onestà, 1, fols 8r–9 bis. (Pages misnumbered in the original and renumbered later, hence '9 bis' here.)
43. Onestà, 1, fol. 8r.
44. Onestà, 1, fols 8r–8v. Copy of Provv. 105, fols. 248r–248v.
45. On Santo Spirito and the Oltrarno, see Nicholas A. Eckstein, *The District of the Green Dragon: Neighbourhood Life and Social Change in Renaissance Florence* (L.S. Olschki, 1995).
46. Onestà, 1, fol. 8v.
47. Onestà, 1, fol. 14r.
48. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution', 41.
49. Brackett, 'The Florentine Onestà and the Control of Prostitution, 1403–1680', 289.
50. Samuel Kline Cohn, *The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence* (Elsevier, 2013), 159.
51. John K. Brackett, *Criminal Justice and Crime in Late Renaissance Florence, 1537–1609* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 68.
52. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 237–40.
53. Raymond de Roover, 'Labor Conditions in Florence around 1400: Theory, Policy and Reality', in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, by Nicolai Rubenstein (Faber and Faber, 1968), 293.
54. Lynn Marie Laufenberg, 'Women, Crime and Criminal Law in Fourteenth-Century Florence' (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2000), 88–96 and 256–8.
55. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution', 41 n.35.
56. Onestà, 1, fols 3r–8v.
57. Onestà, 2; Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution'.
58. Samuel Kline Cohn, *Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 175 n.26.

59. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 172–3.
60. Alan S. Morrison et al., 'Life Cycle Events in 15th Century Florence: Records of the Monte Delle Doti', *American Journal of Epidemiology* 106, no. 6 (1977): 487–8.
61. Julius Kirshner and Anthony Molho, 'The Dowry Fund and the Marriage Market in Early Quattrocento Florence', *The Journal of Modern History* 50, no. 3 (1978): 407.
62. Alan S. Morrison et al., 'Epidemics in Renaissance Florence', *American Journal of Public Health* 75, no. 5 (1985): 528.
63. In 1433, the Conservatori dell'Onestà dei Monasteri and the Notte were merged into the Ufficiali di Notte e Conservatori dell'Onestà dei Monasteri (commonly referred to as the Ufficiali di Notte).
64. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 45–6.
65. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 51.
66. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 53. There may have been analogous problems with the severe punishments prescribed for prostitutes in the 1325 statutes, which may have similarly made people reluctant to make accusations.
67. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 47.
68. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 53.
69. Onestà, 1, fol. 17r.
70. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 57.
71. Compagnia di S. Maria delle Laudi e Santo Spirito detta del Piccione, 78, fol. 2r.
72. S. Maria delle Laudi, 78, fol. 2r.
73. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 102–3.
74. Provvisioni Registri 137, fol. 318r-v, 11 March 1447; CRS GF 126, 70 Contratti 1349–1621. Contract numbered 'C No.3', dated 11 March 1447.
75. Provvisioni Registri 146, fols 301r, 24 December 1447, 377r, 28 February 1456; Provvisioni Registri 147, fol. 12v, 15 April 1456.
76. Provvisioni Registri 148, fol. 441v, 21 February 1458.
77. Capitani di Orsanmichele, 1, fols p. 76r–77r.
78. Orsanmichele, 1, fol. 76r.
79. Orsanmichele, 1, fol. 76r.
80. CRS GF 126, 70 Contratti. Contract numbered A No. 1, dated 9 May 1349.
81. Philip Gavitt, *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: The Ospedale Degli Innocenti, 1410–1536* (University of Michigan Press, 1990), 84–5.
82. Gavitt, *Charity and Children*, 85.
83. Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 325.
84. Carole Collier Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes, and Fine Clothing* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 19–20.
85. Goldthwaite, *Economy*, 325.
86. Bruno Dini, *Saggi su una economia-mondo: Firenze e l'Italia fra Mediterraneo ed Europa (secc. XIII–XVI)* (Pacini, 1995), 108.
87. Goldthwaite, *Economy*, 325.
88. Carte Stroziane, Quinta Serie, Pezzo 1744.
89. Dini, *Saggi su una economia-mondo*, 108.

90. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 20.
91. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 128.
92. CRSGF 126, 70 Contratti. Contract numbered D No. 4, 27 June 1459.
93. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution', 31–9.
94. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution', 36.
95. See Lucia Ferrante, 'Honor Regained: Women in the Casa Del Soccorso Di San Paolo in Sixteenth-Century Bologna', in *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 46–72.
96. Nicola Mattioli, ed., *Antologia Agostiniana Volume 3: Fra Giovanni da Salerno: dell'Ordine romitano di S. Agostino del secolo XIV e le sue opere volgari inedite* (Nabu, 2013).
97. CRSGF 126, 62 Ricordi 1349–1621, fol. 183r.
98. CRSGF 126, 62 Ricordi 1349–1621, fol. 2r.
99. Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse dal Governo Francese, 122 (Santo Spirito), fol. 57r.
100. Morrison et al., 'Epidemics in Renaissance Florence'.
101. CRSGF 126, 62 Ricordi 1349–1621, fols 25v–28r.
102. Arte dei Medici e Speziali, 201, 1374–1611, fols 21r–22v; CRSGF 126, 70 Contratti, after contract numbered B No. 2, dated 9 October 1458.
103. CRSGF 126, 70 Contratti, after contract numbered B No. 2, dated 9 October 1458.

Chapter 4

Municipal funding and increased interference

The late republic was a period of increasing municipal interest in Sant'Elisabetta starting in the middle of the fifteenth century when the priors ordered support of the monastery from the Ufficiali di Notte. Against a backdrop of civic unrest and regime change at the turn of the sixteenth century, the municipal authorities continued to show special interest in the Convertite beyond that which they showed to other female religious houses in the city. The period from 1469 to 1512 was one of vast changes to Florence's political landscape.

Lorenzo de' Medici (1469–92) succeeded his father Pietro as *de facto* ruler of Florence in 1469, aged only twenty, and consolidated the power that his grandfather Cosimo il Vecchio had held. Lorenzo used a similar system of alliances and patronage as his predecessors and held on to power despite significant external challenges, including the 1478 Pazzi Conspiracy which claimed the life of his younger brother Giuliano, and, ultimately, consolidated Lorenzo's control of the city by facilitating the expulsion or execution of his most prominent rivals.¹ A skilled politician, he had little interest in the family bank which had been struggling since the 1460s and continued to decline under his rule.

Following the usual Medici pattern of competent ruler succeeded by a feckless heir, Piero the Unfortunate (1472–1503) succeeded Lorenzo but was deposed in 1494 after Charles VIII of France invaded Italy. Unable to follow in his father's footsteps and turn a difficult situation around, he fled the city and finally drowned in a river in 1503. His exile paved the way for the theocracy of Savonarola (1494–8). Although ruling only briefly, Savonarola cast a long shadow over the city for many years after

his execution.² The Medici were concerned about the dead friar's influence well into the sixteenth century.³ The final decade of the republic, under Piero Soderini, ended in 1512 when the Medici were restored and any hopes of reviving the republic were finally quashed.

Sant'Elisabetta continued to receive funding from various civic sources from 1447 onwards, although the nature of that support changed over the subsequent century. On several occasions the authorities were sufficiently worried about the women's plight that they stepped in to shore up the monastery's finances directly. They provided support in the form of alms and donations, portions of the money collected by city magistracies and exemptions from taxes (most often salt taxes, the *gabelle del sale*). However, the ad hoc provision of relief in the form of victuals (from rents, and from the Notte between 1446 and 1455) and the unpredictable sums of money from the Notte and then other magistracies was not sufficient to keep Sant'Elisabetta afloat, and the authorities sought a longer-term solution. During the period of the late republic, the city began more concerted efforts to support Sant'Elisabetta financially, to keep it open and functioning as a refuge for repentant prostitutes. These efforts led to an unusually high level of municipal interest in the operation of the monastery. Consequently, this increased civic interest paradoxically led to the monastery's use by government bodies as a middle way between prison and pardon for those Sherrill Cohen described as 'anomalous women', in violation of the purpose of the monastery that the authorities sought to preserve, undermining the very reason that the city provided funding in the first place.⁴

Poverty and civic relief

The civic authorities' concern about the poverty at Sant'Elisabetta, evident from the mid-fifteenth century, continued into the sixteenth and led to various attempts to relieve the Convertite's hardship. Although claims of poverty were a common refrain from monastic houses and welfare institutions, they were often true. Sources from the mid-fifteenth century onwards support the convertite's claims about the monastery's financial need and indicate that the municipal authorities believed that the nuns faced serious financial difficulties. The records of several government bodies and discussions of the Signoria in the Provvisioni attest to this belief that Sant'Elisabetta was in great poverty. Firstly, the council decided on 19 December 1470 to send the monastery money instead of provisions: *'il munistero delle convertite si troova in grandissima poverta e necessita che per sobvenise alla loro miseria fu gia providesto che la meta*

dello condemnagionj che si farossino per gli ufitali di nocte a per tenessi e andassi a detto convertite [the monastery of the Convertite is found to be in the greatest poverty and need and to help their misery it is provided that half of the condemnation [fines] that are made to the Ufficiali di Notte may be held and may go to the aforesaid convertite].⁵ The priors' continued interest in Sant'Elisabetta exceeded the payments from the Notte discussed in the previous chapter and indicates that the financial stability of the monastery was still a matter of some concern.

Sant'Elisabetta received donations and bequests from people with personal connections to the monastery occasionally, though not frequently enough to have a significant effect on its finances. For example, on 19 April 1471, Monna Nanna d'Angolo Barbieri, the mother of abbess Suora Alexandra di Bartolomeo, donated ninety florins because of her '*singulare affectione*' [singular affection] for her daughter's monastery, and for '*la salute dell'anima sua e del suo marito*' [the health of her soul and that of her husband].⁶ Suora Alexandra was not listed among the nuns in 1459 when Suora Elisabetta Giovanna was abbess.⁷ She is first mentioned, as Suora Sandra the abbess, on 10 December 1470.⁸ As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), the constitutions of Sant'Elisabetta allowed for an abbess to be appointed from another monastery if one could not be found among the convertite themselves. It is possible that Suora Alexandra came to be abbess in this manner.⁹ Her ongoing familial connections make it less likely that she was a former prostitute.

The donation came with the usual obligations: the convertite were to have masses celebrated annually for Monna Nanna and her husband, prior to and especially after her death. This is one of only three instances over the period of 300 years that this study covers in which a convertite nun's family are documented (the others are in 1550 and 1620, addressed later). Abbess Alexandra's father was a barber and although her mother had gathered a substantial sum of money to donate to Sant'Elisabetta, it is unlikely that the family were very wealthy. Barbers were members of the guild of doctors and apothecaries, the *Arte dei Medici e Speciali*, but were less skilled than the *medici* and undertook medical work like blood-letting. In Italy, surgery was performed by surgeons and barbers were not analogous to the barber-surgeons elsewhere in Europe.¹⁰ Barbers were part of the lower tier of the *Arte*'s membership, among the *ciarlatani* [charlatans], *guaritori* [healers] and the *norcini* (it is not clear exactly what the *norcini* did; the two individual examples about whom we know the most were described as 'doctors for those with problems of the genitals' and Katharine Park proposes that they performed some surgery, perhaps specifically to remove bladder stones).¹¹ These professions did not require university study and were accordingly lower paid, though Monna

Nanna seems to have been comfortable. The Arte dei Medici had been Sant'Elisabetta's *operai* since 1458 and this connection further suggests that she was not a former prostitute.

Importantly, the document outlining Monna Nanna's donation lists all of the professed nuns at Sant'Elisabetta on the day it was written. There were twenty-four nuns, a forty per cent increase from the seventeen in 1459. The names suggest the origins of some of the convertite nuns had shifted too. While their names suggest a place of origin, they cannot be relied upon as accurate. The 1471 list indicates a place of origin for all of the twenty-four listed women, whereas in 1459, only ten of the seventeen had any such indication.¹² Of the twenty-four in 1471, only two were not Italian: Suora Piera di Giovanni da Francia, who was also listed in 1459, and Suora Laudomina di Gerardo d'Allamagna. Of the remaining twenty-two nuns, nineteen were described as Florentine. The others were Suore Angnola di Francesco da Chastel San Giovanni (also on the 1459 list), Francesca d'Antonio da Siena, and Agostina di Giovanni da Venezia. This shift in only twelve years corresponds to the trend among prostitutes documented by Richard Trexler, who argued that, based on prostitutes' names as recorded by the Onestà, that by the last quarter of the fifteenth century, most of the women working in the Florentine brothel were Tuscan, and foreign women made up only a small portion of the total.¹³

Monna Nonna's bequest also noted that the friars of Santo Spirito provided the *governatore* for Sant'Elisabetta. This was the arrangement that the Captains of the Piccione had established when they founded the monastery in the fourteenth century, although the subsequent relationship between Sant'Elisabetta and Santo Spirito is not well documented. The friar mentioned several times in the late fifteenth century accounts from Sant'Elisabetta was '*Maestro Santi di Simone frate di Santo Spirito di Firenze ghovernatore di detto munistero*' [Master Santi di Simone, friar of Santo Spirito, governor of the aforesaid monastery], which provides one of the few pieces of evidence of the friars' ongoing direct involvement in Sant'Elisabetta.¹⁴

The fifteenth-century records of the Signoria show that municipal authorities, under the administration of Lorenzo de' Medici, continued to take measures to ensure that Sant'Elisabetta remained open. There is evidence of an unusual pattern of giving to Sant'Elisabetta that was not replicated for other religious houses. The Camera del Comune accounts show payments made by the city, the *famiglia* of the Podestà and the Ministro di Giustitia.¹⁵ Most of the expenditure in these records is for salaries or other payments to those who were employed by the city in various capacities. However, they also document multiple payments to the

Convertite. Sant'Elisabetta was thus placed among those in the service of the Comune.

Several irregular payments were made to Sant'Elisabetta from city coffers over a period of fourteen years. The first was for the sum of 6.5 *soldi* on 10 June 1474.¹⁶ Goldthwaite estimates that in 1474 an unskilled labourer's daily wage was 10 *soldi*.¹⁷ A month later, on 11 July, another payment was made, but this time for the more substantial amount of 35.25 *soldi*. Over the period to 29 December 1488, more than 360 *soldi* was paid to Sant'Elisabetta. The reasons for the payments are not noted and the record of the decision to make them is missing. The sums paid vary greatly. At their height, two payments totalling 68 *soldi* were made on 18 September 1476. In contrast, a payment of less than one *soldo* was made on 9 January 1484.¹⁸ The range both in number of annual payments and the total annual value is great. The value of payments peaks in 1476–7 with eight separate payments in 1477 totalling over a hundred *soldi*. After that, payments drop significantly, with none made in 1480 or 1486, and ceasing altogether after 1488.

These payments may have been offered as alms or other gifts, but they were not repeated for other religious houses. No similar charitable payments were made through the Camera like this at this time. The payments were inconsistent both in terms of value and frequency, suggesting that they were intended to supplement shortfalls in the funding provided by the Ufficiali di Notte and the monastery's other income. It is not clear if the amounts paid by the Camera were in direct response to fluctuations in other sources of income as there is no evidence of such calculations. This direct support from the Signoria ended in 1488.

Direct payments were not the only way in which the priors aided Sant'Elisabetta in the late fifteenth century. On 12 April 1481, the Signoria agreed alms of salt for the Convertite because '*sint pauperes miserabiles et vivant partim ex labore manuum suarum, partim etiam ex elemosinis, et ipsa numerus multum creverint*' [they are miserable paupers and live partly from the labour of their hands, partly through alms, and their number grows greatly].¹⁹ The first civic support for the Convertite had taken the form of a donation of stone from the recently raised walls in 1330, then food from the Notte over a century later. The priors of the late fifteenth century thus continued to support Sant'Elisabetta with provisions and money.

A new chapel and new art

The end of the fifteenth century may have been a period of somewhat better financial stability. At this time, the Augustinian Hermit Friars

from Santo Spirito, who were the Convertite's governors, and the Arte dei Medici and Speziali who had been Sant'Elisabetta's *operai* since 1458, oversaw important building works undertaken at the monastery. This likely included the installation of prestigious artworks commissioned from Botticelli, but no documentation relating to the commission survives and the paintings are not mentioned in the Sant'Elisabetta archive. This suggests that the Arte rather than the monastery paid for the commission. They commissioned such altarpieces for other monasteries such as Sant'Ambrogio.²⁰

There has been some controversy over this altarpiece, in particular around the identification of the painting. Early sources that mention Sant'Elisabetta's Botticelli do not describe it. The *Libro di Antonio Billi* says '*nella Chiesa delle suore delle Convertite [Botticelli] dipinse la tavola dell'altare maggiore*' [in the church of the sisters of the Convertite, Botticelli painted the main altar panel].²¹ Billi (1481–1530) was a merchant who owned the *Libro* and may have written it though its authorship is unclear.²² The earliest surviving copies of the Billi manuscript are known as the *Anonimo Magliabechiano* and are dated to c.1537–42. Vasari, who was familiar with an earlier version of the *Libro* also gives little detail of the Convertite altarpiece, simply stating that Botticelli '*lavorò nelle convertite una tavola a quelle monache, e a quelle di S. Barnabà*' [He worked in the Convertite [on] an altarpiece for those nuns and for those at San Barnabà].²³ The work was last recorded *in situ* in 1802 shortly before the suppression of the monastery in 1808, and by 1824 it was lost.²⁴

The lacuna in the provenance has led to confusion over which painting was created for the Convertite. Works of art by Botticelli such as the *Pala di Sant'Ambrogio* and *The Virgin and Child with Saint John and an Angel* have been proposed as stylistically fitting.²⁵ However in 1925, Yukio Yashiro identified *The Trinity with Saints Mary Magdalene and John the Baptist*, then in the collection of Viscount Lee of Fareham and now in the Courtauld Institute Galleries and recently restored, as the Sant'Elisabetta altarpiece on the basis of connoisseurship.²⁶ Most art historians have agreed with this identification. The prominence of Mary Magdalene in the *Trinity* certainly makes it a more likely candidate than the *Pala di Sant'Ambrogio* which features saints Cosmas and Damian. As physician-saints, Cosmas and Damian were patrons of the Arte dei Medici and so it is likely that the guild commissioned this painting, though not for Sant'Elisabetta. *The Virgin and Child with Saint John and an Angel* also features Mary Magdalene but, as Rachel North argues, the *Trinity* Magdalene is depicted in her later years as a penitent in the wilderness and so is more fitting for Sant'Elisabetta.²⁷ The *Trinity* also features the archangel Raphael, the healer, and Tobias who cured his father's blindness. These were popular

subjects in Florentine painting in the second half of the fifteenth century and link the painting to the guild.²⁸ The other main figure in the painting is St John the Baptist, patron saint of Florence. The prominent dove above Christ's head also suggests Santo Spirito and the confraternity which founded the monastery and who used the dove as their symbol so prominently that it became their nickname.

The dating of the works is important in establishing their prestige by fixing the point in Botticelli's career in which they were created. Yashiro dates the *Trinity* to between 1473 and 1478, believing it to be from the earlier end of the range, again on the basis of connoisseurship. The Courtauld Institute, however, dates it to between 1491 and 1494.²⁹ The painting was accompanied by four additional predella pieces, now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which have also been dated later than Yashiro's 1470s. Andrew Blume, assessing both the *Trinity* and the predella pieces argues convincingly in favour of a 1490s date for all five pieces.³⁰ Similarly, Rachel North proposes a 1491–5 dating.³¹ The later dating would mean that the significance of this artwork in the chapel of Sant'Elisabetta was greater. It places the paintings after, rather than before, some of Botticelli's most important pieces: for example, *The Adoration of the Magi* (1475), the *Madonna del Magnificat* (1481), *Primavera* (1482), *Mars and Venus* (1483) and *The Birth of Venus* (mid-1480s). This means that the artworks held a considerable prestige, especially for a poor nunnery in the Oltrarno.

Mary Magdalene and John the Baptist are obvious connections to Sant'Elisabetta. Although the monastery was never officially dedicated to Mary Magdalene, her role as patron saint of fallen women was fundamental. As well as her role as patroness of former prostitutes, both she and John the Baptist were penitents who spent time in the wilderness, and so were appropriate subjects for the high altar of a Convertite monastery. The Magdalene also links the smaller predella panels to the main altarpiece in a series of particularly appropriate scenes which are not simply the best known or even most important points in her story.³²

The first panel, *St Mary Magdalene Listening to Christ Preach*, starts the chronological depiction of the Magdalene's life (Fig. 4.2). Blume links this image to the charismatic preaching of Simone Fidati da Cascia, whose sermons reputedly inspired the Piccione to establish the monastery. Although the link between Fidati and Sant'Elisabetta seems to be an eighteenth-century fabrication, the importance of preaching in the conversion of prostitutes was underlined in Florence. From 1578, the city's registered prostitutes were required to attend the Lenten service of Mary Magdalene at the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore which was used as an opportunity to convert them.³³



Figure 4.1 Sandro Botticelli, *The Trinity with Saint Mary Magdalene and Saint John the Baptist, Archangel Raphael and Tobias*, c. 1490–1495. Tempera on panel, 215 × 192.4 cm, The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)
Photo © The Courtauld/Bridgeman Images. CC BY-ND.

The second panel depicts *The Feast in the House of Simon* where the sinful woman anointed Christ's feet (Fig. 4.3). The image of the woman caught in sin, her repentance and active penance, represents the purpose of Sant'Elisabetta: to offer women who had fallen into sexual sinfulness an environment in which they could dedicate the rest of their lives to repentance.

The third panel is *Noli Me Tangere* (Fig. 4.4), perhaps the most important scene from the Magdalene's life, in which she recognises the risen Christ. The final panel, *The Last Moments of Saint Mary Magdalen*

(Fig. 4.5) shows her receiving a blessing at the end of her life, after her long period of penitence in the wilderness, as indicated by her long hair covering her nakedness. Her assumption, as *St Mary Magdalen in Glory*, would be the subject of a later ceiling fresco in the chapel, painted by Alessandro Gherardini in 1703 and completing her life story.³⁴ The second two predella images move on from the saint's sinful past, for which she repents, to her role as a holy woman, the first disciple to witness the resurrection of Christ, and the Apostle to the Apostles, and the final moments before her assumption into Heaven. This, in turn, reflects the convertite's conversion from sinners and prostitutes, through repentance and penance, to nuns, their lives dedicated to God.

Blume argues that the central figures of either Christ or a male preacher-confessor in all of these images are further references to Fidati 'who gave the first women of the order the power that Christ gave to the Magdalene.'³⁵ However, Blume may have overestimated the uniqueness of Sant'Elisabetta as a monastery for repentant prostitutes and sought to find evidence of a link to Fidati who he believed to be the architect of such an unusual institution. Blume's association of Sant'Elisabetta with Fidati tracks back, via Bacchi, to Richa, who we must accept as the ultimate source of the legend.³⁶ There is nothing about these images that otherwise identifies Fidati. The argument is circular: they must represent Fidati because he is linked to Sant'Elisabetta, and we know it is Sant'Elisabetta because of Fidati's presence in the images. The prominence of these priest-confessor figures at the high altar of a nunnery is to be expected and rather than referring to Fidati, they point to the central role of the Church and through

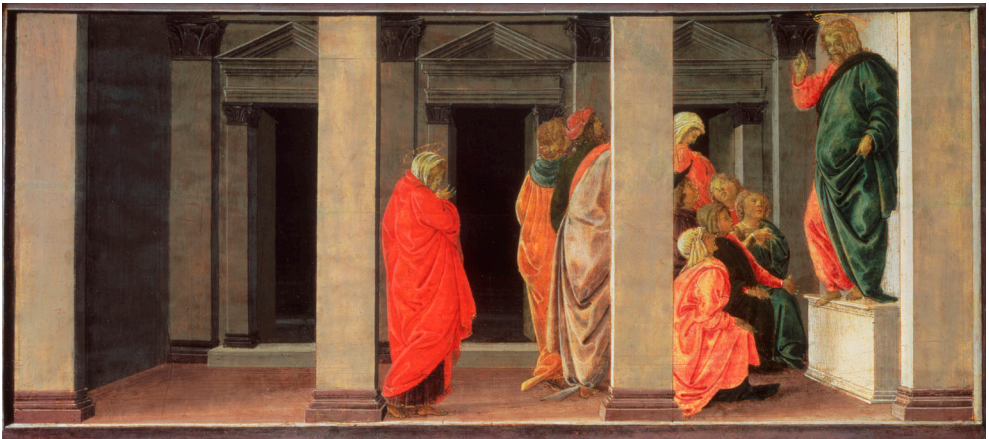


Figure 4.2 Sandro Botticelli, *Saint Mary Magdalene Listening to Christ Preach*, c. 1484–1491, tempera on panel, 20 × 43.8 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection 1917, Cat. 44. CCo/Public domain.



Figure 4.3 Sandro Botticelli, *The Feast in the House of Simon*, c. 1484–1491, tempera on panel, 19.8 × 43.7 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection 1917, Cat. 45. CCo/Public domain.

the Church, Christ, to the sacrament of penance which was fundamental to the monastery.

The new altarpiece must have been commissioned to coincide with the restoration of the chapel at Sant'Elisabetta. The extensive work undertaken on the chapel was combined with work on a new dormitory.³⁷ The earliest payment for the work is dated 5 November 1487 and was for the '*subfidio [subficio] della muraglia*' [foundation of the walls] valued at 221 *lire*.³⁸ The record shows that 34 *florini d'oro* were donated for this work by Suora Eufemia, a nun at Sant'Elisabetta. Art historians have relied on Herbert Horne's 1908 work on Botticelli to date the renovation of this chapel but he misdates it to the early 1490s.³⁹ Horne used the accounts preserved in d'Albizo's *ricordi* but seems to have missed this earlier payment which was recorded anachronistically after a payment made in November 1492.⁴⁰

The work was completed in early 1494 and was financed by the monastery itself as can be seen from the detailed accounts preserved by d'Albizo. The accounts span four pages, detailing the individual payments for the works. Suora Alexandra kept the accounts and Prior Nicholaio checked them: '*Suora Alexandra Badessa delle convertite de avere le infrascritte spese vedute per me Magistro Nicholaio*' [Suora Alexandra the abbess of the convertite to have the underwritten expenses seen by me, Magister Nicholaio prior of the convent of Santo Spirito].⁴¹ Abbess Alexandra must therefore have had sufficient education to keep accounts though the ones in the *ricordi* seem to have been written out by Nicholaio. He wrote in the first person, neat and uniform accounts with few corrections, which suggests these



Figure 4.4 Sandro Botticelli, *Noli Me Tangere*, c. 1484–1491, tempera on panel, 19.8×43.7 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection 1917, Cat. 46. CCo/Public domain.



Figure 4.5 Sandro Botticelli, *The Last Moments of Saint Mary Magdalene*, c. 1484–1491, tempera on panel, 18.3×43.8 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection 1917, Cat. 47. CCo/Public domain.

were finalised accounts based on perhaps less tidy, working accounts kept by the abbess. Altogether, they show expenses of almost 3,000 *lire* for the works.⁴²

The accounts indicate some sources of income as well as expenses and the sources of these give us an idea of the range of people donating money to the Convertite. For example, a note on a payment of 26 *lire* in 1494 states that this had been given as alms of 4 florins by Piero de' Medici, then ruler of the city.⁴³ The nuns themselves also made donations to the project and Prior Nicholaio gave a florin. Suora Anastasia gave 10 *lire*.

The brother of Suora Veronica gave 5 florins *per parte della sua dota* [for part of her dowry], Suora Marietta's mother paid her dowry of 30 florins, and friar Tomaso Busoni from San Marco gave alms of 20 florins.⁴⁴ Giovanni Corbinelli paid 31 and then 162 *soldi* for the dowry of his daughter Suora Seraphina who was listed by d'Albizo among Sant'Elisabetta's well-born residents.⁴⁵ There are few payments from individuals with no stated connection with the monastery.

The renovation works lasted seven years and the accounts describe extensive rebuilding of the chapel and the creation of a new dormitory. While the exact nature of these works is not described in detail, the accounts give an idea of their comprehensiveness. As Prior Nicholaio described, the chapel was entirely rebuilt from its foundations to the *corona* of the altar. There were payments to painters, though not for the altarpiece itself: '*fiorini nove e mezo d'oro in oro dati a Francesco dipintore per la corona dell'altare legname oro e facitura*' [nine and a half *fiorini d'oro in oro* given to Francesco the painter for wood, gold and making the crown of the altar].⁴⁶ Later, on 25 December 1494, the accounts show: '*a Iacopo dipintore che dipinse gli altari cioe del crocifisso e della Vergine Maria per sua fatica et dipintura valsono lire novanta una. E di avere per insino a di detto lire quattro soldi sedici dati a Iacopo dipintore per oro e calcina per detti altari*' [to Jacopo the painter who painted the altars namely the crucifix and the Virgin Mary for making and painting [them] worth 91 lire. And to have until the said day 4 lire 16 *soldi* given to Jacopo the painter for gold and mortar for the said altars].⁴⁷ It is likely that this Jacopo was painting the side altars rather than the high altar, and Horne posited that he may have been Jacopo di Francesco Filippi, Botticelli's assistant, but this is by no means certain.⁴⁸ The absence of payments for the high altar altarpiece is striking and indicates that this commission must have been undertaken on Sant'Elisabetta's behalf by external agents, most likely the *operai*, the Arte dei Medici.

The women of Sant'Elisabetta at the turn of the century

The monastery's financial situation remained precarious despite the patronage of the Arte dei Medici, no doubt worsened by the expensive building works undertaken at the end of the century. On 22 January 1492, Suora Eufemia, who had funded the first payment for the chapel renovation in 1487, donated a further 64 *fiorini d'oro in oro* from her '*Guadagno e fatica*' [earnings and labour]. Her donation was described as being motivated to alleviate the financial difficulties the monastery was facing and to support the chapel renovations: '*essendo detto monastero al presente*

in gravi bisogno e maxime beneficando la nuova cappella e per passato stato e per pagare altri debiti [The monastery being at present in great need and benefitting the new chapel the most and for the past state and to pay other debts].⁴⁹ However, Suora Eufemia had not simply given away her earnings. She had made an arrangement with Sant'Elisabetta which had the potential to be very profitable, for Eufemia at least: *'Con patti che detto monastero debba dare e consegnare alla detta Suora Eufemia tutta la pigione della bottega posta in mercato vecchio nel popolo di Santa Maria'* [With the agreement that the said monastery must owe and give to the said Suora Eufemia all the rent from the shop at the Mercato Vecchio in the parish of Santa Maria].⁵⁰ The shop was rented to Bernardo Manfredi, a *rigattiere* [used cloth and second-hand clothing dealer], and the rent was due to Suora Eufemia until her death when it would revert back to Sant'Elisabetta.

The arrangement with Suora Eufemia indicates that the financial position of Sant'Elisabetta was especially precarious in the early 1490s. The monastery evidently needed funds with such urgency that Abbess Alexandra and Prior Nicholaio felt it was preferable to take the 64 florins then and there, at the expense of the shop rent for the remainder of Eufemia's life (however long they expected that to be – she was not listed as a nun in 1471 and we cannot tell how old she was in 1492).

Later that year, on 25 August, the monastery and nuns were again described by the city priors as desperately poor: *'Monialium monasterij Capituli et Conuentus delle Conuertite de Florentia quem ad modum ipse de mense Maij proximis praeterita in cum essent inter omnos in dicte monastorio LXXij pauperes et sine consanguineis aut paucis et admodum pauperibus, et non possent vivere, supplicari fecerunt ipsis dominis et Consiliis de quadam elemosina'* [The nuns and monastery of the Convertite of Florence since in the month of May recently past there are altogether in the said monastery 72 paupers and without relatives or a few who are very poor, and they would not be able to live, made supplications to the lords and councils for alms].⁵¹ The municipal authorities here recognised that the convertite faced particular financial problems brought about by their lack of familial connections. The patronage of female monastic houses by wealthy families is well documented and could take various forms. It was the building of familial links through enclosing multiple members of a kinship group within one institution that proved to be particularly lucrative to that institution. This allowed the family to gain influence within the monastery and to focus their patronage on a single house, as well as allowing enclosed nuns to maintain links to their external relations while building familial units inside the monastery.

The specific problem for Sant'Elisabetta, outlined by the priors, was that the nuns were poor and had either no relatives at all, or had only very poor relations. The convertite had no wealthy patrons with long-term interests in the monastery. The nuns could neither expect nor rely on regular patronage and were instead dependent on other sources of income. Any funds they received from wealthy citizens were ad hoc charitable donations which, even if made regularly, were apt to cease without warning in a way that was not true for donations other nunneries received from connected family members. This paucity of financial resources upon which the Convertite could rely was a fundamental and unusual problem for a Florentine monastic house. Compared to somewhere like Le Murate, which took in women from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds and was one of the only houses more populous than the Convertite, Sant'Elisabetta was drawing from the goodwill of those from the lowest economic brackets.⁵² Le Murate could offset low dowries and income from its poorer nuns with the wealth and connections of its richer ones.

The late fifteenth-century *ricordi* which d'Albizo included in his seventeenth-century codex, and in which the accounts of the chapel rebuilding period are contained, is an invaluable source. It not only reveals the financial operation of Sant'Elisabetta in a tumultuous time in Florence's history but it also gives us numerous glimpses of individual women who lived there. It provides almost all the insights that survive about such familial relations which the nuns of Sant'Elisabetta maintained. As armies ravaged Italy in the period after 1494, there was a sharp rise in the number of Florentine women seeking refuge in nunneries.⁵³ This is also apparent at Sant'Elisabetta from a record dated 25 February 1495 and which describes the arrangement for Monna Lucrezia, from the parish of San Giorgio, to live at Sant'Elisabetta as a *commessa* with her daughter Marietta for the duration of the former's life. She would pay 100 *fiorini larghi d'oro in oro* in exchange, and have a room that she would share with her daughter, built within the monastery: '*fa murare e mura al presente una camera per habitatione sua e di detta Marietta*' [will have built at present a room for the habitation of herself and the said Marietta]. The contract specified that the room could not be taken from Lucrezia or from Marietta unless or until she married or died.⁵⁴ The arrangement further explains that Marietta had not taken vows at Sant'Elisabetta and would be free to leave if she married. Alternatively, '*se pel alcuno tempo la detta Marietta si volessi commettere o farssi monaca o venire habitare in detto monastero che allora e in quel caso noi siamo tenute dare e consegnare alla detta Marietta la detta camera*' [if at some time the said Marietta wants to commit or to become a nun or to come to live in the said monastery that then and in that case we are held to give and consign to the said Marietta the said room].⁵⁵ The cost to build

the room was not described but was a considerable investment. Monna Lucrezia was keen to ensure she and her daughter had the benefit of it as long as they wanted.

The two women were to live at Sant'Elisabetta for what we can assume was intended to be a period of some years without taking religious vows, or being obligated to do so. Marietta's age is not stated and she may have been a child. In 1495, the options available for her future were marriage, monachisation or simply continuing to live in the monastery. Although not described as such, the arrangement may in effect have been a *corody* as there is no suggestion that Monna Lucrezia was to pay any further contribution to their bed and board. Although Sant'Elisabetta was to gain 100 florins and, eventually, a new room, the monastery was to bear the cost of keeping the two women for an unknown number of years.

The record of Monna Lucrezia's deal with Sant'Elisabetta tells us several things. Firstly, that the Convertite accepted women as *commesse* (older women, usually widows in receipt of a pension or annuity).⁵⁶ Although this was a common practice elsewhere, there is no further evidence of it at Sant'Elisabetta before the seventeenth century. It may, however, have been a regular occurrence. The roll calls of nuns at Sant'Elisabetta do not always specify what position each woman held other than the abbess and sometimes the *vicaria*. The 1471 list stipulates that it consisted of professed nuns, but earlier lists are ambiguous: they may contain a mixture of professed nuns, novices, *converse* [lay sisters], *commesse* and other women, or, more likely, they list *velate* and omit the others. This would account for the apparent discrepancy between the list of 1471 with twenty-four women, and the figure of seventy-two women noted in the *Provvisioni* of August 1492. It is unlikely the population of Sant'Elisabetta almost tripled in size in those twenty years. It is not until d'Albizo's comprehensive list of 1620 that the positions of the women were clearly distinguished (though none were noted as *commesse*).

Secondly, the arrangement demonstrates that younger women were also admitted without the obligation for them to take vows later. Marietta's position is unclear, though several options were available for the full course of her life. *Serbanza* was the placement of a girl into the care of a nunnery prior to her marriage and was typically practised by merchant and artisan families.⁵⁷ Marietta was not, however, at Sant'Elisabetta in *serbanza*: her stay was not specified as being temporary (though it was not necessarily permanent), and she was to live in the monastery with her mother. There is no mention of education which was the usual reason for *serbanza*.

Finally, the record indicates that Monna Lucrezia was a woman of some means. The cost of building a new room and the 100 florins she

was to pay in addition to that, were significant expenses. There is little information about this woman – her husband was named as Nicholo d'Antonio Fini, and her father as 'Stephano di . . .' with the document left blank where the rest of his name should be. The Fini was a distinguished family but neither woman is listed among the gentle and noble daughters of the monastery (perhaps because neither took vows in the end).⁵⁸ There is no indication in the record of a prior personal connection between Mona Lucrezia and Sant'Elisabetta, nor her reasons for choosing a poor monastery of former prostitutes, on the outskirts of town, to live out her remaining years. She may have done so as it was the most economical option, or because its penitential mission appealed to her.

Shortly after this deal was struck, the nuns took in another girl, this time specifically in *serbanza*: '*Memoria come a di [. . .] di novembre 1496 pigliamo la Ginevra figliuola di Lionardo Serragli in serbo che lui devessi dare per le spese ogni anno*' [Record that on the day of [. . .] November 1496 we take Ginevra, daughter of Lionardo Serragli, in service that he must give [her] expenses every year].⁵⁹ It seems that Ginevra, like many other girls in *serbanza* in nunneries at the time, later took religious vows there as she is listed as 'Suora Ginevra di Lionardo Serragli' in d'Albizo's list of gentlewomen.⁶⁰ *Serbanza* was particularly popular between the 1480s and 1530s and could be a convenient way of protecting girls in step-families in which powerful male relatives sought excessive influence.⁶¹ Nunneries offered protection of the girls' physical well-being and honour that was of heightened concern during the period of foreign wars and civic upheaval.

The case of Ginevra is an example of the local connections the monastery formed. The Serragli were based in the Oltrarno and were a family of some importance who would later give their name to the street which ran from Borgo San Frediano to the Porta Romana. Via Chiara, on which stood Sant'Elisabetta, was part of this long road. The Serragli's political fortunes declined in the mid-fifteenth century though they remained an important force in the district, with a chapel in the Carmine church.⁶²

Placing girls in nunneries like this, often with little or no intention that they would become permanent members of the community, was sometimes controversial. Church authorities did not always look kindly on the mixing of secular and religious women and girls, though the fees families paid for them were always welcome.⁶³ The fees could be a vital source of income for overstretched religious houses like Sant'Elisabetta. It also filled the gap in the provision of care for vulnerable girls and could help reinforce kinship ties for girls placed in monasteries that were also home to their female relatives.⁶⁴

Other Serragli women are not listed as residents in any of the surviving records so Lionardo Serragli seems not to have been motivated to place Ginevra in Sant'Elisabetta by kinship ties. He might rather have chosen the monastery on the basis of the heightened environment of penitential piety inspired by Savonarola at that time. This may also have inspired Mona Lucrezia in 1495. As a monastery with a particular focus on penitence, Sant'Elisabetta may have been an especially attractive institution in which a particularly pious father could place his daughter. This serves to underline the redemptive function of Sant'Elisabetta. In theory, a person took on a new identity along with a new name when entering holy orders. A Convertite house tested the limits of this in practice, but we can see that at Sant'Elisabetta, the women's pasts were forgotten. No surviving record refers to the women there with the language of prostitution and their chronicler d'Albizo talks instead about '*le mie monache*' [my nuns]. While some female religious houses in Florence had strong ties to the Savonarolan movement, there is no evidence of it at Sant'Elisabetta.⁶⁵ However, the convertite's example of penitence and redemption may have appealed to the preacher's followers.

Trends in the placement of noble and gentlewomen, as listed by d'Albizo, show the most concentrated numbers in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, at and after Savonarola's time and coinciding with the period of most sustained practice of *serbanza* in Florence.⁶⁶ However, due to low numbers overall, it is difficult to come to any firm conclusions about trends.

Sant'Elisabetta and civic funding at the end of the republic

During Savonarola's reign (1494–8), the priors again pursued the stabilisation of Sant'Elisabetta through municipal funds, this time from the Otto di Guardia e Balìa. This was a criminal magistracy established in 1378 during the Ciompi Revolt. It was subsequently merged with the revived Otto di Balìa as the Otto di Guardia e Balìa. It presided over most criminal cases: murder, theft, assault, fraud and crimes against religion.⁶⁷ By the end of the fifteenth century, therefore, the Otto was long established and had a wide remit to prosecute crime in Florence. In 1495, the priors supplemented the funding provided by the Ufficiali di Notte with a portion of the money received from condemnations by the Otto. The Signoria decision of 28 March 1495 recorded: '*Si fa un assegnamento alle Convertite sulle condanne degli Otto di balìa essendo quel convento povero e cresciuto*

in buono numero di monache et di donne et fanciulle di buona et ottima fama et vita' [An allocation is made to the Convertite on the convictions of the Otto di Balìa, that convent being poor and having grown in good number with nuns, women and girls of good and excellent *fama* [reputation] and [way of] life].⁶⁸ The Otto had previously made donations to and occasionally had fines paid to Sant'Elisabetta and other, mostly female, monastic houses prior to the establishment of this formal financial relationship.⁶⁹ Sant'Elisabetta stood to benefit from the prosecution of a much wider swathe of crimes than those pursued by the Notte.

On 29 December 1502, the Ufficiali di Notte were disbanded, leaving the funding from the Otto as the sole source of civic funding for Sant'Elisabetta. The event was significant enough for the monastery that the legislation that dissolved the magistracy was copied into the monastery's contract book. It marked the loss of an established revenue stream for the cash-strapped nuns.⁷⁰ However, less than six months later, on 31 May 1503, the Convertite paid the Piccione 100 *lire* and gave them a house that the monastery owned in the parish of San Piero Gattolino (south of Sant'Elisabetta, near the Porta Romana) in payment for the *spedale* which the nuns continued to run.⁷¹ The Convertite *spedale* is not mentioned in records again. It seems likely that the nuns closed it soon after the sale. The Piccione opened another hospital on Borgo San Piero Gattolino in the early sixteenth century, perhaps in the house acquired from Sant'Elisabetta. Later sources often confuse the two *spedali*, making it difficult to firmly establish when one closed and the other opened.⁷²

Following the discharge of the Ufficiali di Notte, the civic authorities sought a way to fill the gap in Sant'Elisabetta's funding. On 7 February 1504, a more sustainable solution was sought. As the priors saw it, Sant'Elisabetta was a victim of its own success: the sheer number of women there strained its finances.

*Le monache del monastero di Santa Lisabetta, chiamate volgarmente le convertite di Firenze sono cresciute di numero in modo che in detto munistero si trovano essere 118 et più et che non havendo loro beni proprij ma vivendo solamente della faticha loro, et di limosine, sono in grande strettezza delle cose necessarie al vitto loro, et sono per venire ogni dì in maggiore perché ogni dì moltiplicano più . . .*⁷³

The nuns of the monastery of Sant'Elisabetta, called colloquially the Convertite of Florence, have grown in number in such a way that in the said monastery are found 118 and more and not having their own goods but living solely by what they earn and by alms, they are in great shortage of the things necessary for their life, and every day they become greater [in number] because every day they multiply more.

The 118 people described here must represent all of the *bocche* dependent on the monastery and not only the professed nuns. The figure was used to highlight need and dependency rather than status; the 1471 list of nuns, in contrast, was created as part of a contract and so lists only the professed nuns, as they had a stake in its terms. It is implausible that the number of nuns rose from twenty-four in 1471 to 118 only thirty-five years later.

The council agreed a solution that expanded previous attempts to provide Sant'Elisabetta with municipal funding. From this point, an additional four *denari* for every *lira* charged in fines by any of the city's magistracies and offices (with a few specific exceptions) was to be levied for Sant'Elisabetta. They were ordered '*pagare mese per mese alle dette monache o loro legittimo sindacho et procuratore per subsidio et sovvenzione loro sotto pena del doppio a chi a debiti tempi predetti non pagassi applicata et da pagarsi alle monache predette*' [to pay month by month to the said nuns or their legitimate official and *procuratore* for their support and subsidy under penalty of double to who does not pay at the due times aforesaid and to be paid to the aforesaid nuns].⁷⁴

The magistracies exempt from the rule were the Podestà, Giudici del Consiglio di Giustizia, the Otto di Guardia e Balìa and the Provveditori del Sale, Vino e Macello.⁷⁵ The Otto di Guardia e Balìa had an existing arrangement to provide funds to Sant'Elisabetta. The legislation does not state that it was intended to fill the funding gap left by the Notta but it is not too far a stretch to imagine that this was a significant factor in the decision. The new legislation was wide ranging and offered a more inventive solution than previous attempts at municipal support. It also provided some regularity as payments were to be made monthly. It afforded Sant'Elisabetta not a portion of the fines collected, as previous arrangements had, but instead required those fined to pay an additional sum which magistrates would pass directly to the monastery. Thus, Sant'Elisabetta received much-needed funding without depriving the city of the income from fines.

Municipal interventions must have helped secure the monastery, but Sant'Elisabetta continued to make private financial deals, like that with Suora Eufemia in 1487, with other convertite. It regularly required an immediate influx of cash in preference to smaller regular payments. On 15 October 1505, Suora Alexandra, still abbess, made another such contract, this time with Suora Dianora. In return for 40 *fiorini d'oro in oro* then and there, the monastery would pay Dianora 30 *lire da piccolo* annually in two instalments of 17 *lire* and 10s each in January and July for the rest of her life: '*Et in contributione di detti ducati quaranta d'oro el detto monasterio sia tenuto dare et pagare alla detta suora Dianora ogni anno a sua vita lire trenta di soldi da piccoli*' [And in contribution of the said 40 golden ducats

[=florins] the said monastery will be held to give and to pay to the said Suora Dianora every year of her life 30 *lire*].⁷⁶

This arrangement seems similarly disadvantageous to the monastery as that of Suora Eufemia. By 1500, a florin was worth 140 *soldi*, or 70 *lire*, so it would take Dianora only thirty months to recoup her investment, thereafter making a profit of over 35 *lire* per year for the rest of her life.⁷⁷ Such arrangements highlight that the monastery's difficulties lay, in whole or in part, in problems of cash flow. The money they received from the Otto and other magistracies was unpredictable in value which may have led to problems.

Conclusion

The last years of the Florentine republic was a period of significant change not only for the administration of the city but also for the Convertite. Attempts to support Sant'Elisabetta financially that had begun in the mid-century developed and changed in response to regime change and the monastery's ongoing poverty, despite major civic upheavals.

Sant'Elisabetta itself found additional sources of income during this period by accepting a small number of *commesse* and boarding girls in *serbanza*. However, the cost of extensive building works on the chapel and dormitory caused the monastery to make financially costly deals with nuns which provided instant cash in times of crisis, but potentially cost them more in the long term due to the loss of regular income from rents or repayments far above the original investment amount. Suora Eufemia was evidently confident of some return on her investment from the shop rent, and Suora Dianora would only have had to wait two and a half years to break even on her investment, but in both cases the monastery could clearly not afford to wait that long for an injection of cash.

Those cash flow problems did not prevent the chapel renovation; the building works may in fact have exacerbated existing problems. The potentially disadvantageous deals with nuns were made immediately before and a few years after the works. However, the abbess also harnessed external donations to fund much of the works and the Arte dei Medici are most likely responsible for commissioning the Botticelli artworks, as they had done for other monastic houses. If so, they did so at a high point of the artist's fame and celebrity. The new chapel and prestigious art may have promoted Sant'Elisabetta as a place of piety. Sources before and after Vasari mention these artworks, indicating that they were well-known, though the lack of descriptive detail suggests that they were not widely viewed by those outside the monastery.

The civic authorities continued to look for ways to support Sant'Elisabetta, finding a temporary and probably unsatisfactory solution in sending money directly from civic coffers through the Camera del Comune, but this ended after only fourteen years. It was likely never intended as a long-term solution to the monastery's precarious financial situation to fund it directly from the city's central accounts. Except for Piero de' Medici's gift of 26 *lire* in 1494, the Medici administration preferred to provide funding at a step removed: from the income of a magistracy. This was an expansion of the arrangement made first with the Ufficiali di Notte and directed money to Sant'Elisabetta before it reached the centre. This was expanded again when all but a handful of the city's magistracies were instructed to levy an additional sum on top of the fines they collected to send to Sant'Elisabetta. This allowed the authorities to ensure a monthly income from the city at no cost to the city. This ongoing municipal intervention in Sant'Elisabetta's finances was unique in Florence.

Notes

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- 69. Otto di Guardia Repubblicana, 79, n.d., fols. 22r, 23r, 33r.
- 70. CRS GF 126, 70 Contratti. After contract numbered C No.3.
- 71. Compagnia di S. Maria delle Laudi e Santo Spirito detta del Piccione, 78, fol. 89v.
- 72. For example, Agostino Lucarella, *Spedali e Ospedali a Firenze* (Edizioni Giuseppe Laterza, 1999), p. 190–91 which erroneously has the Convertite *spedale* open until 1752.
- 73. CRS GF 126, 70 Contratti. After contract numbered PP No. 38.
- 74. CRS GF 126, 70 Contratti.
- 75. CRS GF 126, 70 Contratti.
- 76. CRS GF 126, 62 Ricordi 1349–1621, fol. 98v.
- 77. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 610–13.

Chapter 5

Making prostitutes pay for Sant'Elisabetta

Between the establishment of the ducal state in 1513 and the creation of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in August 1569, the position of Sant'Elisabetta changed dramatically. The Medici returned from exile in 1512, ending hopes of re-establishing a Florentine republic. Instead of a return to even a pretence of republican structures, the support of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and two Medici popes paved the way for the Duchy of Florence (1531–69) and thereafter the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

The civic intervention that had begun in the fifteenth century continued under Medici administrations. However, the character of the interventions changed as the regime sought to exert increasing control over the running of the monastery, primarily in terms of who could be admitted. Firstly, in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, the Otto di Guardia used the monastery as a place of imprisonment for women implicated in crimes, often of a sexual nature. Secondly, new civic legislation in 1553 restricted admission to women who had been public prostitutes. This law ended the use of the monastery as a secular prison but created a new problem for Sant'Elisabetta when vulnerable girls sought admission as novices.

Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–74), who became Duke of Florence in 1537, sought to rationalise the city's disparate welfare provision. Institutions were predominantly run by small, individual charitable groups. Cosimo aimed to bring the net of welfare under the control of his administration. This policy included the law of 1553 which aimed to secure the financial future of Sant'Elisabetta. It provided a significant new source of income from the estates of the city's prostitutes. However, this income suffered

from similar problems as previous sources of municipal funding: it did not provide the reliable, predictable sums of money that would have put the monastery on an even keel. In response to petitions from Sant'Elisabetta, the law was expanded in 1559 and the *Ufficiali dell'Onestà* imposed an additional tax on both registered and unregistered prostitutes, part of which went directly to the Convertite.

The ducal period was one of substantial change for Sant'Elisabetta. The new legislative approach by municipal authorities brought greater resources for the Convertite but at the cost of its independence. While the nuns petitioned authorities for an extension of the 1553 law to include unregistered prostitutes, increasing their income, they effectively lost control over who they could admit to the monastery. Any requests for exemptions to the prostitutes-only rule had to be addressed to the duke himself.

The sixteenth century also saw an increase in documentation of Sant'Elisabetta. Although there are no full sets of accounts until the early seventeenth century, other records survive which help build a more comprehensive picture of Sant'Elisabetta and its relationship with the city. There is a larger volume of pertinent records in the archive of civic administrative bodies in addition to those later compiled by d'Albizo and held at the monastery.

Municipal funding and the Medici duchy

The city's attempts to provide secure income to Sant'Elisabetta, with minimal cost to its own funds, in the late fifteenth century continued into the sixteenth. The requirement for the Otto di Guardia and most other magistracies to send money to the Convertite was augmented. On 9 June 1515, the recently restored Medici government expanded the provision of funds to Sant'Elisabetta because '*le Monache del Monastero delle Convertite sono poverissime et al presente di numero 162 et ogni di moltiplicano*' [the nuns of the monastery of the Convertite are extremely poor and at present number 162 and every day multiply].¹ Firstly, the monastery's salt tax bill would be funded to the tune of 600 *lire* per year. This was not the first relief from the *gabella del sale* that the Convertite had been granted, but this decision made the exemption permanent.² This was funding in the form of a tax exemption, combining passive support with the active support previously instituted that redirected a portion of the income of the magistracies to Sant'Elisabetta. Further active support was provided in the form of annual payment of 1,000 *lire* which was described in the Balie records as *elemosina* [alms].³

Despite this charity, the Convertite remained in some hardship and continued to make potentially financially disadvantageous deals with its nuns. A contract written only two years after the new funding was established indicates that the monastery still had difficulties related to cash flow. On 15 September 1514, the abbess, by this time Suora Clementia, agreed a contract with nuns Dianora d'Albizo de Rossi, Cornelia and Allegra on account of the '*la miseria e necessità del pane e del vino e d'ogni bene e come era bisogno si provvedessi al vitto di dette monache*' [the poverty and need of bread and wine and of all goods and as was needed to provide food for the said nuns].⁴ In return for 62 *fiorini d'oro in oro*, of which 55 *fiorini* was to be paid in cash immediately, the three nuns would receive the rent income from certain land leased by Sant'Elisabetta for the rest of their lives. This arrangement was similar to those made with Suore Eufemia in 1492 and Dianora in 1505. The list of noblewomen shows that the Dianora of the 1514 contract was a different woman from the Dianora of the 1505 contract. The latter's family name was not given but Suora Dianora d'Albizo de Rossi arrived in 1514 along with Suora Clementia di Bartolomeo Ciacchagnini the abbess.⁵ However, by August 1517 the second Dianora had herself become abbess of Sant'Elisabetta.⁶

The 1513 payment of 1,000 *lire* to Sant'Elisabetta was part of a larger distribution of charity to monasteries and hospitals.⁷ It seems that the money took some time to reach its intended recipients and was not divested until 1520, as the Balie records of 23 May that year detail the payments.⁸ This entry lists the institutions which have received funds along with the number of dependent *bocche* for all except Sant'Elisabetta. However, the following pages of the Balie records has a copy of the earlier council decision which states that there were 162 hungry mouths at the Convertite.⁹

The list shows that by far the largest sums of money went to the main city hospital, Santa Maria Nuova, with its 630 *bocche*, and to the foundling hospital, the Innocenti, which had 600 *bocche*. The latter received a comparatively low amount of 4 *lire* per *bocca* compared to 14 *lire* at Santa Maria Nuova since the majority of the latter's *bocche* were those of infants and children who were less expensive to feed. Only two male houses received money: San Marco and San Barnaba. Again, San Marco received a significantly higher sum per *bocca* than did the friars of San Barnaba, who received the lowest amount of all the institutions relative to its population at a little over 3 *lire* per dependant. San Marco, once the recipient of Medici largesse, had been greatly reduced in the wake of Savonarola's fall at the end of the fifteenth century when the friars' continued veneration of the preacher put them at odds with their former benefactors.¹⁰ The female religious houses received wildly varying

amounts, from Le Murate's 1,004 *lire* to 164 *lire* for Le Poverine. The value of donations relative to residents also varied greatly: San Jacopo di Ripoli and Sant'Onofrio received almost 7 *lire* per *bocca*, while San Jacopo on Via Ghibellina and Le Poverine each received just over 4 *lire*. These differences indicate that the division of alms in this case was calculated on a more complex basis than simply mouths to feed. Le Murate and Sant'Elisabetta received similar total amounts, but the former had 200 dependents and the latter 162. Le Murate, however, was a significantly wealthier institution than Sant'Elisabetta.¹¹ It seems, therefore, that the donation amount was based on need, or the perception thereof.

Women in Sant'Elisabetta in the early sixteenth century

The records of Sant'Elisabetta are often silent on the effect of external events on the monastery. Were the reader reliant on the Sant'Elisabetta archive, they would be hard pushed to find more than traces of the political tumult of the fifteenth century, or of Catholic reform in the later sixteenth. The records that survive are far more quotidian: food purchases, rent payments, donations. However, occasionally records from other bodies give us a glimpse inside the monastery, for example, an outbreak of plague among the nuns in 1542 is recorded in two letters to the archbishop of Florence.¹² The illness was discovered among the convertite on 31 May, when the first report notified the archbishop's office, and continued until at least 11 June, the date of the second letter. Outbreaks of disease in the city were not unusual in the sixteenth century. Monastic communities, with their enclosed and close quarters living, were especially susceptible. This particular outbreak was recorded due to the concerns of those outside the monastery for lay-women resident within.¹³

The second letter is the longer and provides more detail not only of the plague itself but also of the situation of Sant'Elisabetta. The author, Johannes, wrote to the archbishop:

Intendendo el caso successo della peste nel Monasterio delle Convertite et essendo in ditto Monastero una mia figliuola detta d'annj 7 per imparare et un'altra secolare d'anni 30 in circa vi missi in serva[n]za et pensando essere al proposito causale di tanto pericolo mi mossi a trovare Bernardo Granacci et riferitogli el caso lo pregai che per me pigliassi licenza di cavare fuori del monastero ditte secolare con le loro maestre dalla Signoria del Vicario.¹⁴

Regarding the case that has taken place of the plague in the Monastery of the Convertite and my daughter of 7 years old being in that monastery to learn, and another *secolare* of around 30 years old sent there in service and thinking to be the cause of so much danger I moved to find Bernardo Granacci and reporting the case to him I prayed that you would give licence for me to take out of the monastery the said laywomen with their teachers from the Signoria del Vicario.

This letter reveals two interesting facts about Sant'Elisabetta in the early sixteenth century. Firstly, that young girls were living in the monastery to be educated there, and secondly that adult laywomen were also present in service and as teachers. Convents were commonly places of education for young girls but in other houses the teachers would have been the nuns themselves.¹⁵ This letter indicates that the *maestre* had not taken solemn vows and so could, with the permission of the archbishop's office, leave the monastery. This practice is not attested elsewhere in the Sant'Elisabetta records. There are few indications of women and girls who were not nuns staying at the Convertite compared to other Florentine nunneries. While it seems unlikely that any teachers at Sant'Elisabetta were not also nuns, as employing them would almost certainly negate the financial reason to take girls in to be educated in the first place, this may in fact have been the case due to low levels of literacy in evidence at Sant'Elisabetta. Of course, it may simply be that the writer was mistaken regarding the possibility of the teachers leaving the monastery.

Johannes's letter reveals the presence of a literate laywoman at Sant'Elisabetta. This too was not unusual in nunneries at this time, but little evidence of it survives for Sant'Elisabetta.¹⁶ The lists of nuns at the Convertite do not differentiate by rank until that of 1620 in which two *secolari* were recorded, and indeed older lists may not have included the inhabitants of the monastery who were not *velate*. *Secolari* were lower status than the *velate* and other nuns who had taken vows and so may have been omitted from lists due to this and their more peripheral roles in the spiritual life of the monastery.

We know little about educational provision at Sant'Elisabetta. There is scant evidence of literacy among the general population of convertite nuns until the eighteenth century. Much of the surviving record was created and kept by the monastery's male *procuratori*, in contrast to other female houses where records were kept by the nuns themselves. At the nearby house of Dominican tertiaries, San Vincenzo, better known by the name of its founder, Annalena, many of the record books, *giornali* and *ricordanze*, note at the beginning that they will be kept by a named nun, for example, the following introduction to a book of *ricordanze* starting

in 1534: '*Cominciato per me Suor Laudomila degli Antinori al presente profexa et scrivana del detto monastero col consenso di Suor Margherita priora et di Monsignore Francesco dal Monte governatore*' [Started by me, Suor Laudomila degli Antinori, at present professed [sister] and scribe of the said monastery, with the permission of Suora Margherita the prioress and of Monsignor Francesco dal Monte the governor of the aforesaid [monastery]].¹⁷

This entry, typical of the introductions of such record books in Italy, displays another important distinction between the nuns of the Annalena and Sant'Elisabetta. Suor Laudomila describes her family roots as a matter of course. She is from the Antinori, a prominent Florentine family. She was keen to impress upon the reader who she was, where she came from and to maintain her identity as a member of a family beyond the walls of the nunnery. She was not alone. The Annalena *ricordi* of 1530–34 is filled with the names of prominent families such as the Ridolfi, Albizi and Strozzi, whose daughters were tertiaries or in *serbanza* there.¹⁸ As a house of tertiaries, the Annalena was not an especially prestigious house, but could nevertheless be linked to important families. Many other nunneries in Florence and Italy strove to maintain their links with illustrious families.¹⁹

The contrast to the almost universal anonymity of the convertite is stark. Of the thousands of women who made Sant'Elisabetta their home, biographical information linking them to a family, even to a hometown with any certainty, survives only for a handful and is often dependent on later attribution by d'Albizo. None of the surviving books from Sant'Elisabetta contain any comparable claims of authorship. It is difficult even to discern if any of the entries in those books were written by convertite nuns until the seventeenth century. Before then, if an entry has an attribution at all, it is to the nuns' *procuratore*.

Literate women came from middling artisan backgrounds or better. They were less likely to fall on hard enough times that prostitution was their only option. In artisanal households, female literacy was not uncommon, though typically their literacy was functional, allowing them to help keep business and household accounts, rather than the broader education some wealthier women received.²⁰ Merchants who educated their daughters did so to make them useful wives, not scriptorium or classroom nuns. It is therefore surprising to find preadolescent girls in Sant'Elisabetta for the express purpose of learning.²¹ This is the only surviving reference explicitly to the education of young girls at Sant'Elisabetta. The practice may have been an irregular one, and dependent upon the presence of a suitably qualified nun, which in turn may have been sporadic as only a small minority of the residents of Sant'Elisabetta were from educated

backgrounds. Some nunneries specialised in the education of girls, such as San Luca, Sant'Appollonia and Sant'Agata. By contrast, houses such as San Pier Maggiore, which were particularly wealthy, rarely accepted girls as boarders for any reason.²² Educational boarders were most common at middling nunneries where there were enough suitably educated nuns and where additional income was needed or helpful.

The surviving evidence from Sant'Elisabetta is by its nature incomplete and it is difficult to be certain of how regularly laywomen and girls in *serbanza* or other forms of educational boarding were admitted. The evidence seen here demonstrates that these practices happened at various points throughout Sant'Elisabetta's long history, as they did in other Florentine monasteries. It seems, therefore, reasonable to surmise that such patterns extended to other Convertite monasteries too. However, the particular circumstances of Sant'Elisabetta, its poverty and specific mission for the reform of prostitutes, may have meant that non-religious women and girls were admitted in lower numbers and less frequently than elsewhere. This means that Sant'Elisabetta was rarely able to exploit this potentially lucrative source of income, compounding its poverty and reliance on municipal financial support.

The Otto and obligations

While the presence of laywomen and girls in Sant'Elisabetta was an occasional occurrence at the monastery's discretion, there were also instances of less desirable visitors over whom the nuns had no say. From 1495, the Otto di Guardia provided funding to Sant'Elisabetta and from the early sixteenth century looked to exploit their investment in the monastery by using it as a place of confinement for those they did not want to send to prison but did not want to release either. This in effect made Sant'Elisabetta part of Florence's justice system. Although lodging these women was not a legal obligation for the monastery when the financial relationship with the Otto was formed, Sant'Elisabetta took on a custodial function some thirty years later. The Otto used the monastery to imprison women and girls who were implicated in crimes, often but not always of a sexual nature, but whose guilt or complicity they found difficult to determine, or who belonged to the grey area between decent women and public prostitutes and who Sherrill Cohen described as 'anomalous women.'²³ The cases were infrequent but indicative of a new type of civic interference in the day-to-day running of Sant'Elisabetta. The convertite were expected to act, to some extent, as jailors to these temporary prisoners.

Sentences handed down by the Otto di Guardia occasionally specified cells in Sant'Elisabetta rather than the overcrowded Stinche which held female prisoners. The first case is dated 4 November 1524: '*Si ordina che certa M. Barbera sia condotta al Monastero delle Convertite di Firenze e non possa uscirne per tutto il mese sotto pena di fiorini 25. Si ordina pure che il marito di lei paghi le spese del vitto*' [it is ordered that Mona Barbera be conducted to the Monastery of the Convertite of Florence and cannot leave it for the whole month, on penalty of 25 florins. It is also ordered that her husband pay her living expenses].²⁴ Unlike the other cases which will be considered here, Barbera was married. Her husband was available to the authorities as he had to pay the expense of her incarceration. The Otto was not, therefore, motivated to put Barbera in Sant'Elisabetta for financial reasons – she was not one of the poor whose incarceration would drain the Otto's financial reserves.²⁵

In more typical cases, Sant'Elisabetta was used to confine girls who had been subject to sexual exploitation.²⁶ In November 1531, Jacopo Pulci, resident in Florence for two years prior to his conviction, was found guilty of committing *atti disonesti e nefandi* [dishonest and wicked acts] with his daughter Lucrezia.²⁷ Among his crimes were the abortions of Lucrezia's pregnancies. Jacopo was sentenced to death, but the authorities were less certain about what to do with Lucrezia. In their eyes she was old enough take responsibility but simultaneously was at the mercy of her father who, they noted, had used *le lusinghe e . . . le minaccie* [flattery and threats] against her.²⁸ They saw her as both guilty of participation in the abortions and as a victim of sexual abuse. They decided to send her to Sant'Elisabetta for five years of incarceration:

*E la Lucrezia a stare murata per 5 anni nelle carceri da farsi nel monastero delle Convertite, col beneficio di due sole finestrette: da una prenderà il cibo e le vesti, dall'altra la luce e l'aria. Passato il tempo, non possa essere liberata senza un partito degli Otto. Gli eredi del prefato Jacopo paghino le spese del vitto e vestito per lei.*²⁹

And Lucrezia is to be walled up for 5 years in the prison to be made in the monastery of the Convertite, with the benefit of only two small windows: from one to take meals and clothes, from the other light and air. The time having passed, she cannot be liberated without leave from the Otto. The heirs of the aforesaid Jacopo will pay for her living expenses and clothes.

Procuring an abortion was a contested crime in early modern Italy but the penalty was often execution, especially if the convicted was male. Florence, however, did not issue a statute specifically against it, likely

considering it covered by existing laws on homicide.³⁰ Despite the Otto's unwillingness to put Lucrezia to the same punishment as her father, she was to be imprisoned. Her punishment was more severe than those of the other women imprisoned at Sant'Elisabetta and the arrangements for her were more detailed in the sentencing. Unlike the other women, the crimes in which Lucrezia had been implicated had led to deaths, albeit of her foetuses. The Otto specified that she is to be '*murata*', using the terminology of monastic enclosure, with only two small windows to permit the necessities of life to reach her. The other prisoners at Sant'Elisabetta seem to have been permitted to move within the complex with no more restrictions than those to which the nuns themselves were subject. Lucrezia, however, was to be segregated from the other residents, in a cell specially built for her imprisonment. She was to be walled up within the walled community. The completion of her sentence too was less clear than in other cases. She was not to be automatically freed after the five years: only with the permission of the Otto could she be released. The sentence also required that the estate of her executed father was to be spent on her maintenance at Sant'Elisabetta.

In 1537, the Otto once again used Sant'Elisabetta as a prison: '*La Betta di Michele Bastiere fanciulla non maritata per avere voluto avvelenar mona Dianora degli Albizzi sua padrona col consiglio di certo Travento soldato fu confinato nella prigione del Monasterio delle Convertite per anni dua*' [Betta di Michele Bastiere, an unmarried young woman, for trying to poison Mona Dianora degli Albizzi, her mistress, with the advice of a certain soldier Travento, was confined to the prison of the Monastery of the Convertite for two years].³¹ This certainly means the *carcere* built for Lucrezia. Her five-year imprisonment began in 1531, meaning that she had indeed been released on time or not much later. Betta was unmarried, unlike Barbera, and, her crime was not sexual in nature, unlike Lucrezia. It is striking that Betta received two years' imprisonment for attempted poisoning while Lucrezia received five for her ambivalent participation in her father's crimes.

Sant'Elisabetta was used to imprison a variety of women, in different circumstances and for varying durations and although the Otto's use of Sant'Elisabetta as a prison was infrequent, they did not use other nunneries as prisons for women convicted of crimes. While monastic institutions often had prison cells, they were intended for the imprisonment of members of the monastic community who had transgressed and not as extensions of the secular penal system. Sant'Elisabetta, as a place of penance, was rather somewhere between protection (in the same way as it provided protection to the young girls there in *serbanza*) and punishment, unlike the Stinche. Lucrezia, both offender and victim to the Otto,

was given a much longer sentence than the others and one that straddled both categories. Her 'walling in' stressed her culpability and so her cell was reused for the would-be poisoner, Betta.

Cosimo's reforms and the place of Sant'Elisabetta in municipal welfare

The irregular use of Sant'Elisabetta as a prison came to an end with the introduction of new legislation which once more aimed to ensure the stability of welfare institutions. The Medici ducal government recognised the usefulness of Sant'Elisabetta and made efforts to ensure the financial well-being of both it and the Ospedale degli Innocenti, the city founding home which was in similar financial straits to the Convertite, with too many mouths to feed, insufficient income from donations and the wage-labour undertaken by residents.³² The ducal government wanted to support institutions which solved social problems such as prostitution and child abandonment.

The 1553 legislation, published as the *Legge dell'illustrissimo et eccellentissimo signore il signore duca di Fiorenza. In beneficio del monasterio delle Convertite, & dello Spedale dell'Innocenti*, was a watershed in the relationship between Sant'Elisabetta and civic government of Florence. Cosimo I de' Medici embarked on a programme of centralisation of the organs of state, including attempts to rationalise and improve the provision of welfare throughout his domains.³³ Until then, institutions providing care and support to vulnerable adults and children were discrete entities, typically run by churches, confraternal groups or other loose lay religious collectives. They offered care to those in need who met their specific criteria – often based on age, gender, location – and rarely established formal links to complementary institutions.³⁴ This left substantial gaps in the system through which it was easy to fall. Cosimo sought to rationalise welfare by bringing many of the existing institutions under state control and widening the net of available care.³⁵ The legislation passed in September 1553 was an important part of this programme.

Cosimo sought to do two things with this new legislation. Firstly, he aimed to ensure that both Sant'Elisabetta and the Innocenti were financially stable and stayed open. The former was described as suffering *estrema povertà* which put its continued operation into doubt. The new legislation put the financial burden of maintaining the Convertite onto the city's registered prostitutes:

*tutte le meretrici infrascritte, abitanti, o che abiteranno nella prefata sua diletteissimo Ducale Citta di Fiorenza, o nel resto del suo amplissimo e felice stato che non habbino per in sino a qui testato . . . sian' tenute e debbino . . . lasciate . . . la quarta parte delle lor substantie, e beni, ragioni, e attioni, pagati e debiti, come di sotto si dice, quando s'applica tutta l'eredità, al soprascritto Monastero e Monache delle Convertite.*³⁶

[all the prostitutes undermentioned, living or who will live in your aforesaid esteemed ducal city of Florence, or in the rest of your most ample and happy state that have not so far made a testament . . . may be held and required . . . to leave . . . a quarter of their substance, goods, reasons, actions, paid and due, as said below, when it is applied all the inheritance [shall go] to the Monastery of the Convertite].

Here, Cosimo's government aimed to use the existing structure of the Onestà and the registration of prostitutes to supplement and stabilise the funding of the Convertite. The officers of the Onestà would take an inventory of the estate and, after creditors were satisfied, extract a quarter of its value for Sant'Elisabetta. This linked prostitutes' wealth, as evidenced by their estates at their deaths, to the financial position of the institutional alternative to prostitution. It extended the obligation to all the prostitutes in the Tuscan state, when previous regulations had only applied to those in the city of Florence. These measures were intended to secure Sant'Elisabetta with little or no additional cost to the state, in a similar way to the earlier additional taxes on fines. While previous municipal efforts to support Sant'Elisabetta offered proportions of fines and penalties for various crimes, the new system provided funds directly from the women who were eligible for admission to the monastery. Those women registered with the Onestà were obligated to leave a quarter of their estate to Sant'Elisabetta. They could do so either on their deaths or by earlier donation. The belongings of those who did not do so voluntarily or who died intestate would be confiscated and distributed by the Onestà, after any creditors were paid. Nonetheless, this source of funding was also subject to the unpredictable variables of wealth and mortality. There could be significant variance between prostitutes' wealth, the stability of their lives that allowed property to be identified, the date they died and the efficiency with which the Ufficiali dell'Onestà registered them.

Sant'Elisabetta was vital to the ducal government. If the state wanted to continue to facilitate female prostitution, and to profit from it, it also needed to ensure that there was a way for women to leave that work and return to the Christian fold. Sant'Elisabetta's presence justified the city's legalisation of an immoral and sinful practice. By creating a civic brothel,

the state laid itself open to charges of procuring, and sought to justify it by funnelling some of the profits into the monastery of repentant prostitutes. The profits of the city magistracies were low, even into the sixteenth century, and the money which found its way to Sant'Elisabetta was only a portion of that. The new funding from the 1553 legislation was intended, like previous attempts, to keep the impoverished monastery afloat.

The second aim of the new legislation was to make certain that Sant'Elisabetta remained true to its original purpose by restricting admission to the monastery to former prostitutes. The legislation removed the ability of the nuns and their ecclesiastical guardians to make exceptions:

*Et di piu volle e ordino, che da hoggi innanzi nel detto Monasterio non si possino accettare le non Meretrici, che sien convertite, e non altre donne, o persone in alcun modo, e che accettandone la lor Badessa, Priora, o le stesse Monache, esse in tal caso le s'intendin' prive del soprascritto beneficio dell'heredita, e rate di heredita soprascritte, e che e s'intenda in tal caso devoluto allo Spedal' predetto delli Innocenti in tutto per tutto.*³⁷

[And more is wanted and ordered, that starting from today in the Monastery they may not accept non-prostitutes, that they may convert, and no other women, or people in any way, and that by admitting them their Abbess, Prioress, or the same nuns, in such a case they deprive themselves of the benefit of the aforesaid inheritance, and the instalments of the aforesaid inheritance, and that in such a case it is transferred to the aforesaid Ospedale degli Innocenti in all things.]

Although the primary purpose of Sant'Elisabetta had always been to offer a home to prostitutes who wanted to repent, the mid-sixteenth century legislation mandated that the monastery admit no one else. The Innocenti was not subject to such restrictions in order to receive the money that the legislation afforded it, though it was perhaps unlikely that the foundling home would admit un-orphaned and unabandoned children in a way that threatened its *raison d'être*.

In 1545, the imposition of lay *operai* allowed Cosimo to exert some control over the city's female monastic houses.³⁸ Although lay *operai* had overseen most houses for many years, in the case of Sant'Elisabetta, since 1447, Cosimo did not interfere with the individual admissions policies at other houses. At Sant'Elisabetta, his primary concern was the continued provision of the specific form of welfare. This state intervention in a monastery's admissions indicates that he aimed to integrate Sant'Elisabetta into his programme of welfare provision. By restricting the type of woman who could take vows at the monastery, he ensured

that Sant'Elisabetta would continue to provide the social service that he wanted and that it had always been intended to provide.

The effect of the 1553 law therefore extended beyond the financial. After this crucial piece of legislation was passed, the internal environment of Sant'Elisabetta was notably altered. The monastery could no longer be used as a halfway house to incarcerate problematic girls and women as it had been for Barbera, Lucrezia and Betta. Mindful of the new restrictions placed upon them, and likely relieved to have a pretext on which to decline such impositions, the convertite refused to accommodate a woman sentenced by the Otto less than a year after the law was written:

*La Caterina di Domenico Santini fiorentina 'come fanciulla gravida di Bartolomeo Saladini pisano suo cognato' aver senza colpa mandato a male una creatura e l'avendo gli Otto confinata per due anni nelle Convertite di Firenze. Ma queste non avendo potuto accettarla per le loro costituzioni, fu invece per un anno confinata in casa proprio.*³⁹

Caterina from Florence, daughter of Domenico Santini, 'as a young girl pregnant by Bartolomeo Saladini of Pisa, her brother-in-law' has miscarried a foetus through no fault of her own, and was sentenced by the Otto to be confined for two years in the Convertite of Florence. But they were not able to admit her due to their constitution, so instead she was confined for a year in her own home.

The reason given for refusal was that the monastery's constitutions forbid such a use, however there is no evidence to suggest that Sant'Elisabetta's constitutions were revised or rewritten between the imprisonment of Betta in 1537 and this request in February 1554. Instead, it is more likely that the new law empowered the convertite to refuse to accommodate the sort of request which had doubtlessly proven burdensome and unwelcome in the past. Using Sant'Elisabetta in this way was expedient for the Otto but cannot have been either convenient or lucrative for the monastery.

Sant'Elisabetta had been important to Florentine governments from the early fifteenth century but under Cosimo I it became an integral part of the function of welfare in the state. With the 1553 law, he brought the monastery directly into the state's network of welfare. By providing financial support, he was able to direct admissions to Sant'Elisabetta. There is no evidence of resistance to this interference either by the nuns or by religious authorities, who may in fact have been glad to be relieved of some responsibility for the constantly poverty-stricken monastery. Cosimo had bought an interest in Sant'Elisabetta at no cost to himself or his state, and

took steps to ensure it remained useful to his wider plans. By restricting admissions to only former prostitutes, he prevented the situation which had developed at the Bologna Casa del Soccorso. It had filled with the daughters of middling merchants who could not afford the dowries of the more prestigious nunneries but who nevertheless wanted to place a daughter or two in the service of God, leaving repentant prostitutes with little opportunity.⁴⁰

The mid-sixteenth century changes led to Sant'Elisabetta becoming increasingly dependent on the funding it received from the new provisions, and the nuns, or those acting on their behalf, frequently petitioned to secure that funding. They directed their petitions and submissions to the duke with the Onestà as intermediary. They requested that legal loopholes, which prostitutes exploited to avoid registration, and so payment of fees and the quarter of their estate, be closed in order to maximise the number of women subject to the law.

One such supplication, dated 5 October 1559, complained that all the wealthy prostitutes in the city had avoided paying the tax levied that year and that without that income the nuns struggled to feed '*grandissimo numero di bocche che passano più che cento*' [very great number of mouths which passes more than a hundred].⁴¹ To solve this problem, the convertite wanted the Onestà to enforce the law more rigorously, ensuring it was applied to '*Tutte le meretrice benché non sieno descritte ne libri dell'Officio dell'Honestà . . . s'intendono essere comprese nella legge*' [All the prostitutes even if they might not be registered in the book of the Ufficio dell'Onestà that they might understand themselves to be included in the law].⁴² The nuns were particularly concerned about the wealthier sex workers. Their taxes and estates were the most valuable to Sant'Elisabetta but they avoided registration and so did not pay. They wanted the duke to make sure that '*le fussino tassate che cosj alle morte loro sarebbono chiarite meretrice et comprese nella tutto et tal tassa fussi applicata a detto Monasterio delle convertite*' [they are taxed so that at their deaths they may be called prostitutes and included in everything and such a tax is applied to the aforesaid monastery of the Convertite].⁴³

The letter survives as a copy in the records of the Ufficiali dell'Onestà, and a gloss describes it as '*rescripta fatta per le monache delle convertite*' [copy made for the nuns of the Convertite]. The writer, on behalf of the nuns, complains that there were prostitutes working in Florence who, being unregistered, avoided the tax imposed by the law of 1553 and did not make the required bequest to Sant'Elisabetta. In particular, the convertite objected to the number of wealthy prostitutes who avoided paying the tax. A quarter of the estates of the wealthiest prostitutes was of course an especially important income. The phrasing of the petitioning is in many

way familiar and formulaic, but it expresses frustration that the monastery forewent income because prostitutes were able to evade registration. The request was accepted, with a note at the bottom of the copied letter, in the same hand as the other additional note, stating that Lelio Torelli (1498–1576), Cosimo's first *auditore*, had agreed: '*Che se li faccia pagare loro la tassa come e ragionevole*' [Make them pay the tax as is reasonable].⁴⁴ It was, of course, entirely in keeping with Cosimo's wider project.

However, only a month later on 7 November, the convertite petitioned the duke again, stating that '*meretrice che per pubblica voce e fama erano tali et che non erano scripte ne sottoposte alle legge di questo officio fussi fatto pagare loro la tassa della quale ne fussi applicata parte al monastero*' [prostitutes by public voice and fame who were such and who were not registered or subject to the law of that office be made to pay the tax of which part is to be applied to the monastery].⁴⁵ They went on to quote the decision made in response to their previous petition but complained that it had not been applied effectively enough and that some prostitutes continued to enjoy the benefits of registration without paying the tax. The letter requests that these women be made subject to the requirements of registered prostitutes, including the registration fees and sumptuary legislation, on the basis of '*pubblica voce e fama*' that they were prostitutes.⁴⁶ This approach was in keeping with the Onestà's purpose in managing prostitution by registration and taxation, and penalising the clandestine practice, and would maximise this source of revenue for Sant'Elisabetta. Both requests were met with speedy agreement. In the case of the second petition, the noted response was dated 12 November and was even briefer than the first: '*così si faccia*' [make it so].⁴⁷ Perhaps from experience, some of the nuns were aware of ways in which women circumvented the law and so deprived Sant'Elisabetta of income, and it no doubt angered those prostitutes who had registered and paid their dues. Women who then entered Sant'Elisabetta may have felt themselves doubly deprived. The supplications to Cosimo indicate the willingness of the convertite actively to pursue the maximum financial benefit to their monastery.

The result of these two petitions was to extend the 1553 law to apply to unregistered prostitutes too. On 17 November, in direct response to the '*supplica fatta dale Monache delle Convertite*' [supplication made by the nuns of the Convertite] earlier that month, a tax was levied on the Onestà's registered prostitutes, the proceeds of which were to go to Sant'Elisabetta.⁴⁸ The following July, the Onestà levied another tax on the city's prostitutes.

[c'è] due sorte di meretrici, una delle quali porta il segno non porta drappo e sta nelle strade deputate per quelle et pagano per tassa ogni 4

*mesi 23 cratie. L'altra specie son quelle che non portano segno, portano drappo e stanno ove par loro e pagano di tassa ogni 4 mesi 1 scudo che cinque lire soldi 1.8 vanno alle convertite et 23 crazie all'ufficio.*⁴⁹

[There are] two sorts of prostitute, one of which wears the sign, does not wear the [prohibited] clothing and stays in the streets appointed for them, and pays as tax every four months 23 crazie [a coin]. The other type are those who do not wear the signs, wear cloth and stay as they choose, and pay as tax every four months one scudo of which five lire 1.8 soldi go to the convertite and 23 cratie go to the Onestà.

The law distinguishes between two types of prostitute: those subject to the rules, and those who had bought exemption. Wealthier prostitutes paid a higher registration fee, part of which funded Sant'Elisabetta. The Onestà thus became a route through which the Medici state made the city's prostitutes financially support the Convertite. However, the overall number of prostitutes in Florence remained low. In 1560, just after this distinction was made, the Onestà counted 147 prostitutes in the city and another 11 in surrounding towns, and an additional 79 who did not wear the signs.⁵⁰ This means that the number of registered prostitutes in Florence and its immediate surroundings was close to the number of women at Sant'Elisabetta: in 1520, municipal records state that there were 162 women at Sant'Elisabetta.⁵¹ The wealthier prostitutes paid approximately £400 every three months to Sant'Elisabetta. Assuming this was paid in full, it was a significantly larger sum than previous methods of support had provided.

Getting around the law

The 1553 law provided a higher income for Sant'Elisabetta than previous schemes and clarified the rules of admission, but it also posed unexpected difficulties for the Convertite. The practice of *serbanza* had become a popular way to preserve the honour of well-born girls and allowed nuns to maintain familial connections as girls were often placed in a nunnery in which a relative was already resident.⁵² In many Florentine nunneries, this continued until the imposition of Tridentine reforms in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, but the 1553 legislation prohibited it at Sant'Elisabetta.

However, despite the ban on *serbanza*, it evidently continued, with the knowledge of the authorities. In August 1561, the Otto di Guardia dealt with a case regarding Sandrina da Pistoia who was described as being *in serbanza* at Sant'Elisabetta. While she was there, Giovanni di

Lorenzo Betti, a Florentine, was charged with having given Sandrina *ricotta, ciliegie e carciofi* [ricotta, cherries and artichokes] using her servant Maria as an intermediary.⁵³ Giovanni was imprisoned. A year later, Sandrina herself was convicted '*per havere scalato il monastero delle Convertite et fuggita*' [having scaled the walls of the monastery of the Convertite and escaped] and found herself sentenced to two years in the Stinche prison.⁵⁴ The circumstances of Sandrina's residence at Sant'Elisabetta do not survive but the case is evidence that exemptions to the law could be made.

Sandrina's full name was given in record of her conviction as Sandrina dall'Antonia da Pistoia. Using her mother's name instead of her father's, it is likely that she was illegitimate and perhaps also the daughter of a prostitute. If so, her mother may have seen Sant'Elisabetta as an appropriate place in which to protect the girl from following in her footsteps. The convertite would have been more willing than other nuns to accept a girl in Sandrina's position. She entered Sant'Elisabetta either on the instruction of, or with the approval of, the authorities: the nuns would not have risked their income by making an unauthorised admission.

The restrictions on whom Sant'Elisabetta could admit posed further problems. In May 1565, the nuns found themselves with a dilemma. Agnoletta, a prostitute, had left her fourteen-year-old daughter at the monastery, with a hundred *scudi* for her dowry. The nuns wrote to Cosimo to explain the predicament: '*Oggi detta Agnoletta sua Madre sene andata a Roma, et lasciato qui detta fanciulla, oggi si trova circa di anni quattordici, et uscendo di questo Monastero sarebbe uno farla capitare male, essendo figliuola di una Meretrice, et non avendo dove dare ricapito*' [Today the said Agnoletta her mother having gone to Rome, and having left here the said girl, today found to be around fourteen years old, and were she to leave this monastery would be to let bad things happen to her, being the daughter of a prostitute and not having an address to give].⁵⁵ They were in an impossible position. They could not in good conscience turn the girl out of the monastery, since she had nowhere to go and they were certain that, as the daughter of a prostitute, she herself would fall into bad ways (*capitare male*), and that they would be responsible. Neither could they accept her as a nun, though they and she wished it, as this would contravene the law:

Vorrebbe però essere Monaca et così dalle Monache sarebbe accettata volentieri: Ma però la legge di Vostra Eccellentissima Illustrissima dice che in questo Monastero non si possa più pigliare fanciulle vergine. Et però non vogliono fare contro a detta legge: Ma bene pregano Vostra Eccellentissima Illustrissima fare loro questa grazia, e questa carità a

*questa povera figliuola, che non capitassi male per essere figliuola di Donna Meretrice pubblica.*⁵⁶

She would like, however, to become a nun and so the nuns would accept her willingly: but Your Excellency's law says that this monastery can no longer take virgin girls. And however, they do not want to do anything against the law: but they pray well Your Excellency will give them this grace, and this charity to this poor girl so that she does not go bad because she is the daughter of a public prostitute.

The nuns proposed a solution. The previous year, they reminded the duke, an exception to the law had been made. The nuns had been allowed to accept another prostitute's daughter, Giovanna, in similar circumstances: '*Che pare che sua Eccellentissima Illustrissima a tale figliuole le abbia fatto tale grazia, come fece alla Giovanna di Francesco Mugnaio Meretrice, che supplico per una sua figliuola per simile causa, che sua Illustrissima Eccellentissima le fece la grazia di poterla mettere per monaca in detto monastero*' [It seems that His Most Illustrious Excellency did grace to such a girl, such as Giovanna di Francesco the Miller, a prostitute, who supplicated for her daughter in a similar case, that His Most Illustrious Excellency gave her the grace to be able to place [her daughter] as a nun in the said monastery].⁵⁷ A note appended to the letter indicates that the nuns' arguments were successful and Agnoletta's daughter was allowed to stay.

The cases of Agnoletta's and Giovanna's daughters highlight the peculiar nature of the relationship between the monastery of Sant'Elisabetta and the ducal government of the mid-sixteenth century. This relationship had developed over the course of the preceding century and a half, during which time the involvement of the civic authorities in Sant'Elisabetta's operations became markedly higher than its involvement in any other religious house in the city.

The evidence we have about *serbanza* practised at Sant'Elisabetta, however, indicates a different pattern to that at other nunneries. Agnoletta's daughter was abandoned at Sant'Elisabetta. She was too old to go to the Innocenti foundling hospital, and the homes for abandoned girls which appeared in the second half of the sixteenth century were reluctant, if not unwilling, to accept a girl whose honour was in question due to her mother's profession.⁵⁸ Sandrina's exact circumstances are not known, though we can make some assumptions. Perhaps because of its very nature as a place of penitence, where sins were repented and penance undertaken, Sant'Elisabetta was an appealing place for more devout families to place their daughters.

Labour in the sixteenth century

Although *serbanza* could be an important source of income for nunneries, it is rarely evident at Sant'Elisabetta, and became rarer still after the mid-sixteenth-century restrictions imposed on the monastery. In the case of Agnoletta's daughter, the dowry that was left for her would have been turned over to Sant'Elisabetta when Cosimo agreed her monachization, but there is no trace of payment for the girl's initial *serbanza*. The nuns therefore continued to seek other ways to fill the nunnery's coffers.⁵⁹ To this end, they undertook work in the silk industry, as their predecessors had done in the fifteenth century and as described in the previous chapter.

Luigi di Tommaso Pieri, a *battiloro*, employed large numbers of nuns in the production of valuable gold thread. One of his surviving account books dated 1566–8 shows transactions with various nunneries in and around Florence, including Sant'Elisabetta. Luigi's scrawl is fast and untidy, much abbreviated and often illegible. The ledger details the value of materials given to the nuns which was crossed out when he collected the finished product.⁶⁰ The nunneries Luigi employed were spread throughout the city: Santa Lucia and San Giorgio were both on Via San Gallo to the north; Le Murate was on the west side of the city, near the Porta alla Croce; both Sant'Elisabetta and the Convento del Portico were across the river in the Oltrarno. Location was not, therefore, Luigi's primary concern in choosing employees. Like his fifteenth-century predecessor Ridolfi, he may have chosen nunneries with large populations that made delivery, production and collection more efficient. It may also have been that these nunneries maintained a high level of skill through training new entrants. Having experienced workers on site, passing on their expertise and knowledge at no cost to him would have been vastly preferable to the merchant.

Luigi's accounts show interesting differences between the way he approached the nuns he employed at Sant'Elisabetta and at other nunneries. He recorded detailed breakdowns of all the materials he sent to each house, and their value, yet he rarely recorded the names of individual nun-workers except at Sant'Elisabetta, where almost every entry allocates materials to a specific, named nun. The variety of names from Sant'Elisabetta, over the period of only a few days, indicates that a single nun did not oversee the work and deal with the *battiloro* or his agent, on behalf of the whole workforce at Sant'Elisabetta. Instead he appears to have dealt directly with a number of individual nuns. There is evidence that some convertite nuns had private wealth with which they made loans to the monastery or funded renovations. The spinning of metallic thread for Luigi di Tommaso was likely a source of this.

Although the production of gold thread required some dexterity and training, it was not the highly skilled and artistic work which some wealthier nunneries took on. The nearby tertiaries (later nuns) at the Annalena were also employed by a *battiloro*'s company earlier in the century but their records show that they also produced expensive embroidery and cloth work.⁶¹ It is unlikely that many of the convertite possessed the elite skills required to undertake this work. Had they had such skills, they would likely have avoided prostitution. At the Annalena, the production of gold thread seems to have been a small supplement to their income, perhaps done by those residents who lacked proficiency in finer needlework.

The nuns of Sant'Elisabetta, in contrast, were a significant part of Luigi di Tommaso's gold thread producing workforce. They were evidently industrious: there are approximately as many entries for Sant'Elisabetta nuns as there are for the larger monastery of Le Murate. It provided steady, if not high, income that directly benefitted the monastery. If wages earned were kept by individual nuns, as appears to have been the case, the monastery as a whole remained reliant on other sources of income, all of which were largely unpredictable, being subject to a number of variable and largely unpredictable factors.

Conclusion

The ducal period saw significant municipal attempts to stabilise the finances of Sant'Elisabetta under Cosimo I. The continuation of funding from various magistracies established during Soderini's republic was augmented by new sources. The Medici government continued to shift the burden of supporting Sant'Elisabetta from civic resources to certain groups of residents – first those fined by the city's magistrates, then prostitutes. This allowed more significant sums to be paid to Sant'Elisabetta at no cost to the state. The new financial arrangements made at this time were the first to provide truly significant sums of money to the Convertite.

However, the late sixteenth-century funding solutions came with obligations, tacit and otherwise, for Sant'Elisabetta. The Otto briefly exploited its relationship with the monastery by using it as an alternative prison for problematic women. These women were confined at Sant'Elisabetta for varying periods and different crimes, often with a sexual element. Although evidence of only three cases survives, it may have happened more often. In two of the cases that survive, the Otto sought to offset the cost to Sant'Elisabetta but the imprisonment of these women was a burden that provided no benefit to the monastery. It was inconvenient and potentially costly, regardless of the Otto's intentions. The creation of a

cell within Sant'Elisabetta in 1531 indicates that the Otto intended it to be a long-term option for the magistracy and the incarceration of small numbers of these 'anomalous women'. The law of 1553 empowered the convertite to refuse further attempts to use their monastery this way, but it also meant that the nuns were stripped of any discretion they had in admitting new entrants, under the threat of forfeiting vital funding. Instead, it gave the duke, and those acting for him, control over exceptional entries to Sant'Elisabetta.

Funding from the ducal state to Sant'Elisabetta increased over the course of the century, at the expense of the monastery's independence. Sant'Elisabetta eventually succumbed to the sixteenth century's increasingly legislative approach to civic welfare, which aimed to increase governmental control.

Notes

1. CRS GF 126, 70 Contratti 1349–1621. Documents after contract numbered PP No. 38.
2. CRS GF 126, 70 Contratti. Contract after C No. 3 details an exemption to the *gabella* in 1462, for example.
3. Balie, 40, fol. 77v.
4. CRS GF 126, 62 Ricordi 1349–1621, fol. 109v.
5. CRS GF 126, 62 Ricordi 1349–1621, fol. 183v.
6. CRS GF 126, 62 Ricordi, fol. 110v.
7. Balie, 40, fol. 76v.
8. Balie, 40, fol. 76v.
9. Balie, 40, fol. 77v.
10. Sharon Strocchia, 'Savonarolan Witnesses – the Nuns of San Jacopo and the Piagnone Movement in Sixteenth-Century Florence', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 38, no. 2 (2007): 398; Allie Terry-Fritsch, 'Florentine Convent as Practiced Place: Cosimo de' Medici, Fra Angelico, and the Public Library of San Marco', *Medieval Encounters* 18, nos 2–3 (2012): 230–71.
11. K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture: Women and History Writing in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 155–7.
12. Archivio Arcivescovile (hence AAF), Cause Criminale 34/5, Sant'Elisabetta Delle Convertite. Unpaginated loose papers entitled 'Sull'epidemi di peste'.
13. Arthur White, *Plague and Pleasure: The Renaissance World of Pius II* (Washington, 2014), p. 377 lists plague outbreaks in Italy including Florence in 1524.
14. AAF, Cause Criminale 34/5.
15. Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convent* (Penguin/Viking, 2002), 35; Sharon Strocchia, 'Taken into Custody: Girls and Convent Guardianship in Renaissance Florence', *Renaissance*

Studies 17, no. 2 (2003): 181; Sharon Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 147–9.

16. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 173.

17. CRSGF 105 (Annalena), 2 Ricordanze 1534.

18. CRSGF 105 (Annalena), 1 Ricordanze 1530–4.

19. See for example: Sharon Strocchia, 'Remembering the Family: Women, Kin, and Commemorative Masses in Renaissance Florence', *Renaissance Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1989): 635–54; P. Renée Baernstein, 'In Widow's Habit: Women Between Convent and Family in Sixteenth-Century Milan', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 25, no. 4 (1994): 787–807; Laven, *Virgins of Venice*; Silvia Evangelisti, 'Rooms to Share: Convent Cells and Social Relations in Early Modern Italy', *Past & Present* 88, no. Supplement 1 (2006): 55–71; Silvia Evangelisti, 'To Find God in Work? Female Social Stratification in Early Modern Italian Convents', *European History Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2008): 398–416; Sharon Strocchia, 'Abbess Piera de' Medici and Her Kin: Gender, Gifts, and Patronage in Renaissance Florence', *Renaissance Studies* 28, no. 5 (2014): 695–713.

20. John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence 1200–1575* (Blackwell, 2008), 46.

21. Sharon Strocchia, 'Learning the Virtues: Convent Schools and Female Culture in Renaissance Florence', in *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe: A History, 1500 to 1800*, ed. Barbara Whitehead (Routledge, 2012).

22. Strocchia, 'Taken into Custody', 182.

23. Sherrill Cohen, *The Evolution of Women's Asylums since 1500: From Refuges to Ex-Prostitutes to Shelters for Battered Women* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 61–80.

24. Acquisti e Doni, 292; Otto di Guardia Repubblica, 190, 1524, fol. 74r.

25. John K. Brackett, *Criminal Justice and Crime in Late Renaissance Florence, 1537–1609* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52.

26. Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford University Press, 1989) remains the most comprehensive account of approaches to sex crimes in the Italian states; see also Nicholas Davidson, 'Theology, Nature and the Law: Sexual Sin and Sexual Crime in Italy from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century', in *Crime, Society and the Law in Renaissance Italy*, by Trevor Dean and K. J. P. Lowe (1994), 74–98.

27. Acquisti e Doni, 292.

28. Acquisti e Doni, 292.

29. Acquisti e Doni, 292.

30. John Christopoulos, *Abortion in Early Modern Italy* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 193–4.

31. Acquisti e Doni, 291. Book entitled 'Otto 3, Carlo Carnesecchi 1876'.

32. *Legge Dell'illustrissimo et Eccelletiss. Sig. Il Sig. Duca Di Fiorenza. In Benefitio Del Monasterio Delle Convertite, & Dello Spedale Dell'Innocenti. Passata Nel Suo Consiglio de 48. El Di 19. Di Settembre. 1553* (Florence, 1553).

33. Philip Gavitt, *Gender, Honor, and Charity in Late Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 39–40.

34. John Henderson, 'The Parish and the Poor in Florence at the Time of the Black Death: The Case of S. Frediano', *Continuity and Change* 3, no. 02 (1988): 247–72; Nicholas Terpstra, 'Apprenticeship in Social Welfare: From Confraternal Charity to Municipal Poor Relief in Early Modern Italy', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25, no. 1 (1994): 101; Nicholas Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities and Civic Religion in Renaissance Bologna* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

35. Gavitt, *Gender, Honor, and Charity*, 40.
36. *Legge in Benefitio Del Monasterio Delle Convertite*, 1553.
37. *Legge in Benefitio Del Monasterio Delle Convertite*, 1553.
38. Lorenzo Cantini, *Legislazione toscana raccolta e illustrata dal dottore Lorenzo Cantini* (Albizziniana da S. Maria in Campo, 1804), 15:260–63. Legislation dated 17 April 1545.
39. Acquisti e Doni, 292. Unpaginated file entitled 'Partiti degli Otto'.
40. Lucia Ferrante, 'Honor Regained: Women in the Casa Del Soccorso Di San Paolo in Sixteenth-Century Bologna', in *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
41. Ufficiali dell'Onestà, 1, Statuti 1403–1597, fol. 41v.
42. Onestà, 1, fol. 41v.
43. Onestà, 1, fol. 41v.
44. Onestà, 1, fol. 41v.
45. Onestà, 1, fol. 42r.
46. For discussion of the legal implications of *fama* in Florence, see Thomas Kuehn, 'Fama as a Legal Status in Renaissance Florence', in *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe*, by Thelma S. Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail (Cornell University Press, 2003).
47. Auditore dei benefici ecclesiastici poi segreteria del regio diritto. Vol. 4896 (Negozi dei deputati sopra i monasteri), 1562–81, fol. 42r.
48. Onestà, 1, fols 39v–40r.
49. Onestà, 1, fol. 42r.
50. Acquisti e Doni, 291. Book entitled 'Varieta 1560'.
51. Balie, 40, fol. 77v.
52. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence*, 35.
53. Acquisti e Doni, 291. Unpaginated book entitled 'Otto 3, Carlo Carnesecchi 1876'.
54. Acquisti e Doni, 293. Unpaginated book entitled 'Otto Suppliche 2241'.
55. Auditore, 4896, fol. 59r.
56. Auditore, 4896, fol. 59r.
57. Auditore, 4896, fol. 59r.
58. Nicholas Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Nicholas Terpstra, *Lost Girls: Sex and Death in Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
59. For some of the pressures on poor women and their labour in Tuscany, see Erin Maglaque, 'Care Work and the Family in Catholic Reformation Tuscany', *Past & Present* 253, no. 1 (2021): 119–50.
60. Archivio dell'Ospedale degli Innocenti di Firenze (hence AOIF), 13294, Campione A (1566–8).
61. CRSGF 105 (Annalena), 2 Ricordanze 1534, fol. 140v.

Chapter 6

Sant'Elisabetta, the law and exceptions to it

After over thirty years of rulership, Duke Cosimo I's successful expansion of his realm and faithful support of Pope Pius V were rewarded with the title Grand Duke of Tuscany. While Cosimo himself was more interested in military matters than the state of some poor former prostitute nuns out of sight of his grand palazzo, this period saw the adoption of measures that put Sant'Elisabetta on an increasingly formal footing with the civic authorities.

From the mid-sixteenth century, Sant'Elisabetta became part of attempts to bring the irregular provision of welfare across Florence under municipal control. The available care consisted of individual charities and religious institutions, each catering to the needs of those who fitted certain criteria: abandoned boys; honourable girls without dowries; pilgrims; the sick and so forth. It was easy to fall through the cracks. The integration of welfare began under Cosimo I and was continued under his successors. They sought to create a more comprehensive net of care under state control. For Sant'Elisabetta, this meant that more funding was available but at the cost of new restrictions imposed on the monastery by secular authorities. Civic authorities were keen to preserve a distinction between prevention and penance. Sant'Elisabetta was an institution for the latter and not the former, and so it was prohibited from admitting any woman who had not been a public prostitute. In practice, this was not so clear-cut a distinction for the convertite, who petitioned the Grand Duke on several occasions to make exceptions to the rule. Life could be chaotic and dangerous for poor women and girls, and their lives did not always fit into neat categories.

The Convertite capitalised on the city's direct involvement in the monastery, petitioning the Grand Duke on several occasions and for different reasons. Most importantly, they came to act as intermediaries

between prostitutes and the authorities – for a price. Prostitutes who had been fined for infractions of the rules, such as working in an unauthorised area or flouting the clothing regulations, sometimes approached Sant’Elisabetta and asked the nuns to intercede between them and the authorities in return for money to be paid directly to the monastery. The frequency of petitions to the authorities, and the frequency with which they were approved, illustrates Sant’Elisabetta’s significance to the city authorities, including the personal interest in the monastery displayed by Grand Duke Cosimo II, his wife and his mother.

It is a historical truism that more sources survive from later periods, and indeed there are far more sources for this period than from the earliest part of Sant’Elisabetta’s history. Governmental records are particularly rich. For example, significant reforms of the *Onestà* in 1577 were closely documented. Its revised statutes reveal that it took a substantially more important role in funding Sant’Elisabetta, as well as extensive changes to the ways in which prostitution was regulated throughout the city. Later records kept at Sant’Elisabetta have survived in greater number too, particularly towards the end of the period covered by this chapter.

The reigns of the first Medici Grand Dukes, from Cosimo I to his grandson Cosimo II, saw the culmination of centuries of civic interest in stabilising Sant’Elisabetta. From early ad hoc and ineffective attempts via the *Ufficiali di Notte* and the *Otto di Guardia*, to the *Onestà* and the city’s prostitutes themselves, the monastery’s financial insecurity continued into the seventeenth century and attracted the attention of the grand ducal family.

The ghetto and the dispersal of prostitution

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the Medici government decided that the enclosure of Jews was a more pressing priority than the restriction of prostitutes to a particular area of the city. Francesco I was regent for his father Cosimo I who had retired from day-to-day affairs since 1564. In 1572, he established a ghetto in the heart of the city. The new ghetto was constructed in what had been for 170 years the official brothel district and an unofficial one for at least 250 years. Prostitutes were dispersed through the city, finally putting an end to the *Malacucina* which had more and often less successfully contained the sex trade in Florence.

Although prostitutes had been permitted to live beyond the borders of the *Malacucina* since 1547, the area had remained the primary location

of the licensed sex trade. There is a long history of cultural association between Jews and prostitutes in Europe.¹ Both were perceived as dangerous, corrupting influences that ideally should be segregated somehow. It seems impossible that, as Stefanie Siegmund has argued, those who decided on the location of the new ghetto did so without intending any spatial connection to be made between the two groups of people. The state believed both to be unsavoury and unchristian but, unfortunately, necessary.² The persistent association of the Malacucina and sex work would not have been greatly eroded by twenty-five years of the spread of prostitutes to a handful of additional streets. Indeed, the diarist Agostino Lapini (1515–92) made the spatial connection between the two when he wrote about the establishment of the ghetto. He explained that from January 1571, Francesco had spent several thousand *scudi* on '*case, magazzini e postribuli e botteghe et altre abitazioni dove erano state le pubbliche meretricie e meccaniche, grandissimo tempo*' [houses, stores and brothels and workshops and other habitations where there had been public prostitutes and mean sorts of women for the greatest time]. The area contained '*le botteguzze e stanzuzze delle meccanichissime meretrice*' [mean little shops and rooms of the most abject prostitutes] which were razed or walled up.³

To Lapini, the Mercato Vecchio was an area not just of prostitution, but of the most miserable type of prostitution. His description of women in wretched poverty points to the associations Florentines made with the area, for he was undoubtedly not alone in his view of this most central area of Florence. The poverty of the women who worked here was representative of a significant portion of Florentine prostitutes. The census of prostitutes discussed in the previous chapter shows that almost a third were in the poorest category and were paying low fees to the Onestà.

The existing population was thus forced out and a new minority forced in. Walls were built and gates installed so while the prostitutes of the Malacucina had been restricted only by legislation and the threat of fines, the Jews were physically imprisoned during certain hours. Both were required to wear parallel distinguishing signs: the wearing of yellow marked Jews and prostitutes alike as corrupting influences. Jews replaced prostitutes as the marginal population which bore the most restrictive dress codes and limitations on their location and unlike prostitutes, they could not purchase exemptions from it.

The legal options for women displaced by the new ghetto were limited to the streets that had been earmarked for prostitutes since 1547, though, as ever, the law and what actually happened were not necessarily the same thing: even before they were allowed to, prostitutes lived illegally beyond the permitted area. If Lapini's portrait of the desperate situation

of the Malacucina women is to be believed, it is more likely that their primary concern was finding new accommodation they could afford on their meagre incomes. If that happened to have been on restricted streets, they may not have been greatly concerned about it.

The closure of the Malacucina was not, however, prompted by the same moralising zeal as the Protestant Reformers, which had prompted the closure of city brothels at the insistence of Lutheran preachers in many northern European cities.⁴ Evangelical preachers attacked prostitution as part of an anticlerical agenda that held that monks and priests were regular frequenters of brothels, seducers of married women and virgins and keepers of concubines, all of which was subsumed under the title of 'whoring'. Luther and other reformers argued against the justifications of prostitution that had begun with Augustine.⁵ Catholic thinkers began to follow suit. In the 1570s, Spanish theologians began to reject Augustine's arguments. In Italy, the great reforming archbishop and later saint, Carlo Borromeo, condemned prostitutes for creating opportunities for sin, whereas before they had been tolerated for providing an acceptable outlet for sin that was believed to be inevitable. Italian cities found attempts to ban prostitution were no more successful in the sixteenth century than they had been in the thirteenth. Rome in particular could not seem to settle on a strategy: Pius V banned prostitutes in 1566, wanting the centre of the Catholic world to serve as an example of morality, only to have Clement VIII allow them back in less than thirty years later.⁶ By closing the Malacucina, Florentine authorities made prostitution less visible while maintaining revenue, echoing the aims of the abandoned 1415 plans for more official brothels. This was a more pragmatic plan than trying to enforce regulations that had proved to be unenforceable in the past. This policy also ensured continued income to Sant'Elisabetta.

Catholic reform and the reform of prostitutes

The revived targeting of Jews was part of the renewed Catholic zeal of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in response to the Protestant Reformation. The decisions made at the Council of Trent (1545–63) were implemented in those areas where the Catholic Church retained its authority. The spread of syphilis from the late fifteenth century saw attitudes to prostitution harden: although treatment of the disease with mercury could relieve some of the symptoms, it was incurable until the availability of antibiotics in the 1940s. Throughout the peninsula and much of Catholic Europe, these two factors led to the establishment of new Convertite monasteries and other similar institutions for women and

girls in danger of poverty and destitution. In central Italy, new Convertite opened in Bologna in 1559 and 1589, Siena in 1570, Pistoia in 1604 and Pisa in 1612.

Rome, where we might expect to see the clearest evidence of Tridentine zeal, had long struggled with the question of prostitution. The city, and its popes, vacillated between toleration and repression even before the Reformation challenge to Catholic morality. The seat of the Church offered prostitutes a significant client base of single men, but their presence polluted the heart of Christendom.⁷ Prior to the Reformation, much depended on the preferences of individual popes. In 1527, there were an estimated 4,900 prostitutes working in Rome in a population of 55,000 people.⁸ In contrast, Florence had a similar population (60,000 in 1551⁹) but the number of registered prostitutes working in the city was only in the hundreds.¹⁰ The Roman figure is almost certainly inflated: even in a city that drew a regular influx of potential clients, it is impossible to imagine that women doing sex work constituted 10 per cent of the population.¹¹

Almost as soon as syphilis appeared in Italy in 1494, it was linked to prostitutes. In 1497, a Genoese confraternity set up a hospital to treat *incurabili* in Rome and in 1520 expanded that care to prostitutes by establishing a Convertite in the city, Santa Maria Maddalena. It was supported by Cardinal Giulio' de Medici prior to his elevation to the throne of St Peter as Clement VII in 1523.¹² As a native Florentine and Archbishop of Florence, the cardinal was at least passingly familiar with Sant'Elisabetta and so his support of a Roman Convertite is unsurprising. Under Pope Paul III (1534–49), the Convertite's remit was expanded so that any woman who had worked as a prostitute in a brothel or at home, lay and ecclesiastical concubines and any woman who had lived immodestly could be admitted.¹³ In contrast, Florence took the opposite tack by restricting entry to Sant'Elisabetta to all but women who had been registered with the Onestà. This left no place for clerical concubines or those suspected of a *mala vita* but whose activities had not been formally established.

In Rome, the Ignatius Loyola and his Jesuits led the way in creating redemptive institutions for women.¹⁴ In 1542, with the blessing of Pope Paul III, they established the Casa di Santa Marta. The house was open to all women who wanted to renounce sin. It was something of a halfway house. After a stay of usually between six months and a year, women moved on, either returning to their husbands, marrying or taking the veil.¹⁵ The house evolved to include an Augustinian nunnery and a *mal-maritate* for women who could not return to abusive husbands.¹⁶ It thus fulfilled the roles of several Florentine institutions in one.

The Jesuits arrived late to Florence, in the mid-1550s, by which time some of the gaps in provision for compromised women had already been plugged.¹⁷ In Florence, the Casa del Malmaritate opened in 1579 for 'badly married' women who could not become nuns due to their living husbands.¹⁸ In 1583, Vittorio dell'Ancisa, a chaplain from Santa Maria del Fiore and friend of Filippo Neri, who was deeply influenced by the Savonarolan movement, established a house for the poor. A few years later, the Casa della Carità started to admit orphaned and abandoned girls, aiming to prepare them for decent marriages or the cloister. By 1595, the house had become a refuge for daughters of the *poveri vergognosi*, the 'shamed poor' who were unable to sustain the lifestyle that their rank demanded, rather than those in abject poverty. This was the result of pressure on Ancisa from Grand Duke Ferdinando.¹⁹ These girls were to be protected from the 'pericoli della povertà' [dangers of poverty].²⁰ Rather than a life on the streets, the danger was that an insufficient dowry resulted in a marriage deemed to be beneath them.²¹ Sant'Elisabetta continued to provide the alternative to sex work that the city needed and reformers wanted, so no additional monasteries of that type were created in Florence.²² Instead, similar institutions were established for women who could not enter Sant'Elisabetta: married women and poor virgins.

The Counter-Reformation redemptive institutions were in many cases successful, in contrast to those founded during the thirteenth century. In Seville, the Convent of the Sweet Name of Jesus opened in 1540, moved to a larger house in 1551 and reported more than a hundred inhabitants thirty years later. Unlike Sant'Elisabetta, the Seville house was originally intended to house virgin nuns who would educate and convert prostitutes without the expectation that they would then take vows.²³ This in turn led to concerns about segregation and mixing, although in this case, a papal brief in 1641 condemned separating repentant prostitutes from the professed nuns in contrast to the Florentine authorities' concern about putting good women in among former sex workers.

The Counter-Reformation eagerness to redeem prostitutes was a particularly Catholic expression of sin and forgiveness. While the Protestant Reformers sought to eliminate prostitution and banish prostitutes, Catholic experience told them that this was destined to fail, as it had in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when many European cities had tried it. Instead, Catholic cities reinvested in programmes of reform, offering institutions for temporary rehabilitation and a return to the world or permanent reclusion in a nunnery. Sant'Elisabetta fitted neatly into that world, as a testament to Catholicism's long-standing doctrine that no sin was too great to be forgiven.

Exceptional entries 1572–6

In addition to the portion of registration fees and fines from the Onestà, Sant'Elisabetta continued to receive its quarter of prostitutes' estates provided by the law of 1553, which was still in force twenty years later. This law also prohibited the admission of any women who had not been prostitutes. As the reforms brought about by the Council of Trent were imposed in Florence from 1575, other nunneries also had to contend with restrictions upon admissions. However, for those nuns such regulations were imposed by ecclesiastical authorities, especially Archbishop Alessandro de' Medici (1535–1605, later Pope Leo XI), rather than the state. Among the Tridentine restrictions was a prohibition on accepting girls as novices before the age of twelve (although they could still be admitted for education from the age of seven, allowing families to effectively monachize daughters at an earlier age). When the other nuns sought exemptions to the Tridentine rules, they had to contend with the archbishop, as Le Murate did when it defiantly admitted an underage nun in the 1590s.²⁴

Sant'Elisabetta, like Le Murate, found that the externally imposed restrictions sometimes posed problems. The law had formalised Sant'Elisabetta's usual practice of only admitting former prostitutes and had clarified grey areas such as the admittance of the daughters of prostitutes or other girls perceived to be in danger of becoming prostitutes. The change was not made at the behest of the nuns, who, in certain circumstances, preferred the option to admit women who did not meet the legal criteria. Four petitions survive from Sant'Elisabetta to the authorities requesting exceptions to the strict entrance requirements, all dated to within the short span of 1565 to 1576. The petitions show that the nuns were happier to blur the distinction between the institution of prevention (designed to prevent girls from becoming prostitutes) and of penance (in which women could repent their sins subsequently) than were the legislators.

The earliest surviving supplication was made on behalf of Agnoletta's unnamed daughter in 1565 as described in the previous chapter. It was followed in October 1572 when Agnolo Guicciardini (1525–81) approached Cosimo I on behalf of Sant'Elisabetta. Guicciardini was a statesman who held numerous municipal positions during his career, including as a grain officer at the Ufficiali della Grascia; one of the Otto di Practica who were responsible for foreign policy and military matters and one of the Quattro Buonomini delle Stinche who managed the city's main prison.²⁵ In 1572, he was appointed to two magistracies relevant to this case: the Ufficiali dell'Onestà and the Deputati Sopra i Monasteri.²⁶ The latter had been established in 1545 by Cosimo I and consisted of four laymen who

oversaw religious houses.²⁷ Guiccardini was, therefore, a figure of some importance in Florence and had worked in proximity to the Medici rulers, accompanying Cosimo I to Rome in 1570 for his confirmation as Grand Duke.²⁸

In 1572, Guiccardini was employed on a less prestigious matter on behalf of another unnamed young woman. This girl had been resident at the Casa della Pietà for five years. The Pietà was a home for orphaned and abandoned girls founded in 1544 by women influenced by Savonarolan ideals.²⁹ The home took in girls mostly between the ages of six and sixteen years and who were perceived to be in moral danger. Girls who entered the Pietà had often been rejected by other homes for *abbandonate* [abandoned girls] because they were too old, or they showed signs of disease.³⁰ The Pietà sought to protect the girls from prostitution and eventually facilitate their marriages or, in some cases, entry to a nunnery. By 1568 the Casa della Pietà had moved from its first home on Borgo Ognissanti, one of the streets assigned to prostitutes, to the leafy north of the city on Via Mandorla. By early 1595, some of the Pietà girls were taking simple vows as Dominican Tertiaries. This began the gradual transformation of the house from a preventative institution into a convent.³¹ Guiccardini's Convertite petition is dated after the move but before the girls had begun to take vows.

The Pietà girl herself remains unnamed, as Agnoletta's daughter did. She was described as the daughter of Maddalena di Domenico Biliotta, who was registered with the Onestà, and it stated that she had been admitted to the Pietà when she was young.³² She wanted to become a nun but, as she was the daughter of a prostitute, Guiccardini doubted that any monastery other than Sant'Elisabetta would accept her. It seemed almost certain that refusing her entry to the Convertite would see the girl follow in her mother's footsteps and Guiccardini pleaded for an exception to the rule which prevented her admission '*per evitare maggior pericoli*' [to avoid greater danger].³³ The girl was by then too old to stay at the Pietà (she was described as being '*in età di discrezione*' [at the age of discretion], so in her early teens).³⁴ Other nunneries saw the daughter of a registered prostitute with no wealthy relatives or powerful connections as an unappealing potential novice. Sant'Elisabetta was more generous, both in terms of their pity for her situation and their willingness to accept the girl without the necessary 100 *scudi* dowry. Indeed, she would be a further drain on already strained resources.

The petition acknowledged the 1553 legislation as the one thing that prevented Sant'Elisabetta taking in the girl. She was not (yet) a prostitute and Sant'Elisabetta was not a preventative institution as the Pietà was. Nonetheless, in much the same way as the 1565 petition for Agnoletta's

daughter had approached a similar quandary, Guiccardini invited Cosimo to make another exception.

*Et se bene la legge del 1553 proibisce che le Convertite non possino ricevere in quel luogo se non chi havesse tenuto vita impudica sotto pena d'esser prive di quelle portioni delle heredita delle meretrice che li concede l'estessa legge, non di meno altra volta l'Altissima Vostra ha dato licentia che l'accetino di simili fanciulle.*³⁵

And although the law of 1553 prohibits the Convertite from being able to receive in that place those who have not lived an indecent life, under penalty of being deprived of the portions of the estates of prostitutes that that same law grants to them, nonetheless Your Highness gave licence for them to accept a similar girl.

Guiccardini's letter contains a mixture of the required humble submission to Cosimo's authority and benevolence, and a gentle-yet-pointed reminder that he had set a precedent by admitting another girl who was in danger of becoming a prostitute. At the foot of the letter, in a different hand, there is a note: '*Concedosi*'. The Pietà girl was allowed to enter Sant'Elisabetta.³⁶

A few months later, on 13 July 1573, Guicciardini and the archbishop's office jointly wrote to Cosimo to explain a difficult situation with another young girl who had nowhere to go. In this case, Mona Gostanza, who had previously led a *mala vita*, and '*non havendo il modo a metterla nei monasteri che vogliano grandote*' [not having the means to send her into monasteries which want a large dowry], could not find a nunnery willing to accept her eleven-year-old daughter who wanted to become a nun.³⁷ The girl was also below the Tridentine minimum age for admission, but that was, at best, a secondary concern. Guicciardini's petition explains that the Convertite was willing to accept the girl with whatever dowry her mother could pull together if Cosimo would give his permission. From here, the petition returns to the formulaic structure and content seen in the previous two examples. The wording deviates little. The letters are brief, no longer than a single page, and outline the situation and the desired outcome. Again, there is a reminder that Cosimo has made exceptions before and that to refuse puts the girl at risk.³⁸

There is a curious linguistic quirk in this letter that is not present in the others. The writer (by the hand, this was also composed by Guiccardini) refers to the girl as '*putta*' meaning 'girl' and synonymous with '*fanciulla*' which is found throughout the records of this period to indicate an unmarried girl or young woman. However, '*putta*' was also used as a contraction of '*puttana*' a vulgar term for 'prostitute' which,

though frequent in common parlance, was exceedingly rarely used in official records. Perhaps it was intended to underline the risk the girl faced as at the time of writing, she sat perilously on the edge between maiden and prostitute. If so, it worked as this request too was marked '*Concedesi*'.

Another, slightly different, situation was described in a letter signed by the vicar of Florence, the prior of the Innocenti, and Guiccardini on 10 July 1576. Once again, they request permission from the Grand Duke (by this time, Francesco de' Medici as regent for his father) to admit the two daughters of La Piera de Levaldini, a prostitute from Prato.³⁹ Silvia was fifteen and Antonia thirteen years old, and until then they had both lived *honestissimamente* [most honestly] despite their mother's profession. They wished to continue to lead honourable lives by becoming nuns. As daughters of a prostitute, their living situations became increasingly difficult as they reached adolescence. It grew harder for their mother to protect them from her clients and so she sought a monastic solution to the family's predicament. However, while this letter also follows the formula of the previous examples, it is quieter about the dangers Silvia and Antonia faced. The letter evocatively describes their desire to enter Sant'Elisabetta where '*fuggite li pericoli del mondo, possino servire a Dio*' [they can flee the dangers of the world and serve God].⁴⁰ The letter breaks the formula here. The petitioners usually described the threat that the girls would become prostitutes in terms of avoiding the specific danger of following in their mothers' footsteps, but in this case the dangers are more vague and the risk that these girls would become prostitutes is implied less strongly than in the other cases. This example underlines that control over entry to Sant'Elisabetta lay entirely with secular and not ecclesiastical authorities. The vicar of Florence, writing on behalf of the archbishop, had to request Francesco's permission to admit the girls. This was not a mere formality: at the foot of this letter, there is a note from his administrator which says '*osservisi la legge*' meaning that Silvia and Antonia were not allowed to go to Sant'Elisabetta.

The petitions explain that the girls should be admitted to Sant'Elisabetta in order to avoid danger. In the case of Gostanza's daughter, the danger is spelled out: without admission, the girl will follow in her mother's footsteps. By making the requested exceptions for some of these girls, Cosimo effectively turned Sant'Elisabetta from a solely penitential institution into one that also acted to prevent sin. Institutions and the municipal authorities otherwise strove to delineate between prevention and penance. For women's institutions in particular, this meant not admitting former prostitutes, their daughters or other girls in danger –

whose virtue may already have been compromised – to a home with ‘good’ women and girls. The distinction was maintained to varying degrees. At the Casa della Pietà, for example, girls may not have been questioned too closely about how they had managed to make ends meet prior to their arrival, but generally few institutions would knowingly mix innocent and fallen women. When mixing was suspected, it caused significant concern to authorities – though considerably less to the women themselves.⁴¹

Such was the case at the Orbatello. It had been founded in the 1370s and, like the later Ospedale degli Innocenti, was the product of a rich merchant’s bequest. It housed poor but respectable widows and their children. Widows who found themselves without adequate protection from male family members were believed to be in danger of resorting to prostitution. The Orbatello offered them a secure home to reduce that risk. Like other quasi-monastic institutional solutions offered to women, it was one that sought to keep those inside segregated from the wider community by high walls and strict rules on who could enter.⁴² So great was concern about inmates’ virtue that sons were only permitted to live with their mothers in the Orbatello until they reached the age of twelve.⁴³ From at least the fifteenth century, the honour of the Orbatello was always in question and rumours were rife that it was, in effect, a brothel.⁴⁴ These rumours and accusations largely rested on the suspected presence of compromised women and unauthorised men.

Mixing was only reluctantly agreed for Sant’Elisabetta, as well. The petitioners’ citation of precedent indicates their willingness to engage with the requirements of the law placed on Sant’Elisabetta and, at certain times, to challenge those restrictions. They humbly made requests on the one hand while stating their cases in clear, legalistic terms on the other. The price of a covert admission in defiance of the law was too great for the convertite; they needed the quarter of prostitutes’ estates. Their financial position remained precarious and they were reliant on this state-mandated revenue. Instead of pushing the limits of the Grand Duke’s benevolence, they nudged him towards their preferred outcome by reminding him of his previous kindness and by appealing to his munificence.

In practice, pragmatism seems to have swayed the decisions. The girls who were either already at Sant’Elisabetta or in an untenable situation at another welfare institution such as the Pietà were permitted to stay; those like Silvia and Antonia, who were still in their mother’s care, were refused. It made sense to break the rules on admission when the alternative was to put young girls out onto the streets, which defeated the aim of providing a wide net of preventative care.

Reforms of the Onestà and the regulation of prostitution

The Onestà continued to provide funding for Sant'Elisabetta throughout the later sixteenth century, during significant reforms to its operation, and into the seventeenth century. The grand ducal government under Francesco began a programme of reforms in 1578 through the *Practica Segreta*, an initially advisory body established by Cosimo I.⁴⁵ These reforms were considered important enough that the Ufficiali started a new book of *Statuti e Legge* to record the new rules.⁴⁶ Although the reforms were chiefly concerned with the administration of the office, they also reviewed the proportion of fines and fees that was to go to Sant'Elisabetta.⁴⁷

The Onestà continued to use parts of the fines and fees it collected to support the Convertite. Prostitutes were to pay registration fees quarterly according to their income bracket (the *tassa maggiore* was £15, the *tassa mezzana* was £7 and the *tassa minore* was £4). From each payment of the *tassa maggiore*, £5.1.8 was to go to the Convertite; £0.8.4 from the *tassa mezzana* and £0.11.4 from the *tassa minore*. Sant'Elisabetta gained £0.8.0 from every *bulletino* that cost £2 and that allowed the holder to be on the streets at night over the course of a fortnight. Further money was to come from the *rigàglie*: additional fees of £0.6.8 that were added to the fines levied for infringements of the regulations. This sort of charge had been applied to the fines of several other magistracies since 1504 and was now to be applied to the Onestà.⁴⁸

This array of new and revised fees was to be supported by an annual *rassegna*, a review of the prostitutes registered. It was to take place at the Lenten sermon of Mary Magdalene and Florence's prostitutes were all required to attend upon threat of prosecution if they failed to turn up. Lent was particularly associated with repentance from sin and Christians were expected to make some demonstration of this.⁴⁹ The new statutes set out the requirement and the other objective of that sermon:

*Ogn'Anno una volta in tempo di Quaresima la settimana avanti si habbia a fare la Predica di Santa Maria Maddalena il Magistrato deva fare convocare a se e rassegnare tutte le Meretrici et esortarle a lassare il peccato et il vizio e ritornare alla vita e costumi christiani secondo li precetti Divini.*⁵⁰

Once every year at the time of the last week of Lent, they have to attend the sermon of Mary Magdalene, the Magistrate must call and inspect all of the prostitutes and exhort them to leave sin and vice and return to Christian life and customs according to Divine precepts.

The *rassenga* therefore had two aims. Firstly, the Onestà used it to take a roll call of the women who were or should be registered with them and to make sure that they were all paying the appropriate fees. However, this cannot have been effective in identifying clandestine prostitutes who had successfully avoided the Onestà's attention up to that point. Instead, it can only have brought to the Ufficiali's attention those women who were already registered but who had not appeared, meriting investigation and a fine.⁵¹ Secondly, it was an opportunity to call prostitutes to renounce their sinful lives. Sant'Elisabetta was probably frequently mentioned during the sermons as a means by which the women could do just that.

Sumptuary regulations were also revised to expressly prohibit displays of wealth by prostitutes:

*Sia prohibito a qualunque Meretrice sottoposta al detto officio portare per suo vestire, o per ornamento di sua persona, così in casa come fuori, Drappi d'oro, o d'argento. Velluta d'ogni sorte, fornimenti d'oro, o d'argento, Perle d'ogni sorte, et in qualsivoglia modo. E sia loro in tutto e per tutto prohibito d'andare di giorno in cocchio, carrozza o simile per la Città di Firenze.*⁵²

It is prohibited that any prostitute registered with that office should wear for her clothes or for the decoration of her person, whether at home or outside, cloth of gold or silver; velvet of any sort; finishings of gold or silver; pearls of any sort, and in any way. And they are completely prohibited to go by day in coaches, carriages or similar in the City of Florence.

These new sumptuary restrictions suggest that there were increasing numbers of women who made a good living from prostitution and could afford luxuries, or at least that the authorities believed that to be the case. These regulations reflect the longstanding concern with visually segregating sex workers as discussed in [Chapter 2](#). Authorities were at pains to avoid sex workers presenting the appearance of well-born women, or making prostitution look like a financially lucrative and so an appealing career.

Studies of courtesans in Italy have focused on Rome and Venice with their well-documented examples of highly paid and prestigious sex workers, and in doing so have all but ignored Florence. The culture of expensive prostitutes with a few patrician clients was never as widespread in Florence as in those two cities; it was present to some extent from at least the 1540s when Tullia d'Aragona set up her salon.⁵³ She was born in Rome and briefly lived in Florence but was not typical of even a minority of prostitutes whose clients were wealthy or powerful men. Such women avoided

registration with the Onestà in order to circumvent the constraints that it imposed, and often had powerful patrons who could aid them. When the Onestà attempted to prosecute d'Aragona for sumptuary violations in 1546, she was able to evade registration through the intercession of Eleanor of Toledo, wife of Cosimo I.⁵⁴ Other wealthy courtesans in Florence would also likely have been able to avoid the Onestà and so there would have been no meaningful increase in the number of women paying the *tassa maggiore*, and so no increase in funding for Sant'Elisabetta.

The money Sant'Elisabetta received from prostitutes' estates via the Onestà remained an important source of income. The reformed statutes set out a process by which their possessions were to be inventoried to maximise this revenue: *'ogni volta che gli accadrà la morte d'alcuna Meretrice habitante nella loro iurisdizione civile o criminale che la si sia far subito inventario di tutti li patrimonij, beni, sustanze e masserizie della già detta morta meretrice rispettivamente, incontinente che gli occorrerà la morte di queste cali'* [every time that the death of any prostitute occurs in their civil or criminal jurisdiction, they will be required and obliged at once to have an inventory of all of the estate, goods, properties and furnishings of the aforesaid deceased prostitute immediately on learning of the death of these fallen women].⁵⁵ Items confiscated by the Onestà, or other official acting on their behalf, were to be *'depositare appresso idonea persona che le conservi e ne venda conto a chi apparterà'* [deposited with a suitable person who will keep them and may sell them on account of those to whom they will belong].⁵⁶ Once the goods were registered, the death would be announced to allow creditors to make their claims.

These instructions repeatedly stress the urgency of establishing the extent of a prostitute's wealth and imposes responsibility for this on any official who has been made aware of such a death during the execution of his office, in addition to the Onestà's responsibility. The aim of this regulation was to ensure that Sant'Elisabetta received its due while satisfying creditors who might make a claim on the estate. Cosimo I established the Auditore Fiscale in 1543 to control criminal justice and this office's inclusion in the process indicates how seriously the late sixteenth-century administration took this procedure.⁵⁷ The dead woman's goods were to be inventoried urgently to establish the value of her estate. None of the inventories have been discovered so it is difficult to estimate what possessions and wealth Florentine prostitutes had. According to Lapini's description of the women forced out of the Malacucina to make way for the ghetto, in many cases there may have been little to inventory. Although later account books from Sant'Elisabetta survive, the income from the Onestà is shown but not itemised in such a way as to allow the sources of the funds (portions of fees, fines or estates) to be distinguished.

The reforms of the Onestà ensured continued funding to Sant'Elisabetta and tightened up the process of assessing prostitutes' wealth on their deaths. In contrast to the relatively benign management of prostitution that characterised the magistracy's earlier history when a low charge for registration conferred certain privileges, the reformed statutes were primarily concerned with levying fees. However, by the mid-sixteenth century, prostitutes who could afford to do so bought exemptions to the Onestà's regulations, which undermined the wider legislative environment in which prostitution was tolerated. Only in the 1570s did the Onestà move to the more financially exploitative model ascribed to it by John Brackett.⁵⁸ As Sant'Elisabetta received only a small portion of the Onestà's income (up to a third of the *tasse* and around a quarter of fines), support of the Convertite was not the Onestà's primary purpose even after 1577. In fact, the magistracy struggled to remain solvent.

Sant'Elisabetta and working prostitutes

The links between Sant'Elisabetta and the world beyond its walls have left archival traces that only hint at wider patterns. We know that local people attended religious services in the Convertite chapel, as they would any such chapel in their communities, but there is little surviving evidence of this commonplace activity. When evidence does survive, it usually describes events that unfolded in an uncommon way. In 1609, for example, an unexpected altercation took place that reveals not just a glimpse of everyday life in a poor neighbourhood of seventeenth-century Florence, but also, from its context, something important about the community's use of the chapel. The archbishop's office investigated, and its reports survive, preserving an event which would otherwise have been lost.

On Christmas Day 1609, a man named Orlando Turco attended mass at Sant'Elisabetta. During the service, he objected to a woman named Maddalena receiving communion because she was *una disonesta* [an indecent woman].⁵⁹ Maddalena was upset by this accusation, *parole ingiuriose* [insulting words] were said and, ultimately, the priest refused her communion. The background to the disagreement between Turco and Maddalena is the use of the chapel by local people. It also shows us that the congregants expected the normal rules to apply at Sant'Elisabetta: although former prostitutes were resident there it did not mean that those who had not done penance for their sins could receive communion. Maddalena, if her reputation were less than spotless as Turco alleged, may have thought that Sant'Elisabetta would be friendlier to her than another church but was proved wrong.

Florentine prostitutes saw Sant'Elisabetta as sympathetic to their needs even before they converted. One of the Convertite's more surprising activities was to intercede between prostitutes and the legislature, which reveals the authorities' further willingness to set aside sentences in exchange for cash. Although only two examples of this have been found, it may have been a more regular occurrence as the tone of neither letter suggests that it is an unprecedented or even unusual request. Each case is slightly different: in the first, the monastery interceded directly with the Otto to mitigate the sentence given to a prostitute for infringements of the rules in return for a financial donation; in the second, a prostitute appealed directly to Cosimo II to request exemptions from some of the sumptuary restrictions in exchange for an annual payment directly to Sant'Elisabetta. Both instances show that the monastery's financial position was of sufficient concern to municipal authorities that such donations could persuade them to mitigate sentences or exempt individuals from the regulations. They also indicate that its financial situation was known to city sex workers who used it to make their own case more persuasive.

The first case went before the Otto di Guardia in 1613 and illustrates the role of the Convertite. The case was summarised by the archivist Carlo Carnesecchi in the nineteenth century, based on the records of supplications to the Otto.⁶⁰ Aurelia Bedei of Piacenza's crime was not specified here but it was serious enough to merit banishment. The supplication makes clear that in exchange for the promise of a donation of 100 *scudi*, the Convertite would request the Grand Duke's mercy, via his officers, asking him to commute the sentence. The principle was acceptable to the authorities but the amount of the donation was not. Based on information from the Onestà, perhaps the level of tax Bedei paid to them, the officers instructed that she would have to pay 300 *scudi* to receive grace from her punishment. Bedei paid it.

There are two key observations to make about this case. Firstly, that the Convertite was willing to intercede on behalf of prostitutes and secondly that the authorities were willing to accept these intercessions and to raise the donation offered. The decision to triple the already high donation Bedei had offered would have significantly benefitted Sant'Elisabetta and can only have encouraged the monastery to accept requests for intercessions in the future. The fee that was ultimately paid was triple the dowry for the girls abandoned at Sant'Elisabetta. It was advantageous to the nuns to do this.

Two years later, Giulia di Antonio petitioned Cosimo II directly and offered to make an annual payment to Sant'Elisabetta if she were exempted from some of the restrictions imposed on prostitutes.⁶¹ Giulia was registered with the Onestà but wanted permission to wear gold and

pearls and to go to church services. She noted that other women had such exemptions, and offered 20 *scudi* a year, to be paid in two instalments, to Sant'Elisabetta. Although this request was also granted, she found herself under scrutiny once again in April 1615. She had been caught leaving a sermon at the church of San Piero, her exemption not recognised. Michele Dati, the governor of Sant'Elisabetta, appealed to the archbishop's office on her behalf, stating that Giulia was '*sotto la fede del monastero*' [under the faith of the monastery]. She was freed from prison under a '*certa mallevadoria*' [certain guarantee]. The letter also notes that Giulia was not unique: 34 women paid 20 *scudi* a year to Sant'Elisabetta to go unmolested, indicating a portion of the prostitutes in the city were earning enough to buy gold and pearls and to pay for a licence to wear them.

Dati had a particular interest in the matter beyond his role as governor of Sant'Elisabetta. On 31 August 1614, he had written to Cosimo II suggesting that prostitutes make an annual payment of 20 *scudi* as a way to solve the problem of many not paying their dues. This is the payment to which Giulia referred the following year. Dati wanted the money to be paid directly to the abbess of Sant'Elisabetta.⁶² There were 571 prostitutes registered with the Onestà around this time so the 34 paying this particular exemption did not represent a significant proportion (around 6 per cent) but it would have been enough to bring around 700 *scudi* to Sant'Elisabetta every year.⁶³ This was a huge sum: the equivalent of 750 *florins*, one of which would have bought a week's work in 1600.⁶⁴

Dati's brokered arrangement between the authorities, the Convertite and wealthier prostitutes like Giulia illustrates how women could use Sant'Elisabetta beyond admission and, in turn, how Sant'Elisabetta could exploit its position as both a religious house and an institution with a key role to play in civic life. Bedei's one-off payment of 300 *scudi* and the 34 women who paid 20 *scudi* a year represent significant income, though it remains unclear how reliable it was as even the annual payments could stop without warning.

Conclusion

During the early grand ducal period, the relationship between Sant'Elisabetta and the city shifted from the ad hoc provision of food and funding from various magistracies, or from the city's prostitutes themselves. It became a more stable arrangement that saw the city authorities involve themselves in the monastery more directly. This was a culmination of almost three centuries of varying strategies by the civic authorities that had each proven to some extent unsuccessful, as the

nuns continued to plead poverty and to request additional support from the city.

The increasing formalisation of the relationship between Sant'Elisabetta and the grand ducal government came during a wider movement to bring the provision of welfare services within municipal control that began with Cosimo I and was continued by his successors. Sant'Elisabetta was part of this net of care, its role restricted by the 1553 law to one of penitence alone. However, in the 1570s, the distinction between prevention and penance caused problems for the convertite, which they sought to resolve by petitioning Cosimo II for exemptions to the legal restrictions. They hoped to admit girls who, the nuns argued, had nowhere else to go and were at risk of becoming prostitutes. The nuns aimed to make Sant'Elisabetta a preventative institution for these girls, and they were sometimes successful.

As Counter-Reformation interest in reforming women who had or were suspected of having compromised their honour swept Europe, Sant'Elisabetta fulfilled a reinvigorated role in the reform movements which reached Florence and Tuscany. Unlike other houses, such as the Jesuit Santa Marta in Rome, it remained dedicated to its role as a Convertite house: a place of permanent penance and not temporary rehabilitation. Like all nunneries, the door was not revolving and only with some effort was Sant'Elisabetta able to admit anyone who had not been a public prostitute.

The period also saw changes to the way prostitution was managed in the city. In 1572, the Malacucina brothel district was dismantled to make way for the ghetto, forcing prostitutes out of the area they had inhabited for 250 years, both legally and illegally. A few years later, the Onestà underwent significant reforms that sought to ensure funding to Sant'Elisabetta. The scheme of fees and fines was revised, and new exemptions were sold, with a portion of the money raised sent to the Convertite. The revised statutes show that this funding for Sant'Elisabetta was a higher priority than it had been previously. However, the Convertite received only a small portion of the money the Onestà took and the office remained primarily focused on managing prostitution rather than supporting Sant'Elisabetta.

Notes

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4. Lyndal Roper, 'Discipline and Respectability: Prostitution and the Reformation in Augsburg', *History Workshop Journal* 19, no. 1 (1985): 3–28.
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8. Lazar, *Working in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 45–6.
9. R. Burr Litchfield, *Emergence of a Bureaucracy: The Florentine Patricians, 1530–1790* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 45.
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15. Lazar, *Working in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 52–3.
16. Lazar, *Working in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 67.
17. Kathleen Comerford, *Jesuit Foundations and Medici Power, 1532–1621* (Brill, 2016); Juan-Alphonso de Polanco, *Year by Year with the Early Jesuits (1537–1556): Selections from the 'Chronicon' of Juan de Polanco, S.J.*, with Internet Archive (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2004), 44–5. There was no new Convertite in Florence at that time.
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20. Enrica Viviani della Robbia, *Nei monasteri fiorentini*, with Internet Archive (Sansoni, 1946), 49; Sherrill Cohen, 'Asylums for Women in Counter-Reformation Italy', in *Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe: Private and Public Worlds*, by Sherrin Marshall (Indiana University Press, 1989), 180.
21. Richard C. Trexler, 'Charity in the Defense of Urban Elites in the Italian Communes', in *The Rich, the Well Born and the Powerful: Elites and Upper Classes in History*, by Frederic C. Jaher (University of Illinois Press, 1973), 71.
22. For the changes to nunneries brought by the Counter-Reformation in Florence, see Julia Rombough, *A Veil of Silence: Women and Sound in Renaissance Italy* (Harvard University Press, 2024).

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26. Bramanti, 'Guicciardini, Agnolo'.
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28. Bramanti, 'Guicciardini, Agnolo'.
29. Nicholas Terpstra, *Lost Girls: Sex and Death in Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
30. Terpstra, *Lost Girls*, 161. While homes were concerned about accepting sick girls who would be costly to care for and may not survive, they were also worried about the effect a communicable disease like plague, tuberculosis or cholera might have on the rest of the resident population.
31. Terpstra, *Lost Girls*, 138.
32. Auditore dei benefici ecclesiastici poi segreteria del regio diritto. Vol. 4896 (Negozi dei deputati sopra i monasteri), 1562–8, fols 329r–330r.
33. Auditore, 4896, fol. 329r.
34. Auditore, 4896, fol. 329r. Another copy of the petition states that the girl had been at the Pietà for five years, but neither states her age.
35. Auditore, 4896, fol. 329r.
36. Auditore, 4896, fol. 329r.
37. Auditore, 4896, fol. 348r.
38. Auditore, 4896, fol. 348r.
39. Auditore, 4896, fol. 472r.
40. Auditore, 4896, fol. 472r.
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45. Paul N. Balchin, *Urban Development in Renaissance Italy* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 244.
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Chapter 7

A new era of financial stability

The latter half of Cosimo II's short reign brought significant changes to the interaction between Sant'Elisabetta and the government of Florence. After nearly three centuries of precarity and struggle, the nuns attracted Medici patronage and they and their male officers moved quickly to put it on a more formal footing. This was achieved by naming Cosimo the monastery's *procuratore* in September 1620. Unfortunately, this promise of stability was thrown into jeopardy by the Grand Duke's death only five months later. However, the Archduchess Maria Maddalena continued to support and donate to the monastery as regent for their son Ferdinando II.

The new interest in Sant'Elisabetta from the grand ducal administration, rather than simply the personal patronage of the Medici family, led to more significant changes and concerted efforts to stabilise the monastery. In keeping with previous approaches, the focus was on making Sant'Elisabetta self-sufficient rather than supplementing its coffers from the treasury. The wage labour undertaken by the nuns was emphasised and new facilities built at the monastery to accommodate a greater scale of production. In addition, the monastery was physically extended through a large donation of adjacent buildings made by Maria Maddalena in 1627. This ushered in a new era of stability and security for the nuns.

An accounts ledger dated 1616–19 survives in a good degree of completeness and so it is possible to piece together Sant'Elisabetta's financial position in a much more accurate and detailed way than for any earlier time. While on the face of it, a ledger is not the sort of document that necessarily raises the pulse of social historians, this type of source reveals a wealth of fascinating details about life in the monastery rarely visible in other ways: wine consumed, the rarity of meat and that the nuns employed a gardener. Then, as now – and in a city of bankers

and merchants above all – money was the lifeblood of institutions, and so this detail is key. There is a marked increase in the surviving records from Sant’Elisabetta from the early seventeenth century. Sadly, bucking this trend are the records for the reign of Cosimo II, a vigorous patron of Sant’Elisabetta. The Medici archive is vast but the surviving records of this period, those of Cosimo and his ministers, are uncharacteristically patchy.

***Debitori e Creditori*, 1616–19**

From the earliest records of Sant’Elisabetta, the monastery’s interactions with the city were primarily economic. Over the centuries, officials attempted numerous interventions to keep the monastery solvent. However, it is only possible to build a full picture of Sant’Elisabetta’s financial situation from the early seventeenth century. Prior to 1616 the accounts that survive are fragmentary and so the nuns’ claims of poverty and need are difficult to substantiate or to refute. Yet the varied financial interventions by the city indicate that the authorities accepted the claims as truthful. Using data from the 1427 *catasto*, Sharon Strocchia showed that, for the fifteenth century at least, Sant’Elisabetta was second only to the tiny Benedictine monastery of San Silvestro in its poverty of assets.¹

The earliest surviving account book is a large *Debitori e Creditori* dated 1616–22, with seemingly complete ledgers for the years 1616 to 1618 and sparse additions for 1619 to 1622.² The records for 1616–18 are almost all in the same hand. It is neat and regular and suggests a practised writer. The text notes that there were two new *camerlinghe* in 1616 and it is likely that the book was kept by one of them, though she is never identified by name. The *Debitori e Creditori* cross-references other Sant’Elisabetta account books, particularly the *Entrata e Uscita*. Entries are dated and describe payments made and received (*dare* and *havere*) and the creditor or debtor. The reasons for the payments tend to be implied by the description of the individual’s relationship to the monastery such as *pigionale* [tenant], *legnaiolo* [woodcutter] or *lavoratore* [workman], though a few are explicitly stated (e.g. ‘Antonio Marchissi per nostra portione di redita della Dianora sua donna’ [Antonio Marchissi for our portion of the bequest of Dianora his wife]).³ Most entries, however, do not describe the reasons for payment.

The expenditure described in the *Debitori e Creditori* is usually more straightforward. Details of payments to numerous workers connected to the monastery and records of purchases of oil, meat and wine give a picture of the costs Sant’Elisabetta incurred. It is the earliest

surviving comprehensive record of ordinary expenditure. It provides us with important context for the nuns' almost constant claims of poverty and need.

The ledger begins with an assessment of the monastery's financial position on 20 November 1616. The assets (debtors) listed value over £17,500.⁴ More than a third of the assets consisted of rents owed by tenants in properties owned by the monastery. Although the value of the *beni stabili di nostro convento* [fixed assets of our convent] is listed as £382.12.6, the sale value of the rental properties is not included. Sant'Elisabetta had liabilities (creditors) to the value of over £3,615, consisting of moneys owed to eight individuals. Some were external professionals, such as Santi the cooper who was owed £68, while Giuseppe and Agnolo di Bello, millers, were owed £59 and £140 respectively. Others were employed or resident in the monastery: Francesco di Filippo, the convent factor, was owed £12 (probably wages or costs associated with work he had undertaken); Ser Marcantonio Vadori, the *procuratore*, was owed an undisclosed sum. Most interestingly, Suore Margherita Michelozzi and Maddalena Carnesecchi were owed considerable sums (£1437.10 and £371.18 respectively).⁵ These two entries suggest that nuns continued to make loans to the monastery. Previous arrangements between individual nuns and Sant'Elisabetta showed that cash flow was a long-term problem that the various financing schemes of the civic authorities had failed to adequately address. It is likely that some of the entries in 1616–18 were the result of similar pressures. The list of creditors, therefore, only gives unusual expenses and does not include day-to-day outlays: the costs associated with feeding and clothing 200 nuns; maintaining the buildings and fixtures; and wages owed to the various workers employed by the Conventite (unless through the factor). Although far from a complete picture of the costs incurred, it is nevertheless an invaluable glimpse into the nuns' lives inside Sant'Elisabetta.

Expenditure

The *Debitori e Creditori* offers the earliest insight into the costs incurred by Sant'Elisabetta, as the accounts that survive from the mid-fifteenth century relate to the renovation of the chapel rather than everyday expenses. Although there are numerous entries for *spese diverse* [diverse expenses], the ledger contains some more detailed lists of how Sant'Elisabetta spent its money. The main categories of expenditure were living costs, and the wages paid to those working land owned by Sant'Elisabetta.

Predictably, *spese di vitto* [food expenses] account for much of the expenditure. In 1620, d'Albizo listed all the nuns at Sant'Elisabetta, totalling 204 *velate*, *converse* and *secolare*, all of whom needed to be fed, clothed, kept warm and nursed when sick.⁶ The convertite had a heavily grain-based diet, with payments received in grain, and frequent expenditure on *farina*, *grano* and *pane* [flour, grain, bread]. For example, on 20 November 1616, two payments were made for flour totalling £125.10.⁷ There are only three distinct payments for meat, and all of them low value when compared to those for flour: on 7 November 1616, £49.6 for '*una pietanza di arista*' [a dish of pork loin]; on 16 November, £22 for '*una pietanza di carne*' [a dish of meat]; and on 15 April 1617, £35 for '*spese in carne*' [meat expenses].⁸ The second November payment was certainly for the feast of St Elisabeth of Hungary the following day. The April payment does not seem to have been linked to a calendar festival (Easter Sunday that year was 26 March, placing subsequent feasts such as that of the Ascension or Corpus Christi too late for this purchase). It may have been for another celebration or festivity. Except for oil, no other food is readily identifiable, but some meat, fish or vegetables were probably included under *spese diverse*. Further living expenses, such as *spese di fuoco* [fire expenses] and wine, are listed throughout at varying costs.

Wine was a particularly high regular cost. The ledger shows payments totalling over £4,000 for *vino per consume di nostro convento* [wine for consumption by our convent] between 9 June and 9 August 1616.⁹ Lazzerio Berugi was paid £1,214 for wine between 12 July and 10 November.¹⁰ A further £1,295 was spent between 19 November 1616 and 9 January 1617.¹¹ Other wine purchases appear throughout, though economies were made on this: *servaglie* [servant nuns] were permitted to drink only diluted wine until 1619.

As well as the costs of food, wine and other necessities, Sant'Elisabetta employed various workers and temporarily hired others, as well as buying goods which the monastery could not produce. The nuns paid the *legnaiolo* [woodcutter] Agnolo Bandini £212 between 24 November 1616 and 3 February 1617, though they also bought wood from elsewhere.¹² Similarly, they paid *nostro braciaiuolo* (who produced firewood or coal for them) £35 on 24 September 1616.¹³ Lorenzo di Santi, the *ortolano* [gardener], was paid £5 on 10 December 1616 and nearly £800 on 21 August 1617 (the discrepancy likely due to him having less work to do over the winter).¹⁴ The nuns' garden was at the western side of the monastery, adjacent to what would become the Torrigiani Garden. Monastic gardens typically produced food, but either the nuns were not able to tend it entirely by themselves or Lorenzo di Santi worked an additional garden owned by Sant'Elisabetta but located further afield so that the nuns could not attend.

These and other wages ought to be assessed against the income in-kind that the workers provided, but the *Debitori e Creditori* does not record any in-kind payments so it is not possible to make an economic assessment of their value. Although both a *legnaiolo* and *braciaiuolo* were paid in 1616, the monastery also incurred additional costs for *spese di fuoco* (for example, £14 on 20 November, £12 on 28 November and £34 on 4 December 1616). Similarly, however, it is likely that some payments of rents were made in kind in the form of fresh produce, which would explain why there is no identifiable expenditure on vegetables, fruit or eggs. This does not, of course, mean that these were not consumed: some of this would have been produced in the monastery garden.

Almost everything that Sant'Elisabetta spent was on basic living costs, be that purchases of goods or the employment of workers to provide these goods. The three purchases of meat indicate that there was little to spend on non-essentials. What meat the convertite ate must have come from the farms they owned and was not accounted for in surviving books. Or more likely, they usually went without. In other female monastic houses, food staples were bread, wine and eggs.¹⁵ The ledger is silent on eggs, but the nuns probably kept chickens.¹⁶

Income

The 1553 law had cut off the important income stream of *serbanza* from Sant'Elisabetta, though it had not altogether prevented young girls from taking up residence at the monastery. After the cases of the 1560s and 1570s, there is no further evidence of unusual admissions until one revealed in the 1616 account book: payments for Francesca di Andrea Albertini dalle Pomerance, who was in the monastery as a '*fanciulla in serbo*' [girl in service].¹⁷ The record does not note who paid the sums of 1013 and 336 *scudi*, for periods of *serbanza* up to 1 August 1616 and for *due anni passata* [two years past]. The period that girls typically spent in *serbanza* had increased to between eight and twelve years by this time from the one to three years more common in the fifteenth century, so Francesca may have brought with her an important source of income.¹⁸

It is clear from the example of Francesca that *serbanza* could be financially lucrative for the Convertite, as it was for other nunneries in the city, especially compared to other sources of income.¹⁹ The ledger shows that in November 1616, Lessandra di Francesco Vernaccini, Lucretia di Salvestro Torrigiani and Dianora di Lorenzo da Palazuolo each paid the monastery £70 and Ipolita Bessi Romana paid £140, which included 70 florins for *sei mese in anticipo* [six months in advance].²⁰ The Sant'Elisabetta

accounts do not record the reason, but in three of the five cases the women in question were described as *meretrici*. These women usually paid two instalments of £70, which provided a fairly stable income for Sant'Elisabetta. The nuns kept a sufficiently close eye on this income that in one case, that of Gentile di Polito Mazzi, they noted that she had died in August 1617.²¹ The ledger records forty-two of these payments, from thirty-four different women, totalling £2,170.²² Although this was a significant sum, the benefit to Sant'Elisabetta may have mostly lain in the regularity of its payment, which would have helped mitigate some of the cash flow problems from which the monastery suffered.

These payments, uniform in value and for six months apiece, do not correspond to any fee described in the Onestà statutes. They were certainly made to ensure exemptions to specific Onestà rules, just as Giulia and over thirty other prostitutes had bought exemptions in 1615, costing 20 *scudi* a year from the prohibition on wearing gold and pearls. Although prostitutes had paid some of their taxes directly to Sant'Elisabetta from 1559, those sums were far lower (£5.1.8 regardless of the income bracket into which they fell) than the £70 recorded here.²³

The account book records income to the '*cassa di danari contanti*' [cash box] held '*in mano a Suor Obedienza Zaballi e Suor Cammilla Eletta nuove camerlinghe*' [in the hand of Suor Obedienza Zaballi and Suor Cammilla Eletta the new *camerlinghe*].²⁴ It is likely that one of these two *camerlinghe* named here kept the *Debitori e Creditori* ledger between 1616 and 1618. This is the first evidence of the convertite themselves acting in a financial role. Previously, accounts seem to have been kept by the abbess, as was the case for the expenses for the renovation of the chapel in 1499. Those accounts were signed off by a friar from Santo Spirito who had oversight of the building work. There is no evidence in the *Debitori e Creditori* that any of the male officials involved in Sant'Elisabetta took responsibility for those accounts. The appointment of two named sisters to the role of treasurer ensured appropriate checks against error and fraud were in place.

In September 1618, the *cassa* had transferred to the care of Suore Sibilla and Maria Caterina. Although the handwriting initially remained the same as in the previous period, this may have been a transitional arrangement as the record-keeping task was handed over from the previous *camerlinga* to the next after the latter had learned how to maintain the existing system. The second hand replaces the previous hand from November 1618 onwards, which indicates the regular change of office-bearers.

In addition to the payments from prostitutes, the cash box records show income from a variety of sources. There are several receipts of *limosine* [alms] (such as £195.18 on 10 November), income from a collection

at Santa Maria del Fiore, the monastery's inheritance from nuns and the payments from the Ufficiali dell'Onestà (for all of which see below). Sant'Elisabetta also continued to receive varying amounts of money as dowries for new nuns. When Lessandra di Francesco Vernaccini, who had been paying £70 for her exemptions, left prostitution to become a nun at Sant'Elisabetta in March 1617, she paid £840 as a dowry.²⁵ Lessandra's monachisation is noted below the record of her November 1616 payment: '*Nota come detta Lessandra si è fatta monaca e pagato la limosina in di 4 di marzo £840*' [Note that the said Lessandra is made a nun and paid alms on 4 March £840].²⁶ This seems to have been the standard dowry for a *velata* at Sant'Elisabetta in 1617; other residents such as Lisabetta, Barbera Pesciatinare and Laura Gherardini also paid this amount.²⁷ However, the account book also shows that the price for entry could vary. On 4 March and 10 April, respectively, Lucretia da Castelfiorentino and Fiammetta each paid the equivalent of half Lessandra's dowry (perhaps to become *converse* rather than *velate*), and on 24 April Benedetta Manuelli paid £700.²⁸ The variation in value of these monastic dowries was almost certainly determined by the wealth of the individual seeking entry and it would determine her position within the monastery.

Sant'Elisabetta's income was heavily dependent upon prostitutes both directly, in the form of the exemption payments described above and their dowries as nuns, and indirectly, in the form of fees and fines from the Onestà. The revised statutes of 1578 had set out precise amounts of the Onestà's income that were to go to Sant'Elisabetta. However, even this money could be subject to challenge. In 1617, Domenico di Marco Brandini claimed £210 from the monastery which the Onestà had paid to it '*per havere noi incorporato la quarta di Mona Maddalena donna di detto Girolamo lasciataci pensando che fusse morto detto Girolamo essendo egli tornato ha provato essere sua dote ne e bisognato farne la restitutione*' [because we had incorporated the quarter part of Mona Maddalena, wife of the said Girolamo left to us thinking that the said Girolamo had died, he having come back he proved it to be his dowry and he is in need of restitution to be made of it].²⁹ The Convertite was consequently required to pay back a portion of the money they had received in good faith.

In addition to the payments from the Onestà, the dowries and exemption fees, which were all to a greater or lesser extent legally mandated, the account book shows that alms and collections from other churches were also important sources of income. Each donated money from collections, of varying amounts that were typically between £20 and £50.³⁰ Sant'Elisabetta received money from a variety of orders and areas of the city: the Franciscans of Santa Croce; the Carmelites at the nearby Carmine; the Augustinian Hermit Friars at Santo Spirito; the Benedictine

nuns at Santa Felicita; the city cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore; the recently enclosed Dominican tertiaries at the nearby Annalena convent; Orsanmichele (whose donation in 1349 is the earliest record in the Sant'Elisabetta archive); the Medici church of San Lorenzo; the Theatines at San Gaetano and the Dominican friars at Santa Maria Novella.³¹ The records also note donations from San Piero, although several churches in the city bore that name. While some of the churches that made donations were located in the Oltrarno, close to Sant'Elisabetta, most were found north of the Arno (Santa Croce, the Duomo, San Lorenzo, San Gaetano, Santa Maria Novella and Orsanmichele).

The account of the cash box for April 1618 shows the variety of sources of alms for Sant'Elisabetta. As well as the collections at other churches, *cassette* at Sant'Elisabetta itself facilitated direct donations. This was a successful source of income and was more lucrative than from the other church collections. On Holy Saturday, 14 April 1618, £219 was taken from the Sant'Elisabetta *cassette*, while the highest donation from another church that month was only £30 on 6 April from Santa Croce.³² This money was accompanied by alms given directly to Sant'Elisabetta; some were offered by named donors, including convertite nuns, and many were anonymously paid. Income also came from convertite nuns who continued to earn money privately. In April 1618, £28 was received from Suor Cordula on the 10th, and on the 14th Suore Maria Gratia and Laldomine gave £14 and £17, respectively. In total, almost £1,800 was received in April 1618, comparable to two or three monachizations, or six years of *serbanza* at the rates described above.

The increasing involvement of the Medici family is visible in the early seventeenth century. Sant'Elisabetta started to receive irregular but significant donations directly from Grand Duke Cosimo II and his family, for example, on 7 and 15 April 1616 of £47 and £49 respectively, from the Grand Duke.³³ On 23 November, there is a further donation of 35 *scudi* from Cosimo II, followed by £70 a month later on 28 December. The Archduchess Maria Maddalena (1589–1631), his wife, had donated £35 two days previously, and Don Antonio de' Medici (1576–1621), son of Ferdinando I and Bianca Cappello, and nephew of Cosimo II, gave £70 on 15 January 1617.³⁴ The *giornali* also records several payments from Don Antonio's estate after his death in 1621. Precise reasons for the donations are not given, although the entries of November and December describe Cosimo as *nostro padrone*, indicating the nuns had – or wished to foster – a relationship of patronage with the Grand Duke.

Medici patronage of religious houses tended to be directed by female family members as it was considered the most appropriate form of patronage for women.³⁵ Archduchess Maria Maddalena was especially concerned

with female mystics and built close ties with Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, a Carmelite nun at Santa Maria degli Angeli (beatified in 1626, canonised in 1669). The Archduchess continued to make frequent donations to the Angeli after the nun's death in 1607.³⁶ She actively supported canonisation efforts, and the nuns' campaign to move from Borgo San Frediano.³⁷ In 1628, with the help of the Archduchess, the convent transferred to the Cestello monastery on Borgo Pinti, in which the first convertite of Florence had lived in the thirteenth century. The Archduchess and her mother-in-law, Christina of Lorraine, accompanied the nuns as they crossed the city to their new home.³⁸

Although Sant'Elisabetta did not produce any famed mystic or holy woman of the type that would likely have garnered even more interest from the Archduchess, the Convertite monastery of Siena did. Caterina Vannini, a native of that city who had worked as a prostitute in Rome, returned home to dedicate her life to penitence. In many ways, Vannini's *Vita* follows the pattern of the stories of other prostitute saints from earlier periods, for example, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt. She also bore similarities to late medieval holy penitents such as Margaret of Cortona (1247–97, canonised 1758), called the 'second Magdalene' and 'a penitent Magdalene' by her early fourteenth-century biographer.³⁹ She lived as a rich merchant's irregular wife in an unsanctioned common law marriage.

Vannini's life provides an interesting exemplar of a typical, poverty-driven entry to prostitution, followed by reform and admission to a Convertite monastery, though atypical in its mysticism and her lack of anonymity. She was born probably in 1562 into a family which fell into destitution after the death of her father while she was young. Vannini was a particularly beautiful child and, according to her *Vita*, her mother decided to put that beauty to use by having Caterina do sex work from the age of eleven.⁴⁰ They moved to Rome, a more lucrative market for a courtesan, where some time later, in fear for her soul, she attempted suicide but was saved through the intercession of the Virgin. In the jubilee year 1575, she was imprisoned as part of Pope Gregory XIII's repression of prostitution in the city. She was told to either enter the Roman Convertite or marry. Refusing either option, she was exiled to Siena where she continued to do sex work. During Advent, she had a mystical experience and converted, giving away her expensive clothes and belongings to the poor and donning the habit of a Dominican tertiary.⁴¹

Over the course of the next decade, Vannini lived as a recluse in her home, gaining a reputation for holiness. She applied to enter the Convertite three times before finally being admitted. There, her reputation of holiness spread further, and she gave spiritual counsel to both lay and religious visitors. She experienced mystical visions and ecstasies, and

endured stigmata. Her reputation attracted the attention of Archbishop Federico Borromeo, who took a particular interest in holy women. They met in 1604 and corresponded until her death in 1609. Her *Vita* was written shortly thereafter, leading to her beatification but attempts to have her canonised in the seventeenth century ultimately failed.⁴²

Despite Vannini's fame and residence in Tuscany, and despite Archduchess Maria Maddalena's evident interest in holy women and convertite nuns, there is no evidence of contact between the two. The Archduchess and her mother-in-law instead focused their attentions on holy women located closer to the Palazzo Pitti and on the Convertite monasteries in Florence and Pisa.

At Sant'Elisabetta, all of the income streams described, including donations from the grand ducal household and generous though some of them were, resulted in the same problems as those described in previous chapters: they were unstable and unreliable. While *un segreto* may have donated 560 *scudi* on 18 November 1616, the nuns could not have expected that a similar amount would be forthcoming in December, or even as an annual payment the following November.⁴³

In 1619, another source of income was added to those described in the Sant'Elisabetta *Debitori e Creditori*. On 3 December, a *bando* was issued which mandated a tax on the sale of playing cards and on hosting games. Restrictions on gambling were not new but this tax, intended to benefit Sant'Elisabetta and '*altri luoghi pii*' [other pious places], was a new development.⁴⁴ The monastery of the Convertite was identified while the other holy places were not. The regulation, which prohibited dice games, echoed the earlier transfer to Sant'Elisabetta of funds collected from prostitutes by the Onestà. The Medici administration sought again to offset its toleration of morally dubious activities by taxing them to support pious institutions. In this case, as before, Sant'Elisabetta was singled out as a recipient of money received through the taxation of immoral activities permitted by the state.

Grand ducal control, 1620

The year following the end of the *Debitori e Creditori* brought much bigger and more permanent changes to the way the Medici state supported Sant'Elisabetta. In September 1620, Cosimo II moved to bring the Convertite under the auspices of the Grand Duchy, allowing the state to take firmer control of the monastery's financial situation. The move came as a response to a period of particular hardship for the monastery and the city itself. A Europe-wide economic slump began at this time and brought

high prices which, combined with frequent poor harvests, led to famines. The famine of 1620 brought with it plague, so Cosimo's attentions to Sant'Elisabetta were especially valuable.⁴⁵

D'Albizo detailed the change in the monastery's *ricordi*: '*fatto di comun' volere di tutte le Monache fatto loro procuratore irrevocabile con facoltà di sostituirsi il Serenissimo Gran Duca di Toscana loro Signore et Priore a potere liberamente disporre di tutte le cose loro sì di beni stabili et altro come ad esso parra et piacerà*' [enacted with the common will of all the nuns made their irrevocable *procuratore*, with the power to choose to be substituted His Most Serene Highness the Grand Duke of Tuscany their lord and prior, being able to freely dispose of all their things, both their property and other things as it seems good to and pleases him].⁴⁶ D'Albizo stressed that the decision was prompted by the monastery's financial plight (which specifically included debts) and urgent need for food. It was decided with the consent of Michele Dati the governor, and all the nuns, represented by the abbess Suor Gostanza. This refrain of need, and especially hunger, had been repeated for Sant'Elisabetta since the fourteenth century. The city's numerous attempts to respond by providing food, wine and money reflected Sant'Elisabetta's civic role and indicates that the requests were generally accepted as genuine, however formulaic such claims may have been.

Cosimo was an entirely different *procuratore* to d'Albizo. The role allowed his officials to take direct control of the monastery's finances and may have encouraged donations from those seeking favour with the grand ducal family, but neither he nor his agents would perform the duties which d'Albizo had undertaken. To that end, d'Albizo continued in his role until 31 July 1621 when the *ricordi* states that he was replaced by the Franciscan Silvestro Bartolucci.⁴⁷ The everyday functions performed by the *procuratore* continued to be fulfilled by a religious.

The nuns had previously described Cosimo as their patron, and this relationship was formalised with his official role in the monastery's hierarchy. On 15 December of that year, d'Albizo recorded that the Grand Duke had sent alms to the nuns:

*Cento saccha di grano cioè staia trecento bonissimo di quello di Montepaldi, et barili settanta di vino buono; et pochi giorni [or] sono mando ancora scudi cinquanta per limosina, che se non fussino le sue elemosine che giornalmente ci manda le monache si morrebbero di fame, poichè le elemosine dei particolari non sono più nulla, poichè la nostra Città e ridotta in gran necessita, essendo piene le strade di poveri.*⁴⁸

[100 sacks of grain which is 300 staia [bushels] of the best of that of Montepaldi, and 70 barrels of good wine. And a few days ago, he again

sent 50 *scudi* for alms, so that if it were not for his alms sent to us daily, the nuns would die of hunger, because the alms from individuals are no longer worth anything, because the city is reduced to great need, the streets being full of the poor.]

The grain Cosimo sent was from the Medici estate at Montepaldi, south-west of Florence. Wine was no doubt particularly welcome as it had been the source of some controversy that was only resolved the year before. On 19 December 1619, the abbess agreed to change Sant'Elisabetta's wine policy. Instead of giving watered-down wine to the *servigiale*, as had been the case, they would now receive the same wine and the same amount of wine as the *velate*.⁴⁹ A victory for equality within Sant'Elisabetta, no doubt, but also an additional expense.

Cosimo's gift of grain and wine came at a time when the whole city was suffering. D'Albizo ended his *ricordi* entry with wish for the Grand Duke's health that reveals a pressing concern for those at Sant'Elisabetta. Cosimo was only thirty years old but had suffered from tuberculosis for several years. His health had been in decline since 1614 and by early 1621, his life would be in danger.⁵⁰ Cosimo had proven to be a vital patron and his death would once again throw Sant'Elisabetta into jeopardy. The alms from Cosimo continued over the next few weeks. On 19 December 1620, the nuns received 200 *scudi* which they used *per pagare vino et altri debiti* [to pay for wine and other debts].⁵¹ These gifts were valuable, both the food itself and the money which allowed the monastery to pay its debts and buy supplies.

As a consequence of the widespread hardship brought by famine and plague in the 1620s, Sant'Elisabetta could expect a reduction in the alms it received from local people. The monastery, therefore, turned to its old supporter and new *procuratore* who had the means to help. D'Albizo described a situation of extreme precarity at Sant'Elisabetta, with the nuns dependent on Cosimo's generosity for their lives. This may have been an exaggeration to valorise the Grand Duke, but given the city's desperate condition, his fear for the nuns' lives may have been quite genuine.⁵²

The alms from Cosimo continued into January. He sent '*cento dicianove zecchini di £10.3.4 l'uno acciò se ne comprasse tanto pane et vino si come si e determinato fare dalla detta Madre Badessa*' [119 zecchini [gold coins] worth £10.3.4 each, so that as much bread and wine as determined by the said Mother Abbess could be bought with it].⁵³ The nuns sang the *Te Deum* and prayed for his health in response. Three weeks after this, on 23 January, he sent *un porco domestico morto* [a dead domestic pig] which, given the apparent rarity of meat at Sant'Elisabetta, must have provided quite a feast.⁵⁴

The frequency and value of the alms Cosimo sent to Sant'Elisabetta increased significantly after he was named *procuratore*. Alms sent by the Medici family as seen in the 1616–18 ledger were tiny compared to those which came after September 1620. The type of donation also changed. In addition to cash, Cosimo sent grain from the Medici estates and wine from their vineyards, indicating a more personal interest in the monastery.

In his description of Cosimo's gifts, d'Albizo displays his typical fondness for the convertite. He frequently referred to them as '*le mie monache*' [my nuns] throughout his writing.⁵⁵ He made sure to portray their piety, describing their apparently spontaneous response to Cosimo's generosity by going to the choir to sing the *Te Deum* and to pray for their benefactor's health. Cosimo was in his final decline at this point and would be dead less than two months later. His failing health may have inspired his pious donations.

Two days after they received the money, the nuns again responded to the ill health of their patron, this time with a more elaborate display of piety. Crediting Abbess Gostanza with the idea, d'Albizo described the plan to display the monastery's crucifix '*di grandissima devozione e miracoli*' [of great devotion and miracles] so that the whole city could see and come together to pray for Cosimo's health.⁵⁶ The crucifix was taken on a night-time procession by all the friars of Santo Spirito and reveals the links which existed between several religious institutions in this area of the Oltrarno (see Figure 7.1). From the chapel of Sant'Elisabetta, the friars took it to the church of the Clarisses at Santa Chiara across the road so that the nuns there could see it. From there, it went up Via Santa Maria to the Annalena, the house of Dominican nuns, where it was placed in the parlour. The nuns knelt before it and sang the *Vexilla Regis* for the health of the Grand Duke. Thence the friars took it to San Felice in Piazza, the parish church and then to Piazza Pitti. When it reached the Medici palazzo, Cosimo and Maria Maddalena went out onto a terrace to look at it. It was then taken to Santo Spirito where the people could see it and thence to Santa Monaca, where the Augustinian nuns sang another *Te Deum* before it was returned to Sant'Elisabetta. The procession led to many offerings for Sant'Elisabetta, of which d'Albizo singled out the Annalena's generous donation of oil, wax, silver *voti*, and other items: '*essendosi stato porto molti oblazioni, et in particolare dale monache di Annalena fu lunedì mandato una so[ma] di olio, et libber none di cera, oltri a molte robe, et voti di argento, et altro*' [Many oblations had been brought, and in particular from the nuns of Annalena it was sent a *soma* of oil, and pounds of wax, and of many goods, and of silver, and more].⁵⁷

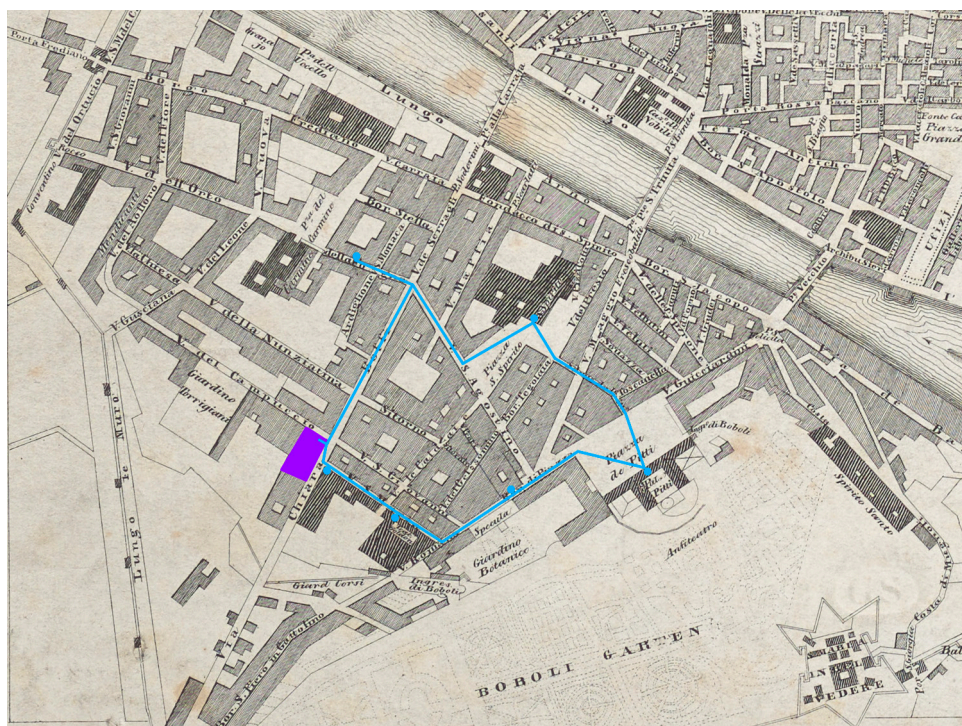


Figure 7.1 Route of the procession of the cross, 1621, with Sant'Elisabetta and the stopping points indicated. Detail of Map of Florence c. 1830, Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig via Wikimedia Commons. CCo/Public domain.

D'Albizo presented these events as an example of the Convertite's piety. He gives the abbess full credit for the idea; her motivation both to recognise the debt owed by Sant'Elisabetta to the Grand Duke, and to facilitate the whole city in praying for his recovery. Although the nuns themselves remained enclosed within the monastery, by making their miraculous crucifix a focus for prayers for Cosimo's health, they undertook an act of civic piety. Citizens entered the monastery chapel to view the crucifix before it was taken out into the streets. Three of the stops on its route were to female monastic communities so that other nearby enclosed nuns were also able to participate in the event and to pray for Cosimo's recovery.

The public viewing and procession of the crucifix also allowed Sant'Elisabetta to reinforce its relationship with the grand ducal family and consolidate the interest in the monastery that Cosimo had shown. Motives of self-interest were present alongside piety: Cosimo had been a vital benefactor, and his death would threaten the monastery's stability once more. The nuns' display of concern for his health may also have been

an attempt to engage the interest and affection of his wife, Archduchess Maria Maddalena. If so, it was successful, as she continued to support Sant'Elisabetta after Cosimo's death on 28 February 1621.

The Archduchess was particularly devoted to her namesake saint, Mary Magdalene, building a chapel dedicated to her at the Medici villa a Poggio Imperiale and commissioning from Justus Sustermans a portrait of herself as the saint.⁵⁸ Cristina di Lorena (1565–1637), Cosimo's mother, chose repentant prostitutes as recipients of her charity. In January 1610, she took an interest in a resident of the Pisan Convertite, writing to a Cavaliere Bocciantini asking him to fund the girl: '*Trovasi costì la Caterina già Hebrea, che è destinata per entrare nel nuovo Monasterio delle Convertite, et vogliamo che ella habbia li tre scudi il mese dal dì che morì la signora Lucrezia Gatani Medici, che le dava le spese*' [You find there Caterina previously a Jew, that is destined to enter the new monastery of the Convertite, and we want her to have there three *scudi* a month from the day that Signora Lucrezia Gatani Medici died, who used to give her these expenses].⁵⁹ The girl's patron having died, her placement at the Pisan Convertite depended upon finding a new one, and so the patronage transferred to the dowager duchess.

In April 1610 the diarist Cesare Tinghi had described the *nuovo monasterio di donne convertite* in Pisa, established by Cristina, and which must be the institution to which Caterina was to enter.⁶⁰ Both Maria Maddalena and her mother-in-law maintained an interest in repentant prostitutes and the institutions established to support them. Their patronage of Sant'Elisabetta, physically close to the Palazzo Pitti, and a long-established feature of the Florentine religious and charitable landscape, continued long after Cosimo's death.

The *nuova fabbrica*

The direct involvement of the grand ducal bureaucracy in the day-to-day running of Sant'Elisabetta is evident in the accounts. A new book of daily accounts (*giornali*) was started on 1 April 1622, with much of its contents being handled by the grand ducal *scrittoio* [desk, indicating office].⁶¹ Another new ledger (this time an *entrata e uscita*) was started on 3 August 1622 by the Grand Duke's camerlengo rather than the nuns.⁶² This ledger was kept in several hands, indicating that the management of Sant'Elisabetta's finances had moved from the nuns to the financial offices of the state. The accounts show the income from rents, alms and from various magistracies, including the Onestà, sometimes split into money from taxes and licences, fines and estates. They also show income from the *bollo*

delle carte instigated in 1619.⁶³ This source of income appears more uniform than others, with payments of £300 made approximately monthly (sometimes in instalments of £100 and £200).⁶⁴ The *giornali* makes clear that the payment is £100 per month.⁶⁵ One of the more striking changes evident in the accounts from 1622 onwards is that regular payments were made to Filippo della Bella, a *macellaro* [butcher]. This suggests that the nuns more regularly enjoyed meat in their diet, an indication of a better financial position.⁶⁶ The ledger also shows that the practice of *serbanza* was allowed once again. On 29 April 1624, £18 was paid to Sant'Elisabetta for the upkeep of Margherita Negri for six months.⁶⁷ A further payment, this time of £36 was made on 29 October to extend the period of *serbanza*.⁶⁸

In November 1626, a new *Entrata e Uscita* account book was opened at the monastery, in the hand of the new *procuratore*, Alberto Galganetti.⁶⁹ This book was created to sit separately from Sant'Elisabetta's other accounts as it pertained exclusively to a new *fabbrica* [workshop]. It is unclear exactly what this *fabbrica* produced. The records of expenses do not indicate raw materials bought in or finished products sold. It is possible that the workshop was created to increase the scale of the work the nuns already undertook, such as the production of gold thread, or to facilitate silk production. This was profitable work in which government officials believed it to be worth investing.⁷⁰ The accounts show the purchase of items to secure the monastery garden gates, indicating that the new workshop held items of value.⁷¹

The ledger entries show payments made to labourers and for stone and lime as the workshop was built. The monastery garden was divided by a new wall, and the gates secured. Labourers were paid to move stone and set the foundations.⁷² A *capanna* [cabin] was built for the nuns who were to oversee the *fabbrica*.⁷³ In July 1627, a *pollajo* [henhouse] was built.⁷⁴ It has been previously suggested that the convertite likely kept chickens and the *pollajo* entries confirm this. The *pollajo* built in 1627 was more likely to have replaced an older one lost during the other building works, perhaps enlarged, but not an integral part of the *fabbrica*.

A new gate was built on Via del Campuccio to allow access directly to and from the workshop.⁷⁵ This clearly indicates that the *fabbrica* products were intended for market. Catholic Reformation attempts to enforce *clausura* more strictly included prohibiting additional, unnecessary entry and exit points of the monastic complex. Later floorplans of the monastery and garden, from 1755, do not indicate a building or room described as a '*fabbrica*' or similar. However, at the back of the garden, away from the rest of the buildings, are small '*stanze per bollire i panni lini*' [rooms to boil linen].⁷⁶ It is not clear when these rooms were constructed, if they were those detailed in the 1626 *Entrata e Uscita* or not. Linen production

is not attested at Sant'Elisabetta in its first 300 years but was a common activity at Florentine nunneries from at least the fifteenth century. The production of linen for everyday use did not require significant skills, though producing finer and more lucrative cloth did, and nunneries could build reputations for the high quality cloth they made. This allowed them to command higher prices, though this was rare and most nunnery linen production was either for the nuns themselves or local markets.⁷⁷ It is very likely that the nuns produced linen for their own use, selling some surplus locally, long before the mid-eighteenth century. The *stanze* set aside for this purpose, at some distance from the main monastery buildings, could well have been built in the early seventeenth century to expand this production and increase the amount of fabric for sale.

Whatever the exact nature of the *nuova fabbrica*, it indicates an increase in the scale of wage labour undertaken at the Convertite. The city likely supported the building investment as a means to make Sant'Elisabetta self-sustaining and the oversight by grand ducal administrators would have focused on profitability.

Medici women's patronage

Cosimo II's heir, his son Ferdinando, was only ten years old when his father died. His mother and paternal grandmother served as co-regents until 1628, and both women remained influential after Ferdinando reached his majority. The regency was the only period during which Florence was ruled by women and while Maria Galli Stampino has shown that this should not be dismissed as a period of feminine hyper-religiosity as it so often is, Maria Maddalena in particular was a dedicated patron of religious institutions.⁷⁸ Sant'Elisabetta was a major benefactor of her patronage.

One donation in particular has left its mark. On Via del Campuccio, formerly part of the perimeter wall of Sant'Elisabetta, is a marble inscription. The text in Latin and Hebrew describes the extension of Sant'Elisabetta in 1627, funded by Maria Maddalena and Ferdinando:

D.O.M. Ferdinandus II Mag[nus] D[ux] Etrur[iae], et Maria Magdalena mater Archid[ucissa] Aust[riae] huius aedificii opus pio aere perfeceru[n]t, ut auru[m] hostis castitatis custos evaderet pudicitiae.

*Le-ahavat ha-El àsu h́ésed ma'alat romemut rozńenu néghed ha-h́ésed.*⁷⁹

Amore divino inflammati sereniss[i] principes nostri praebu[a]ere exemplum magnae honestatis contra maximam inhonestatem. AD MDCXXVII.

Lord Ferdinando II, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and his mother, Maria Maddalena, Archduchess of Austria, completed the work of this building with honest money so that, as a guardian of modesty, it could get away from the gold of the enemy of chastity.

For the love of God, the excellent highnesses of our lords made an act of charity against an act of wickedness.

Inflamed by love of God, our most serene lords have provided an example of great rectitude to counter very great shame. 1627.⁸⁰

It is the only marble inscription of its kind in Florence to include Hebrew text.⁸¹ This has raised questions between the few scholars who have considered the marker.⁸² Others have either not been aware or not tackled the puzzling inscription. Giuseppe Richa, writing in the 1760s, described the plaque as accompanied by the Medici arms. However, the arms are no longer extant, if they ever were, and he incorrectly quoted only a section of the first part of the Latin text, *ut aurum hostis castitatis custos fieret pudicitiae*.⁸³ He mentions the Hebrew text but assumes, again incorrectly, that it is an extract from scripture which echoes the meaning of the Latin.

Gad Sarfatti offered the most considered response to the inscription. He noted the repeat use of the word *hēsed* (חסד) which is usually translated into Italian as *bontà*, *carità*, *grazia* or *amore*, and is used in that sense in the first instance in the inscription, as it describes the pious act of donating the buildings to Sant'Elisabetta. However, Sarfatti pointed to two Biblical instances (Lev. 20.17 and Prov. 14.34) in which the same Hebrew word is used to describe sin. Sarfatti translates these two instances respectively as *infamia* and *vergogna* – wickedness and shame.⁸⁴ It is in this latter sense that the second occurrence of the word is intended. The Hebrew text therefore uses the same word to describe, and thus contrast, the act of charity with the act of wickedness (prostitution) as the second Latin passage also does. It echoes the Latin play on words, which contrasts *aes* (copper, and by extension honest money) with *aurum* (gold, the shameful earnings of prostitutes).

Sarfatti cautiously suggested that a Hebraist at court might have learned of the planned inscription and offered Hebrew text to be included to exploit the *hēsed* contronym that could not be reproduced in Latin. However, there can have been very few Florentines in the early seventeenth century who would have understood it, and few of those would have passed by the inscription down a side street in the Oltrarno. It is unlikely that such effort and expense would be incurred for this obscure wordplay. Additionally, the diacritical marks are wrong, seemingly added

randomly, indicating that a Hebraist was either not involved in this, or the inscriber of the plaque went rogue.⁸⁵

If the Hebrew text is not there because of the pun, then why? It has led to suggestions that converted Jewish women were sent to Sant'Elisabetta, as Caterina was sent to the Convertite of Pisa. The inscription is probably the reason why someone working for the twentieth-century municipality of Florence suggested that converted Jewish women lived in the monastery on the information board outside of the Sant'Elisabetta chapel, as the text specifically mentions the extension funded by Maria Maddalena. However, there is no evidence to support the use of Sant'Elisabetta in this way. There is no mention of converted Jews entering the monastery in the archival record up to 1630. Samuela Marconcini recorded only eighty Jewish women baptised as Christians in Florence between 1599 and 1724.⁸⁶ While this must be balanced against the paucity of sources on converted Jews who became nuns noted by Tamar Herzig, there remains no trace of former Jews resident in Sant'Elisabetta.⁸⁷ Critically, the law of 1553 would prohibit their entry and circumventing this would require the intervention of senior administrators.

In a third play on words in the inscription, the act of *dishonestas* may refer not only to prostitution but also to Judaism. To contemporaries who drew parallels between Jews and prostitutes, it might have made sense to house together former members of both groups who had converted to Christian life. Terpstra observed that both convents and the ghetto 'provided models on how to enclose, protect, and redeem groups.'⁸⁸ In Florence, and other cities like Venice and Bologna, the spatial limitations imposed upon prostitutes served similar purposes: enclosed brothel districts and approved streets; protection from foreign creditors and other legal privileges; the opportunity for redemption offered at the Lenten service they were required to attend, with the availability of Sant'Elisabetta to that end.⁸⁹ The link between Jews, prostitutes and nuns in terms of spatial restrictions suggests that contemporaries may have considered a nunnery for repentant prostitutes as an appropriate place in which to monachize formerly Jewish women. Caterina's 1610 admission to the Pisan Convertite was remarkable enough that Cristina di Lorena was involved, so it is unlikely that such an admission to Sant'Elisabetta, in breach of the 1553 law, would have gone unremarked upon.

Marconcini quoted a claim regarding the Carmelite Padre Alberto Leoni (1563–1642), instigator of the Florentine Casa dei Catecumeni for new converts from Judaism, that he: '*hebbe occasioni di convertire à vera penitenza più ladri, che rapiti dalle sue amorose parole si guadagnarono con tanta penitenza il Paradiso: più meretrici, che, fatte caste, resero feraci di castità quei dirupi*' [had occasions to convert to true penitence

more thieves, who rapt by his loving words won Paradise with so much penitence; more prostitutes, who, made chaste, those fallen [were] made ferocious by chastity].⁹⁰ She also argued that Filippo Neri may have influenced Leoni in this endeavour, which would link it once again to the conversion of prostitutes as Neri's natal home was next to Sant'Elisabetta and eventually became part of the monastery.⁹¹

Conclusion

The *Debitori e Creditori* ledger reveals a wealth of detail about income and expenditure at Sant'Elisabetta. While the nature of the monastery's expenses for food, wine, firewood and wages remained constant, its income fluctuated greatly. There is no identifiable source of regular, stable income, suggesting that the monastery was at the mercy of irregular donations and contributions which confirms the problems of cash flow identified in previous chapters.

By making Cosimo II the *procuratore* of Sant'Elisabetta in 1620, the monastery became in effect a state institution, and its finances could be managed within the greater economic machinery of the state. The Grand Duke, of course, took on none of the practical, day-to-day functions of the *procuratore*. These duties continued to be fulfilled by a religious. Instead, the title facilitated greater control of the monastery's accounts by the government. This can be seen in the transfer of the day-to-day account-keeping from the nun *camarlinghe* to the administrators of Grand Duke's *scrittoio*.

The direct involvement of the Medici government supported the creation of the *nuova fabbrica*, doubtlessly in order to increase the labour undertaken by convertite nuns and the income from it. This industry contrasted with the piecemeal work undertaken in the past in which individual nuns were contracted by *battilori* and kept at least a portion of their wages. The new arrangements, particularly after the stricter rules on private income after Trent, would have ensured that Sant'Elisabetta received most if not all of the income from the work. This combined with additional support from the *bolle delle carte* and continuing income from the Onestà, finally put Sant'Elisabetta on a more even keel.

Notes

1. Sharon Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 75–6.

2. CRSGF 126, 51 *Debitori e Creditori*, 1616–19.

3. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 3.
4. CRSGF 126, 51, fols 1–i.
5. CRSGF 126, 51, fols 1–i.
6. CRSGF 126, 62, fols. 173r–175r.
7. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. xxvi.
8. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 34.
9. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 30.
10. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. lxxi. Part of this total is also included in the sum paid between 9 June and 9 August.
11. CRSGF 126, 51, liii.
12. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 18.
13. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. xxvi.
14. CRSGF 126, 51, fols 25, 89.
15. K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture: Women and History Writing in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136.
16. Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convent* (Penguin/Viking, 2002), 3.
17. CRSGF 126, 51 Debitori e Creditori, fol. 6.
18. Sharon Strocchia, 'Taken into Custody: Girls and Convent Guardianship in Renaissance Florence', *Renaissance Studies* 17, no. 2 (2003): 179–80; Nicholas Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 16.
19. Terpstra, *Abandoned Children*, 16.
20. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 14.
21. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 20.
22. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. xvi., for example, which lists 15 payments of £70 or £140 from women.
23. Onestà, 3, Statuti 1577–1754.
24. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 26.
25. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 14.
26. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 14.
27. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. xxxiii.
28. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. xxxiii.
29. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 33.
30. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 27.
31. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 27.
32. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 108.
33. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 108.
34. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. xxvii.
35. Alice Elizabeth Sanger, 'Women of Power: Studies in the Patronage of Medici Grand Duchesses and Regentesses 1565–1650' (Ph.D. diss., University of Manchester, 2000), 109.

36. Sanger, 'Women of Power', 112; Clare Copeland, *Suor Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi: The Making of a Counter-Reformation Saint* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 94.
37. Copeland, *Suor Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi*, 108.
38. Sanger, 'Women of Power', 113.
39. Paula Clifford, 'St. Margaret of Cortona: The Burden of Being the "Second Magdalene"', *Magistra* 29, no. 2 (2023): 30–1.
40. Federico Borromeo, *Vita Della Suor Caterina Vannini* (Gli Eredi dal Corbelletti, 1699).
41. Eliza Jane Callander, 'Caterina Vannini in the Neoplatonic Paradox: Music, Mysticism, and Enclosure in the Early Modern Convertite' (PhD diss., University of Huddersfield, 2023), 6–10.
42. Callander, 'Caterina Vannini', 10., argues that the *Vita* was most likely written by her confessor Alessandro Quadrio, though Borromeo's name was attached to it.
43. CRSGF 126, 51, fol. 27.
44. Lorenzo Cantini, *Legislazione toscana raccolta e illustrata dal dottore Lorenzo Cantini* (Albizziniana da S. Maria in Campo, 1804), 15:127–30.
45. Gene A. Brucker, *Florence, the Golden Age, 1138–1737* (University of California Press, 1998), 107; John K. Brackett, *Criminal Justice and Crime in Late Renaissance Florence, 1537–1609* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 99.
46. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 105r.
47. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 119v.
48. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 112v.
49. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 186r.
50. Kathleen Comerford, *Jesuit Foundations and Medici Power, 1532–1621* (Brill, 2016), 82.
51. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 112v.
52. Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 574.
53. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 113r.
54. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 113v.
55. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 112v, for example.
56. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 114v.
57. CRSGF 126, 62, fol. 115r–v; Ronald Edward Zupko, *Italian Weights and Measures from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (American Philosophical Society, 1981), 266.
58. Maria Galli Stampino, 'A Regent and Her Court: Towards a Study of Maria Maddalena d'Austria's Patronage (Florence 1621–28)', *Forum Italicum* 40, no. 1 (2006): 23.
59. Medici Archive Project, Doc ID# 29334 (Volume 6038, fol. 80v) (transcription). (Lucrezia Gaetani, m. 1561 d. c. 1610, was the wife of Carlo di Giulio de' Medici [1533x37–1600], illegitimate son of Duke Alessandro de' Medici's illegitimate son.)
60. Cesare Tinghi, 'Diario fiorentino, vol. I (1600–1615)', fol. p. 289v, BNCF Gino Capponi 261.I, entry dated 27 April 1610. [Accessed 18 May 2017]. 'A dì 27 d'aprile avendo Madama Serenissima volontà di creare un nuovo monastero di donne Convertite nella città di Pisa.' [On 27 April, the most serene lady having the desire to create a new monastery of converted women in Pisa . . . [goes on to describe arrangements for male clerics at the new monastery]].

61. CRSGF 126, 1, fol. 1v.
62. CRSGF 126, 16, fol. 1r.
63. Cantini, *Legislazione toscana*, 15:127–30.
64. CRSGF 126, 16, fol. 3v.
65. CRSGF 126, 1, fol. 5r.
66. For example, CRSGF 126, 1, fol. 4v. which shows a payment of over 140 *lire* for ‘many pounds of meat’.
67. CRSGF 126, 1, fol. 6v.
68. CRSGF 126, 1, fol. 8v.
69. CRSGF 126, 17 Entrata e Uscita, 1626.
70. See Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, p. 124 for details of the financial reliance of some nunneries on this sort of workshop.
71. CRSGF 126, 17, fol. 2r.
72. CRSGF 126, 17, fol. 4b.
73. CRSGF 126, 17, fol. 5b.
74. CRSGF 126, 17, fol. 7b.
75. CRSGF 126, 17, fol. 141r.
76. CRSGF 126, 81, Piante diverse, 1755.
77. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 117.
78. Stampino, ‘A Regent and Her Court’, 23–4.
79. Hebrew transliteration in Gad Sarfatti, ‘Un’iscrizione Ebraica Del XVII Secolo a Firenze’, *La Rassegna Mensile Di Israel* 44, (1978), 320. He translates the sentence as ‘Per amore di Dio fecere un atto di carità le eccelse altezze dei nostri principi contro un atto di infamia’. I have translated this above into English in the past tense, as per the Hebrew text, although Sarfatti offers a present tense translation to Italian. With thanks to Dr Emily Michelson for alerting me to this aspect of the Hebrew text.
80. With thanks to Dr Peter Maxwell-Stuart for advice on the Latin translation.
81. Francesco Bigazzi, *Iscrizioni e Memorie Della Città Di Firenze* (Tipi dell’Arte della Stampa, 1886), xix; Sarfatti, ‘Un’iscrizione Ebraica’, 319. Sarfatti describes the locations of other Hebrew texts: all but one are on sculptures, the other is a wooden inscription of the Decalogue on the Porta dei Canonici at Santa Maria del Fiore.
82. Sarfatti, ‘Un’iscrizione Ebraica’; Samuela Marconcini, *Per amor del cielo: Farsi cristiani a Firenze tra Seicento e Settecento* (Firenze University Press, 2016).
83. Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie istoriche delle chiese fiorentine divise ne’suoi quartieri*: 9. *Quartiere di S. Spirito* (Viviani, 1761), 93.
84. Sarfatti, ‘Un’iscrizione Ebraica’, 321.
85. With thanks to Dr David Horowitz who alerted me to the incorrect diacritics.
86. Marconcini, *Per amor del cielo*, 73.
87. Tamar Herzog, ‘The Hazards of Conversion: Nuns, Jews, and Demons in Late Renaissance Italy’, *Church History* 85, no. 3 (2016): 469; Alessia Lirosi, ‘Monacare Le Ebree – Il Monastero Romano Della SS Annunziata All’Arco Dei Pantani: Una Ricerca in Corso’, *Rivista Di Storia Del Cristianesimo* 10, no. 1 (2013): 147–80.
88. Nicholas Terpstra, *Cultures of Charity: Women, Politics, and the Reform of Poor Relief in Renaissance Italy* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 61.

89. Terpstra, *Cultures of Charity*, 205–12; Paula C. Clarke, ‘The Business of Prostitution in Early Renaissance Venice’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2015): 419–64.

90. Marconcini, *Per amor del cielo*, 21.

91. Alfonso Capecelatro and Thomas Alder Pope, *The Life of Saint Philip Neri, Apostle of Rome v.1*, with Saint Mary’s College of California (Burns & Oates, 1894), 35–6; Marconcini, *Per amor del cielo*, 21.

Conclusion

The monastery of Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite of Florence was a house of contradictions. It offers us an unrivalled view into the city's approach to the regulation of sex and the conflicting demands of purity and practicality. Neither the first nor the last institutional alternative to prostitution, it was by far the longest enduring. It was part of the community of female monastic houses in the Oltrarno yet distinctly different from its neighbours. It was at once vital to civic strategies and of little interest to the ecclesiastical authorities. It provided an institutional alternative for women who had given over their lives to sin, allowing them to dedicate themselves to repentance instead. It was a religious house supported by the proceeds of crime, homosexuality and prostitution.

Sant'Elisabetta's conceptual predecessors are found as far back as sixth-century Byzantium but more immediately in twelfth-century France where successful experiments fed into wider movements of lay penitential piety and led to foundations of monasteries for repentant prostitutes throughout the country and into Italy. In Germany, an order of nuns was established with a mission to minister to the needs of prostitutes who wanted to leave their sinful work. Prostitution posed a thorny problem for European medieval cities. On the one hand, pragmatic minds acknowledged its inevitability and the failure of attempts to ban it. Christian thinkers too viewed it as unsavoury but serving the higher purpose of preventing greater sin. The exact nature of the greater sin it averted was mutable: sometimes it was male homosexual activity, other times it was sexual advances made by young men to 'good' women. In many cities, including Florence, municipal legislation aimed to keep sex work out of the city itself by restricting it to areas beyond the walls. This maintained the purity of the city itself while allowing access to sexually available women only a short distance away.

As civic authorities recognised poverty as the main driving factor pushing women into prostitution, they took steps to prevent debt trapping

women. However, it was a lay confraternity that established a monastery offering sex workers an institutional alternative. Sant'Elisabetta opened during an extended period of political tumult in Florence and attracted little municipal interest in the first decades of its existence. The initial donation of stone from the old walls was a matter of convenience for the authorities as much as charity. Only after prostitution was permitted within the walls did the authorities turn their attention to it, marking the beginning of several centuries of support and interference.

This book draws three main conclusions from the archival material examined in the previous chapters. First, that municipal interest in Sant'Elisabetta was directly related to changing municipal policies regarding prostitution between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. This included the creation of a magistracy which acted in some respects like a guild for the city's prostitutes. Second, that financial support from successive Florentine municipal administrations led the monastery to function as an important civic institution. Third, the monastery's dedication to its original purpose of the repentance of prostitutes, and the financial and moral involvement of the municipal authorities, ensured Sant'Elisabetta's importance and longevity.

Municipal interest in Sant'Elisabetta was preceded by changes to the priors' approach to prostitution in the city. There is little evidence of civic interest in the monastery while prostitution was illegal and relegated to an area beyond the walls before the beginning of the fifteenth century. The emergence of Sant'Elisabetta as a civic institution reflected the increasing legislation of morality of the mid-fifteenth century. This shift occurred following the priors' attempts to supervise city morality more closely, through legislation and the formation of new magistracies with jurisdiction over various matters of decency. The first of these attempts was the reversal of the city's previous strategies which banned prostitution from the city proper and limited it to a designated area beyond the walls. In 1403 the municipally approved brothel was brought into the centre of the city to be managed by the *Ufficiali dell'Onestà*. Previous scholars have viewed the *Onestà* as a tool to exploit prostitutes for the economic benefit of Sant'Elisabetta. However, this book has shown that the new magistracy fulfilled several guild-like functions for the prostitutes who registered, and it did not have any financial relationship with Sant'Elisabetta until the mid-sixteenth century. The new approach did not condone prostitution; in fact, it allowed the priors to exert direct control over the city's sexual economy. Further magistracies followed, with jurisdiction over the enforcement of sodomy laws, the morality of convents and corruption in public office, contributing to a greater moralistic tone to city

administration in the fifteenth century. Eventually the priors acted to fund the monastery from municipal sources on a long-term basis.

This concern to impose moral order on the city through legislation led to the first municipal funding of Sant'Elisabetta. The Ufficiali di Notte were required to support Sant'Elisabetta through donations of food and wine, and later with a portion of their fines in cash. For over a decade, cash from the Camera del Comune directly supplemented the Notte funding, demonstrating the priors' commitment to supporting the Convertite. The Notte funding is the first evidence of sustained municipal funding for the Convertite which would continue to be provided through criminal magistracies until the seventeenth century. After the Notte were disbanded in 1502, funding from the city continued, firstly from the Otto di Guardia and then by means of an additional fee levied on the fines paid to most of the city's magistracies. Florentine prostitution was explicitly and inexorably linked to anti-sodomy measures; both prostitutes and the Notte were understood to serve the city by encouraging heterosexual activity. Prostitutes did this by encouraging heterosexual activity with the ultimate aim of supporting population recovery in legitimate marriages, and by protecting 'good women' from the sexual appetites of young, unmarried men. The Notte were the other side of this equation. They prosecuted men who failed to avail themselves of the opportunity provided by sexually available women and who instead continued to engage in homosexual activity. Sant'Elisabetta also served this end by legitimising the city's sponsorship of the immoral activity of prostitution. The monastery offered an institutional, penitential alternative for women who had imperilled their souls in the service of Florence, even if civic duty had not been their primary motivation. We can see glimpses of the Sant'Elisabetta's reputation of dedicated repentance in the early sixteenth century when evidence suggests that those influenced by Savonarolan ideas sought to temporarily place their daughters in the care of the Convertite rather than in a more prestigious nunnery.

Sant'Elisabetta's role as a social and civic institution supported the original vision of its lay founders. The Captains of the Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laude di Santo Spirito were themselves part of the wider and long-standing movement of penitential piety which stressed religious devotion within the secular world. These laymen were affiliated with the Augustinian Hermit Friars of Santo Spirito, where they sang vernacular *lauds* and so, like Sant'Elisabetta itself, fulfilled both religious and secular functions. Their intention was to offer a place of penitence for the many women in the city who, they believed, wanted

to leave prostitution but were trapped. The financial involvement of the Florentine municipality began at Sant'Elisabetta's earliest point with the donation of stone from the recently demolished city walls for building the fabric of the monastery in the 1330s. This earliest intervention, although not exceptional, anticipated the pattern of later interactions between the Convertite and the city over the course of subsequent centuries in which the city responded to pleas of poverty from the monastery.

In the first seventy years of its existence, Sant'Elisabetta managed without municipal support and was reliant on donations and income generated by the nuns. The convertite supported themselves with textile work, which allowed individual nuns to acquire some private wealth. Some nuns used their money to buy property, which was inherited by the monastery on their deaths. This income was supplemented by donations, such as the land given to them by Orsanmichele in 1349, as well as several smaller donations and bequests.

However, it was only after the priors facilitated civic prostitution that they intervened to secure Sant'Elisabetta's continued operation. While many nunneries and other institutions habitually pleaded poverty, authorities evidently believed Sant'Elisabetta's claims. The priors sought ways to provide this financial support without incurring cost to the treasury. The funding made directly from the Camera del Comune between 1477 and 1482 is the only exception to this pattern before the seventeenth century and was most likely intended as a temporary measure. In the sixteenth century, when prostitution regulations underwent further reform, so too did the way in which the civic authorities approached Sant'Elisabetta's precarious financial position. Once again, the municipal authorities passed the burden of supporting the Convertite away from civic coffers, this time to registered prostitutes who were required to bequeath a quarter of their estates to the monastery on or before their death. The law of 1553 was quickly followed by major revisions to the prostitution regulations which permitted prostitutes to live outside of the brothel district for the first time, on a network of approved streets, and to buy exemptions to many of the regulations. These exemptions and a new programme of registration fees and fines provided new income to the magistracy, a portion of which was allocated to the Convertite. For the first time, the Onestà was required to fund Sant'Elisabetta directly.

Sant'Elisabetta's function as a civic institution can be seen most clearly in its use by the Otto as a prison for 'anomalous women' between 1524 and the nuns' refusal to accept one such woman in 1554. In return for the funding provided by the Otto, the magistracy used the monastery to incarcerate women and girls who had been involved in criminal acts, but whose guilt seemed difficult to determine. The particular use

of Sant'Elisabetta, and no other monastic houses, in this way, indicates its unique position in relation to civic power. This was not merely an arrangement of convenience: Sant'Elisabetta seems to have lacked suitable facilities to hold these women, as in 1531 a prison cell had to be built. The use of Sant'Elisabetta as an extension of the city's penal system was the authorities' first active intrusion upon the monastery's ability to self-govern but was followed by legislation which severely curtailed the nuns' ability to determine their own admissions.

From the mid-sixteenth century, Florentine authorities enshrined the monastery's own rules, as indicated in its constitutions and practice, into law for their own ends. Notably, the legislation that provided Sant'Elisabetta with a quarter of the estates of deceased prostitutes now also prohibited the admission of any woman, under any circumstances, who had not previously been a prostitute in the Florentine state. Albeit intended to support the monastery's original purpose, this level of civic intervention was unparalleled. In endorsing this legislation, Duke Cosimo I's government was not primarily concerned with preserving the vision of the fourteenth-century Captains of the Piccione per se, but with ensuring that Sant'Elisabetta continued to serve the distinct function which best suited Cosimo's general reforms of municipal welfare begun in the mid-sixteenth century. Despite strong wording to the contrary, a handful of exceptions were made to this rule. These had to be referred to Cosimo's ministers for a decision and were as likely to be agreed as refused. Those which were agreed, insofar as the limited number of surviving cases lets us deduce, were those in which a refusal would have burdened the state with finding an alternative civic institution in which to place a young girl. By prohibiting admissions to Sant'Elisabetta of non-prostitutes, the ducal and grand-ducal administrations ensured that Sant'Elisabetta continued to function as part of the Florentine system which Cosimo sought to bring under the purview of his government. This attitude placed Sant'Elisabetta fully into the network of Florentine civic institutions.

Cosimo's men made exemptions to the strict limitations on who could be admitted to Sant'Elisabetta. These were cases in which the girls in question were already physically present at Sant'Elisabetta, or in the case of one Pietà girl, on the verge of homelessness. These exceptions blurred the line between institutional prevention and penitence which Cosimo's administrators tried to preserve, but was an insignificant concern for the women and girls who found themselves vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Their situations echo those of the women forcibly held at the monastery by the Otto earlier in the sixteenth century. With nowhere else to go, an institution in which to place them was required, and Sant'Elisabetta provided a solution that suited the authorities.

The few exceptions do not, however, detract significantly from Sant'Elisabetta's overall dedication to its purpose. This encouraged support from municipal authorities for whom a monastic house for repentant prostitutes was a useful addition to the city's network of welfare institutions. Sant'Elisabetta remained the only institution available to unmarried prostitutes while others provided opportunities for women deemed to be at risk of becoming prostitutes: orphaned and abandoned girls vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, women in bad marriages who might be tempted or forced into prostitution and widows without means to support themselves or their dependants. In turn, the authorities sought to preserve Sant'Elisabetta's function with legislation prohibiting non-prostitutes being admitted. With this prohibition, and similar prohibitions on unmarried prostitutes wishing to repent from entering an *abbandonate*, the Malmaritate or the Orbatello, the Medici government was able to preserve the integrity of Sant'Elisabetta as a unique part of the state's provision of welfare.

Finally, in 1620 the grand ducal government reversed the policy of previous administrations in seeking to support Sant'Elisabetta without cost to the treasury. By appointing Cosimo II their *procuratore*, the nuns brought the monastery not only more firmly into Medici family patronage but also under control of the civic government. This move put the existing patronage relationship, from which the Convertite had greatly benefitted in the preceding years, onto a more formal footing. Despite Cosimo's death a few months later, Sant'Elisabetta continued to receive governmental support as well as personal patronage from Cosimo's wife and mother. Thus, Sant'Elisabetta was tied directly both to the civic administration and to the Grand Duke's immediate family. These ties helped to ensure the monastery's continued operation, by finally stabilising its financial situation. More frequent purchases of meat visible in the monastery's accounts suggest this was successful and Sant'Elisabetta's financial position was stabilised.

Naming Cosimo the monastery's *procuratore* ultimately put Sant'Elisabetta on a formal footing with the grand ducal government. Administrators stepped in to manage the monastery's finances which were no longer kept in nuns' hands. They also facilitated the expansion of labour undertaken by the nuns. This followed the pattern established in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by seeking to replace funding from the city treasury with money gathered from external sources: instead of additional levies on criminal fines, by the seventeenth century, it became wage labour. Although the nuns had worked prior to this, almost certainly constantly since the monastery opened, the new workshop built in 1627 marked a significant increase in scale.

The unique place Sant'Elisabetta held in the network of welfare institutions in Florence also had the effect of ensuring the monastery's unusual longevity. By the end of the fourteenth century, it was one of the oldest nunneries in Florence. It remained open on Via Chiara (later Via dei Serragli) until the early nineteenth century when Napoleon forcibly closed many religious houses. The sixteenth-century legislation which preserved Sant'Elisabetta as a monastery (almost) exclusively for convertite also ensured that it continued to receive municipal support. This in turn allowed the monastery to remain open when similar institutions failed or, through economic pressure, admitted overwhelming numbers of non-prostitutes.

This book has focused on Sant'Elisabetta's interactions with the secular authorities and how financial and legislative changes in the city affected the monastery. It has moved Sant'Elisabetta from the margin of studies about Florentine nuns, where it often appears literally and figuratively as a footnote. This relegation to the periphery ignores the monastery's position not only as one of the largest nunneries, but also one with a uniquely important place in the landscape of institutional welfare and civic policy. The monastery's strong civic function is more evident in the later period but has deep medieval roots. We used to think that Sant'Elisabetta's connection to prostitution was simply that it drew its nuns from that population, but in fact the monastery's financial security was tied to changing legislation of prostitution in Florence. Similarly, Sant'Elisabetta has been seen as a recipient of ad hoc alms from the city, but instead municipal funding was part of a wider programme of support and control. The management of prostitution was a vital tool for civic authorities and changing approaches to sexual commerce directed the city's interest in Sant'Elisabetta. It became a key resource in the city's facilitation of female prostitution by ensuring that there was a 'way out' available, one regularly raised during the Lenten sermons which sex workers were required to attend. More broadly, Sant'Elisabetta was an important part of a growing network of institutions devoted to social welfare.

A study of parallel relationships between the Convertite and the ecclesiastical hierarchy and other religious bodies, such as the friars who performed mass in the monastery chapel and provided confessors to the nuns, would reveal more about the religious life of the monastery. These connections remain largely unexplored. Now that the importance of the monastery to the city has been demonstrated, information about that aspect of its practice becomes all the more important.

Sant'Elisabetta was just one monastery, in one city, but it is only through understanding it and the changing relationship between it and successive city governments that we can fully understand how

Florence attempted to manage both prostitution and social welfare. Through the study of Sant'Elisabetta, we chart ways in which women stood outside the normal social and familial positions, and undertook work which compromised their honour while serving the city's wider political and social aim of increasing the legitimate population. This analysis calls into question prostitutes' assumed marginality, showing that they were fundamental parts of city- and later duchy-wide strategies that resulted from authorities' existential fears in the wake of the Black Death, and which continued and adapted once such concerns abated. Instead, the threats of disease, with the appearance of syphilis, and Catholic Reform anxieties about morality, took hold. This leads us to a better understanding of patterns of social control and social provision beyond Florence.

This work is part of the wider history of poverty and responses to it. It focuses on a particularly Catholic response still in evidence today as nuns in Italy work to help women and girls trafficked into sex work. Although monachization and repentance are no longer the proffered solutions, it reflects the impulse to extend *caritas* now, as then. In those areas where the Protestant Reformation took hold, charity ceased to be the obligation it was in the Catholic world. The effects of Protestant moralising added to this, and as prostitution was repressed, Convertite houses were not established, even as the Jesuits expanded that provision in southern Europe. This, and similar studies of poverty and institutions, such as those by Gavitt, Pullan and Terpstra, help to build a picture of the myriad ways Catholic cities sought to provide care in response to hardship and contrast the aims and charitable provision across Europe in the early modern period. The Convertite, in particular, allow us to see how society responded to women who lacked familial or marital support and managed to live with a degree of independence.

The many women who entered Sant'Elisabetta during its first three centuries have left little trace of their individual identities. With a handful of exceptions, their birth names are lost and what remains are the names that some of them took upon their monastic profession. Despite this anonymity, it is evident in small glimpses that the women who left prostitution to devote themselves to repentance in a poor and crowded monastery in the Oltrarno were industrious and shrewd. They took on work, earned money, loaned it to the monastery at advantageous rates and used the law to their benefit even when the legislation hampered their ability to control their own environment. Hardship had driven them into prostitution, charity offered them a way out of it, but poverty also characterised their new lives as nuns. I have resisted painting the women

of Sant'Elisabetta either as proto-feminist heroes or as helpless victims because in truth they were neither. Instead, they were women who navigated the difficult circumstances of deprivation and marginalisation as best they could, and for whom entering Sant'Elisabetta was probably the least bad option.

Appendix: The nuns of Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite

A. 3 July 1368

(Capitoli, Appendice, Pezzo 27, 2v–3v)

Soror Francische
Soror Katerina Gherardi
Soror Niccolosa Michelie
Soror Agata Bonaceuesti
Soror Stefana Giudicci
Soror Bartolomea Ficchi
Soror Taddea Nelli
Soror Andrea Andre
Soror Lucia Jacobi
Soror Agnesa Karigij
Soror Laurentia Giulli
Soror Joha Bartolomeij
Soror Felicita Pieri
Soror Margherita Johie
Soror Agostina Johie
Soror Saluana Rayneij
Soror Daria Vanis Di Pistorio
Soror Maddalena Cecchi
Soror Jacoba Bertelli
Soror Pelagia Leij
Soror Matthea Ugonie
Soror Chiara Coluccij
Soror Santina Andre
Soror Ysabetta Michelie
Soror Comasa B Stefani

B. 27 June 1459

(Contratti 70, D.No.4)

Suora Elisabetta Johanna de Fiandra, Abbatissa
Suora Sarridera Bartolomei de Florentia

Suora Lena Pauli Santa de Florentia
 Suora Pietra Johanna de Francia
 Suora Laurentia Xposari de Sta Maria Inpruneta
 Suora Piccarda Antonii Jacobi de Florentia
 Suora Chiara Giuglielmi de Francia
 Suora Jacoba Federig[]berti
 Suora Sarafina Johanna Ubirieri
 Suora Bartolomea Jacobi Luce
 Suora Cicilia Meniri Fabri
 Suora Angelica Johanni Genobij Amadori
 Suora Eufrangia Antony de Florentia
 Suora Francesca Cristiani
 Suora Tommasa Antonij Chatellini de [. .]
 Suora Doratea Francisci Jacobi
 Suora Angela Cechi de Castro Sancti Johannis

C. 19 April 1471

(Contratti 70, iii.No.55) Professed nuns

Suora Allexandra di Bartolomeo da Firenze, Badessa
 Suora Jacopa di Federigho da Firenze, vicaria
 Suora Piera di Giovanni da Francia
 Suora Lorenza di Christofano da Firenze
 Suora Picharda d'Antonio da Firenze
 Suora Apollonia di Domenicho da Firenze
 Suora Chiara di Giovanni da Firenze
 Suora Serafina di Giovanni da Firenze
 Suora Bartolomea di Francesco da Firenze
 Suora Angnola di Francesco da Chastel San Giovanni
 Suora Cecilia di [. .] da Firenze
 Suora Eufragia d'Andrea da Firenze
 Suora Francescha d'Antonio da Siena
 Suora Eufemia Christofano di Giovanni da Firenze
 Suora Maria di Francesco da Firenze
 Suora Allegra da Firenze
 Suora Monacha Nicholai da Firenze
 Suora Domenicha di B[]edo da Firenze
 Suora Antonia [] di Fabiano da Firenze
 Suora Laudomina di Gerardo d'Allamagna
 Suora Agostina di Giovanni da Vinezia
 Suora Madalena di Jacopo da Firenze

Suora Lucretia di . . . da Firenze
 Suora Ginevera di . . . da Firenze

D. 26 January 1560

(Contratti 70, R.No.17)

Suora Aurelia
 Suora Milia
 Suora Eugenia
 Suora Margherita
 Suora Apollonia
 Suora Diamans
 Suora Vinantia
 Suora Prudentia
 Suora Helina
 Suora Dimitilla
 Suora Clementia
 Suora Marietta
 Suora Puritas
 Suora Filippa
 Suora Laudomina
 Suora Beatix
 Suora Innocentia
 Suora Julia
 Suora Monaca
 Suora Valentia
 Suora Sigismunda
 Suora Cherubina
 Suora Lucretia
 Suora Angelica
 Suora Jacoba
 Suora Hipolita
 Suora Fiaminetta
 Suora Cornolia
 Suora Brigida
 Suora Francisca
 Suora Angelotta
 Suora Datia
 Suora Laura
 Suora Magdalena
 Suora Veronica

Suora Constantia
 Suora Faustina
 Suora Zenobia
 Suora Tecla
 Suora Christophora
 Suora Caterina
 Suora Agata
 Suora Mariantonia
 Suora Caminilla

E. 1 May 1620

(Ricordi 62, 173r–175r)

Velate

Suora Gostanza Badessa
 Suora Fioretta Vicaria
 Suora Portia
 Suora Argentina
 Suora Petronilla
 Suora Tommasa
 Suora Diodata
 Suora Massimilla
 Suora Colomba
 Suora Maria Francesca
 Suora Agnese
 Suora Verdiana
 Suora Margherita
 Suora Maria Anna
 Suora Laudomine
 Suora Gabbriell'Angola
 Suora Luisa
 Suora Maria Gratia
 Suora Davia
 Suora Maria Raffaella
 Suora Sibilla
 Suora Maddalena
 Suora Emilia
 Suora Maria Eletta
 Suora Veronica
 Suora Teodora

Suora Maria Caterina
Suora Raffaella
Suora Daniella
Suora Maria Giovanna
Suora Cecilia
Suora Giovann'Angola
Suora Francesc'Angola
Suora Elena
Suora Maria Laurentia
Suora Damiana
Suora Ubidentia
Suora Maddalen'Angola
Suora Arcangiola
Suora Maria Gabriella
Suora Cassandra Eletta
Suora Lodovica
Suora Maura
Suora Beatrice
Suora Eufemia
Suora Innocentia
Suora Filippa
Suora Alessandra Gerini
Suora Laura
Suora Francesca Vittoria
Suora Plautilla
Suora Lorenza Angiola
Suora Leonida
Suora Alessandra Antinori
Suora Clarice
Suora Agata
Suora Vittoria
Suora Cammilla Eletta
Suora Artimisia
Suora Olimpia
Suora Maria Giulia
Suora Lorenza Eletta
Suora Maria
Suora Dorotea
Suora Isabella
Suora Vintentia Laura
Suora Aurelia
Suora Maria Cambi

Suora Maria Gentile
 Suora Prassede
 Suora Donata Eletta
 Suora Angiola
 Suora Cherubina
 Suora Raffaella Eletta
 Suora Faustina
 Suora Caterina Angelica
 Suora Cammilla Benedetta
 Suora Maria Laura
 Suora Antonia Rinaldi
 Suora Prudenza Angiola
 Suora Lucretia
 Suora Batista
 Suora Clemente Vittoria
 Suora Elisabetta
 Suora Maddalena Felice
 Suora Francesca Eletta
 Suora Rubertia
 Suora Smeralda Felice
 Suora Dionisia
 Suora Batista Giovanna
 +Suora Eleneadia Lalli – morì a di 20 agosto 1620
 Suora Paola eletta
 Suora Anna
 Suora Francesca Giovanna
 Suora Maria Cosima
 Suora Lucretia Felice
 Suora Elisabetta Felice
 Suora Caterina Isabella
 Suora Maria Cristineva
 Suora Cammilla
 Suora Felice Angiola
 +Suora Bastiana felice
 Suora Uliva Benedetta
 Suora Felice Martilla a di 25 di aprile 1621

Converse

Suora Ginevera
 Suora Lorenza
 Suora Maria Giovanna
 Suora Maria oretta

Suora Reparata
 Suora Concordia
 Suora Valentina
 Suora Domenica
 Suora Speranza
 Suora Fede
 Suora Antonina
 Suora Caterina eletta
 Suora Guiliana
 Suora Lucilla
 Suora Guglielma
 Suora Monica
 Suora Paola felice
 Suora Desideria
 Suora Umiliana
 Suora Maria Suane
 Suora Lodovica Eletta
 Suora Barbara
 Suora Maria Cammilla
 Suora Pelagia
 +Suora Maria Dianora a dì 12 giugno 1621
 Suora Andrea
 Suora Leonarda
 Suora Jacinta
 +Suora Allegra – morta a di 19 giugno 1620
 Suora Patientia
 Suora Caterina Angiola
 +Suora Maria Benedetta mori a di 4 di aprile 1620
 Suora Maria Ipolita
 Suora Piera
 Suora Giovanna
 Suora Maria Violante
 Suora Flavia
 Suora Ottavia
 Suora Smeralda
 Suora Cirilla
 Suora Nastassia
 Suora Angiolina
 Suora Zanobia
 Suora Maria Benigna
 Suora Cordula
 Suora Benedetta

Suora Maria Gostanza
 Suora Taddea
 Suora Maria Iacopa
 Suora Maria Verinia
 Suora Giulia Arcangiola
 Suora Gostanza Eletta
 Suora Maria Lucretia
 Suora Maria Ottavia
 Suora Carità
 Suora Maddalena Angelica
 Suora Cristina
 Suora Valentia
 Suora Bastiana Eletta
 Suora Valeria
 Suora Gabriella
 Suora Diamante
 Suora Simona
 Suora Candida
 Suora Maria Taddea
 +Suora Caterina Arcangiola morì a di 9 di aprile 1621
 Suora Niccolosa
 Suora Maddalena Eletta
 Suora Maria Vincentia
 Suora Agostina
 Suora Francesca
 Suora Dianora
 Suora Violante
 Suora Umilita
 Suora Batista Felice
 Suora Giulia
 Suora Maria Marta
 Suora Gratia
 Suora Cosima Felice
 Suora Maddalena Selvaggia
 Suora Paola
 Suora Lutia
 Suora Piera Isabella
 Suora Maria Perpetua
 Suora Bartolommea
 Suora Perseveranza
 Suora Lucia
 Suora Jacopa Felice

Suora Fiammetta
 Suora Maria Bianca
 Suora Annalena
 Suora Giustina
 Suora Mansueta
 Suora Laura Felice
 Suora Maria Angiola
 Suora Ortensia Felice
 Suora Dianora Eletta
 Suora Maria Ancilla
 Francesca secolare
 Dianora secolare

F. Tutte le monache Nobili, et Gentildonne, 1620

(Ricordi 62, 182v–183r)

Nota di tutte le monache Nobili, et Gentildonne che si ritrovavano nel nostro venerando Monistero sotto il titolo di Santa Elisabetta Regina di Ungheria, et di Santa Maria Maddalena detto delle Convertite posto in via chiara nel Popolo di Santo Felice in Piazza di Firenze dall' anno 1455 in sino quasi a questo anno presente 1620 e prima

Suora Alessandra di Bartolomeo Lapaccini fu Badessa, Donna di Gran fama di santità e visse in questo santo Uffizio circa anni 22 per che stavano a vita—	1455
Suora Eufemia di Antonio Franceschi Donna Veneranda—	1455
Suora Jacopa di Taddeo Gaddi nel—	1482
Suora Cammilla di Niccolo Bizzari nel—	1487
Suora Gismonda di Giovanni Batista Deti nel—	1488
Suora Appollonia di Francesco Giandonati nel—	1492
Suora Serafina di Giovanni Corbinelli nel—	1493
Suora Cherubina di M[re] Lorenzo da Bagnano nel—	1494
Suora Lucretia di Piro Antonio Vernacci nel—	1496
Suora Ginevera di Lionardo Serragli nel—	1496
Suora Alessandra di Francesco Giandonati—	1497
Suora Smeralda di Dino Catellacci nel—	1499
Suora Cleofe di Ruberto Adimari nel—	1499
Suora Agnoletta di Soldo Soldani nel—	1499
Suora Honesta di Giovanni Carnesechi nel—	1507
Suora Caterina di Jacopo Baldouini nel—	1507
Suora Dianora di Giovanni De Ricci nel—	1509

Suora Pazzienza di Dardano Acciaiuoli nel-----	1510
Suora Clemenza di Bartolomeo Ciacchagnini fu Badessa nel-----	1514
Suora Dianora d' Albizo de Rossi nel-----	1514
Suora Elisabetta di Bartolomeo Carducci nel-----	1531
Suora Giulietta di Mariotto Ciofi nel-----	1533
Suora Jacopa di Raffaello Federighi nel-----	1553
Suora Beatrice di Giovanni Martini nel-----	1561
Suora Alessandra di Zanobi Borgianni nel-----	1561
Suora Brigida di Lorenzo Miniati nel-----	1563
Suora Aurelia del Milanese fu Badessa nel-----	1564
Suora Elia di Tomaso Niccolini nel-----	1567
Suora Ginevera di Domenico Baccelli nel-----	1567
Suora Marietta de Rinaldeschi fu Baddessa-----	1528
Suora Smeralda di Giovanni Dini nel-----	1569
Suora Innocenza di Antonio Giani fu Badessa nel-----	1583
Suora Agnoletta Soldani fu Badessa nel-----	1522
Suora Dianora di Rossi fu Badessa nel-----	1523
Suora Tommasa Fiorelli fu Badessa nel-----	1534
Se bene queste tre ultime sono scritte un'altra volta io ho voluto nominarle per essere state Donne di Santa memoria et degne di essere nominate più volte per la esemplare loro Santa vita e santi costumi.	
Suora Arsina	} sorelle, et figliuole di Bernardo Granacci nel— 1526
Suora Ipolita	
Suora Laudomine	
Suora Cherubina Agolanti fu Badessa nel-----	1592
Suora Angelica di Niccolò dell'Abbaco nel-----	1528
Suora Maria Cleofe di Nanni Valori nel-----	1570
Suora Angelica di Giovanni Amadori nel-----	1459
Suora Agata Vanni Badessa nel-----	1596

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291

292

293

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 45
 58
 65
 97
 105

137
146
147
148
172
183
186

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Index

- abandoned children, 2, 3–4, 5, 137, 145, 150, 152, 160, 196
- abandoned wives, 4, 54
- abortion, 128–129
- Agnoletta's daughter, 137–138, 139, 151, 152–153
- Albertini dalle Pomerance, Francesca di Andrea, 171
- Albis Sororibus Wigorn*. *See* Worcester White Ladies
- Alexandra di Bartolomeno, abbess of Sant'Elisabetta, 99, 106–107, 109, 115, 202
- Allegra, Suora, 123
- alms, 4, 5, 50, 54, 55, 60, 122
- Altorniri, Naldino di Nicholo degli, 60
- Angela, wife of Nofri di Francesco, 49
- animals, 49
- Annalena, 2, 125–126, 140, 174, 179
- Antinori family, 126
- Antonia, La Gazella, 74
- Antonino, Archbishop, 54
- Antonio degli Orsi, bishop of Florence, 31
- Antonio di Ser Piero da Napoli, 61–62, 63
- Antonio d'Orsi, bishop of Florence. *See* Antonio degli Orsi
- apprenticeship, 5
- Aquinas, Thomas, 33, 48
- arable land. *See* farms, farmland
- archbishop of Florence, 124, 153, 154
- archive, xv, 15, 18, 32, 45, 47, 59, 63, 122, 125, 146, 159, 167–168
- Arno, 2, 15, 46, 50, 54, 57, 72
- Arte dei Medici e Speziali, 12, 90, 91, 99–100, 102–103, 108, 116
- Arte della Seta. *See* Por Santa Maria
- artisans, 55, 78, 111, 126
- artists, 55
- Ascension, feast, 170
- assault, 71, 113
- Auditore Fiscale, 158
- Augustine, 8, 10, 33, 48, 148
- Augustinian rule, 28, 30, 31
- Augustinians, 2, 10, 19, 28, 29, 45–46, 50, 53, 55, 101–102, 149, 173, 193
- Augustus, 32
- banks, 168
- Barbara, prisoner in Sant'Elisabetta, 128
- barbers, 99
- Barbiere, Nanna d'Angolo, 99–100
- Bardi bank, 46
- Bartolucci, Silvestro, procuratore of Sant'Elisabetta, 177
- Basilica di Santa Rita, Cascia, 51
- Bastiere, Betta di Michele, 129, 133
- battilori*, 86, 139–140, 186
- Beatrice, 5
- Bedei, Aurelia, 160
- begging, 54
- beguines, 27
- bells, 77
- Benedictines, 28, 31, 168, 173–174
- bequests, 50, 58, 63, 89
- Betta. *See* Bastiere, Betta di Michele
- Bevegnati, Giunta, 30
- Bice, foundress of Pistoian convertite, 58
- Biliotta, Maddalena di Domenico, 152
- Billi, Antonio, 102
- birth rate, 81
- bizzoche*, 27
- Black Death, 31, 32, 47, 51, 57, 71, 198
- blasphemy, 79, 80
- bocche*, 123
- Bollette, Ufficio delle, 70–71
- bollo delle carte*, 176, 181–182, 186
- Bologna, 27, 149, 185
- Borgo Ognissanti, 152
- Borgo Pinti, 10, 52, 58, 175
- Borgo San Frediano, 60, 112, 175
- Borgo San Pier Gattolino, 114
- Borromeo, Carlo, 148
- Borromeo, Federico, 175
- Botticelli, Sandro, 12, 102, 103–107, 116
- Brabant, 73
- Brackett, John, 74–75, 159
- Brandini, Domenico di Marco, 173
- bread, 49, 123, 170, 178
- Brienne, Walter of, Duke of Athens, 57, 64, 72
- brothel, municipal, 69, 74, 75, 78, 131–132, 148
- brothel district, 8, 61, 70, 72, 146, 194
- brothels, 11, 24, 26, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 47–48, 49, 57, 61–62, 74, 75, 79, 148, 149, 155. *See also* Campoluccio; Malacucina
- brothers, 34, 70, 97, 108
- Brucker, Gene, 57
- burning. *See* capital punishment
- butchers, 49, 182
- Byzantium, 6, 9, 23, 24–25, 38, 52, 191

- Camera del Comune, 12, 100–101, 117, 194
camerlengo, 181
 Camilla Eletta, Suora, 172
 Campoluccio, 36–37, 47–48, 61, 69
 capital punishment, 36, 37, 48, 80, 82, 98, 128
 Capitano del Popolo, 47–48
 Cappello, Bianca, 174
 Carmelites, 173, 174
 Carmine, church, 112, 173
 Carnesecchi, Carlo, 18, 160
 Carnesecchi, Suora Maddalena, 169
 carriages, 157
 Casa dei Catecumeni, 185
 Casa del Malmaritate, Florence, 150, 196
 Casa del Soccorso, Bologna, 134
 Casa della Carità, Florence, 150
 Casa della Pietà, 152, 155. *See also* Pietà girl
 Casa di Santa Marta, Rome, 149, 162
 cash, 60, 115, 116, 123, 160, 179, 193
 Castel Fiorentino, 89
 Castro San Giovanni, 87
 catasto, 168
 Caterina, Jewish convert to Catholicism, 181, 185
 Caterina di Gherardi di Martello di Pisa, Suora, 60
 Catholic Reform, 6, 8, 13, 18, 124, 148–149, 162, 182, 198
 charity, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 30, 46, 49, 54, 55, 57, 121, 123, 145, 198
 Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, 121
 Charles VIII of France, 97
 Chastel San Giovanni. *See* Castro San Giovanni
 children, endangered, 61
 children's homes, 5. *See also* abandoned children
 Christ, 28
 Christina of Lorraine, 14, 146, 175, 176, 181, 183, 196
 patroness of repentant prostitutes, 181
 Pisa convertite, 181, 185
 regent for Ferdinando I, 183
 Ciacchagnini, Suora Clementia di Bartolomeo, abbess of Sant'Elisabetta, 123, 210
 Ciompi Revolt, 64, 113
 Cistercians, 32
 city gates. *See* gates, city
 city statutes, 36, 37
 city walls. *See* walls, city
 civic government, 7, 8, 11, 19, 24, 47, 48, 62, 90, 98, 109, 117, 136, 167, 186, 191–192, 194, 196, 197–198
 civic morality, 6, 192–193
 civic piety, 180
 Clare, St, 30
 Clarisses, 2, 179
clausura, 17, 19, 109, 124, 129, 174, 180, 182, 185
 Clement VII, 149
 Clement VIII, 148
 clerical celibacy, 26
 cloth of gold, 157
 cloth of silver, 157
 coaches, 157
 Cohen, Sherrill, 2, 98, 127
commesse, 110, 111, 116
 Compagnia delle Brucciate, 55
 Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laude di Santo Spirito (the 'Piccione'), 10, 11, 17, 34, 45–46, 50, 51–52, 55, 57, 83–84, 90–91, 100, 103, 114, 193, 195
 concubines, 26, 148, 149
 confession, 27, 28, 55
 confraternities, 7, 10, 11, 24, 50, 54, 55, 57, 130, 149, 192
 Conservatori delle Legge, 81
 Conservatori dell'Onestà dei Monasteri, 81, 192
contado, 46, 59
 convent. *See* specific house and/or nunneries
conversi, 27, 28
 convertite, 3, 7, 10, 15, 25, 26, 32, 53, 148. *See also* Sant'Elisabetta
 Bologna, 27, 31, 134, 149
 Fiesole, 58–59
 Filles-Dieu, 30
 Fontevraud, 9, 26, 30
 Genoa, 31, 52
 Jesuits establish, 149
 Messina, 27
 Metanoia, 9, 24–25
 Pisa, 7, 9, 27, 31, 149, 176, 181, 185
 Pistoia, 7, 52, 58, 59, 149
 poverty, 58
 Rome, 9, 31, 52, 149, 175
 Saint-Antoine-des-Champs, 9, 26, 30
 Santa Maria Maddalena Di Cestello, Florence, 9–10, 23, 31–32, 37–38, 39, 45, 52, 58, 175
 Santa Maria Maddelena, Rome, 14
 Siena, 149, 175
 Viterbo, 9, 27, 31
 Cornelia, Suora, 123
 corporal punishment, 36, 79, 80
 Corpus Christi, feast, 170
 corruption, 81, 90
 Cosmas and Damian, saints, 102
 cost of living, 55

- Council of Trent, 18, 148, 151, 186
 Counter-Reformation. *See* Catholic Reform
 Courtauld Institute Galleries, 102, 103
 courtesans, 157–158
 crime, 85, 113, 121, 127, 131, 140, 160, 194–195
 crises, 5, 46, 57
 Cristoforo da Piacenza, 72
 crop failure. *See* famine; harvests
- D'Albizo, Padre Benedetto, 15–17, 19, 88, 106, 108, 110, 111, 113, 122, 126, 170, 177–178, 179, 180
 D'Albizo de Rossi, Suora Dianora, 123
 Dante, 5
 D'Aragona, Tullia, 157–158
 Dati, Michele, 161, 177
 Datini, Francesco, 5
 daughters, 2, 46, 55, 61, 81, 99, 108, 110–112, 113, 125, 126, 128, 134, 137–138, 139, 150, 151–154, 193
 Davidsohn, Robert, 31, 32, 37
 Dell'Ancisa, Vittorio, 150
 denunciation, 82
 Deputati Sopra I Monasteri, 151–152
 Dianora, Suora, 115, 116
 disease, 152, 164, 178. *See also* syphilis
 domestic service, 5
 domestic violence, 4
 Dominic, St, 28
 Dominican tertiaries, 2, 125, 152, 174, 175, 179
 Dominicans, 18, 28, 29, 174
 donations, 5
 dowry, 4, 5, 11, 81, 145, 150
 dowry, monastic, 27, 81, 137, 139, 152, 153
 Duke of Athens. *See* Brienne, Walter of
- Easter, 170
 education, 3, 6, 106, 111, 125, 126–127, 151
 Elizabeth of Hungary, 10, 29, 53, 89, 170
 enclosure. *See* *clausura*
 England, 31
 Eufemia, Suora, 106, 108–109, 115, 116, 123
 execution. *See* capital punishment
- fama*, 49, 114, 135
 familial support, 4, 54–55, 70, 99, 109, 110, 126, 136, 198
 family breakdown, 4, 70, 198. *See also* abandoned children; abandoned wives
 famine, 46, 177, 178
 farms, farmland, 60–61
 fathers, 34, 70, 76, 81, 99, 113, 128–129
 Ferrara, 70–71
- Ferza, parish, 55
 Fiadoni, Tolomeo. *See* Ptolemy of Lucca
 Fidati, Simone da Cascia, 50, 103, 105
 Fiesole, 58–59
 Filippi, Jacopo di Francesco, 108
 fines, 35, 36, 80, 82, 84, 115, 131, 146
 Fini, Lucrezia di Nicholo, 110–112
 Flanders, 73, 87, 88
 Florence, 30, 31, 34, 38, 49, 121, 149, 150, 191
 marriage rates, 71
 population concerns, 71, 90, 149, 193, 198
 Fontevraud, 9, 26, 52
 food, 62
 food prices, 54, 176–177
forbachaio, 86
 foreigners, 47, 59, 73, 77, 79, 87–88, 100, 185
 Fourth Lateran Council (Lateran IV), 9, 24, 27, 28, 29, 38
 France, 6, 9, 23, 27, 28, 30, 38, 73, 87–88, 100, 191
 Franchi, Archbishop Andrea, 58
 Francis, St, 29
 Franciscans, 29–30, 53, 173, 177
 Fraternità di Santa Maria Vergine della Pietà di Fiesole, 58
 fraud, 79, 113
 Fulk of Neuilly, 9, 26, 38
- gabella del sale*. *See* salt tax
 gabelle, 72, 84
 Gadini, Bartolo, 49–50
 Galganetti, Alberto, 182
 galleys, 71
 gambling, 54, 176, 181–182, 186. *See also* *bollo delle carte*
 gates, city, 35
 Genoa, 149
 Germany, 6, 9, 23, 30, 87, 100, 191
 Gherardini, Alessandro, 1, 105
 Ghibelline faction, 46
 Ginevra di Lionardo Serragli, 112–113
 Giovanna's daughter, 138
 Giudice degli Appelli, 49
 Giudici del Consiglio di Giustizia, 115
 Giulia di Antonia, 160–161
 gloves, 63
 gold thread, 18, 86, 139–140, 182
 Goldthwaite, Richard, 101
gonfalone, 47
 Gostanza, Suora, abbess of Sant'Elisabetta, 177, 179, 180, 204
 Gostanza's daughter, 153, 154
 grain, 89, 177–178, 179

- Grascia, Ufficiali di, 62, 69, 78, 151
 Greece, 73
 Gregorio da Rimini, 56
 Gregory IX, 9, 29, 31, 53
 Gregory XI, 72
 Gregory XIII, 175
 Griffoni, Matteo de', 72
 Guelf faction, 46
 Guicciardini, Agnolo, 151–153
 guilds, 47, 76, 78, 80, 91, 103, 192
 Guillaume d'Auvergne, 30

 harvests, 46, 60, 89, 177
 Hebrew, 14, 183–185
 Henry III of England, 31
 heterosexual sex, 73, 81, 191, 193
 homicide. *See* murder
 homosexual sex, 11, 71, 74, 77, 78, 81, 82, 85, 90, 191, 193
 honour, 1, 33, 36, 47, 71, 72, 73, 74, 79, 81, 112, 136, 138, 145, 154, 155, 162, 198
 hood, 77
 Horne, Herbert, 106
 hospitals, 10, 11, 24, 53, 57, 123
 Humiliati, 37
 husbands, 4, 33, 34, 38, 70, 76, 99, 112, 128, 149–150

 illegitimacy, 137
 immigrants, 46, 50, 55, 79
incurabili, 149
 Innocent III, 9, 26, 28, 38, 73
 Innocenti, 5, 18, 85, 123, 130, 132, 138, 154
 institutions, 3, 5, 24, 28, 45, 85, 89, 98, 121, 130, 145, 149, 150, 154, 194, 195, 196, 197
 inventory, 83
 Italian, 78
 Italian Wars, 97
 Italy, 6, 9, 23, 26, 27, 30, 31, 38, 191

 Jansen, Katherine, 28
 Jean de Joinville, 30
 Jerome, St, 33
 Jesuits, 23, 149, 150, 198
 Jewish ghetto, 13, 147–148, 158, 162, 185
 Jews, 13, 48, 146–147, 148, 185
 distinguishing signs, 147
 John the Baptist, 103
 Justinian, 25, 30

 Konrad von Marburg, 29

 labourers, 55, 58, 78, 182
 Lapini, Agostino, 147–148, 158

 Last Judgement, 4
 Lateran IV. *See* Fourth Lateran Council
 Latin, 14, 78, 183, 184
laudesi companies, 46, 50, 59
 lauds, 24, 46, 193
 lay penitence, 24, 29, 38
 lay piety, 11, 24, 27, 28, 29
lazaretto. *See* leprosarium
 Le Murate, 84, 86, 110, 123, 139–140, 151
 Le Poverine, 124
 Leges Iuliae, 32
 Legge . . . in beneficio del monasterio
 delle Convertite (1553), 130–134, 136, 137–138, 141, 151, 152–153, 155, 171, 185, 194, 195
 legitimacy, 71
 Lent, 156, 185, 197
 Leo VI, Emperor, 25
 Leo XI. *See* Medici, Alessandro de'
 lepers, 9, 26, 37, 48
 leprosarium, 37
 Levaldini, Antonia de Piera, 154
 Levaldini, La Piera de, 154
 Levaldini, Silvia de Piera, 154
 linen, 182–183
 literacy, 3, 126
 Little Ice Age, 46
 Loire, 9, 23
 Louis, St, 30
 Low Countries, 87
 Loyola, Ignatius, 149
 Lucca, 33
 Lucia di Cerchi of Perugia, 60

 Malacucina, 61–62, 146–147, 148, 158, 162
malmaritate, 149, 150, 196
 Manfredi, Barnardo, 109
mantellate, 27
 Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, 57
 Marconcini, Samuela, 185
 Margaret of Cortona, 30, 175
 Maria Caterina, 172
 Maria Maddalena of Austria,
 Archduchess, 13, 146, 167, 179, 181, 183, 184, 196
 devotion to Mary Magdalene, 181
 donation of buildings, 167, 185
 donations from, 174
 interest in Sant'Elisabetta, 180–181
 mystics, 174–175, 176
 patron of religious organisations, 183
 patron of Sant'Elisabetta, 183
 regent for Ferdinando I, 183
 Marietta, 110–112
 marriage, 26, 38, 71–72, 81, 149, 150, 152, 175, 193, 198

- Mary Magdalene, 9, 10, 16, 24, 26, 27, 28,
 30, 54, 89, 102, 103–107, 156, 175
 Mary of Egypt, 175
 Masella, 61–62, 63
 Mazzi, Gentile di Polito, 172
 Mazzi, Maria Serena, 78
 medical care. *See* hospitals
 Medici, Alessandro de', Archbishop of
 Florence (later Pope Leo XI), 151
 Medici, Antonio de', 174
 Medici, Cosimo I de', 4, 13, 121, 130, 135,
 145, 146, 151, 152, 153, 156, 158, 195
 law of 1553, 130–134, 136, 141, 151, 152,
 153
 retirement, 146
 welfare reforms, 121, 130, 133, 135, 145,
 162
 Medici, Cosimo II de', 7, 13, 14, 19, 146,
 160, 161, 162, 167, 174, 177, 178, 179,
 180
 death, 167, 196
 donations to Sant'Elisabetta, 177–178,
 179
 family, 174. *See also* Medici family
 illness, 167, 178
 interest in Sant'Elisabetta, 176–177,
 180–181
 patron of Sant'Elisabetta, 174, 177–180
 procurator of Sant'Elisabetta, 177,
 179, 186, 196
 Medici, Cosimo il Vecchio, 97
 Medici, Donato de', Bishop of Pistoia, 58
 Medici, Ferdinando de', 150, 183, 184
 Medici, Francesco I de', 146, 147, 154, 156
 Medici, Giuliano de', 97
 Medici, Giulio di Giuliano de'. *See*
 Clement VII, Pope
 Medici, Lorenzo de', 97, 100
 Medici, Piero de', the Unfortunate, 97,
 107, 117
 Medici, Piero de Cosimo de', 97
 Medici family, 8, 98, 121, 146, 167, 174,
 177, 179, 180, 196
 Medici women, 183, 196
 mendicants, 9, 11, 24, 27, 29, 53, 56
 Mercato Vecchio, 75, 78, 79, 80, 109, 147
 merchants, 2, 5, 54, 59, 88, 102, 111, 126,
 134, 139, 155, 168, 175
 Messina, 27
 Michael IV, Emperor, 25
 Michelozzi, Suora Margherita, 169
 Ministro di Giustizia, 100
 miraculous images, 59–60
 miscarriage, 133
 monachization, 81, 112, 149, 150–154,
 185
 monastic rules, 28
 money, *xv*. *See also* cash
 Monte delle Doti, 81
 Montepaldi, 177–178
 Monticelli, 60
 Montpelier, 27
 morality legislation, 69, 90, 91
mundualdus, 76
 murder, 113, 129
 mystics, 174–176
 Napoleon, 6
 neighbourhoods, 49, 55, 159
 Neri, Filippo, 6, 150, 186
 Nero di Gozzi di Pelago, 34
 Nicholaio, prior of Santo Spirito,
 106–107, 108, 109
 Nicholas IV, 29
 noise, 35, 50
 North, Rachel, 102
 Notte, Ufficiali di, 11, 12, 18, 81–82,
 84–85, 91, 98, 98, 101, 113, 115, 117,
 146, 193
 nunneries, 3, 29, 45–46, 54, 81, 97, 105,
 113, 139, 151, 152, 162, 180, 183, 191,
 197
 admission to, 81, 112, 149, 150–154,
 185. *See also* monachization
 cheap land, 56
 education in, 125, 127, 151
 kinship groups within, 109
 laywomen in, 125
 literacy, 3, 125
 male *procuratori*, 125
 populations, 86, 110
serbanza at, 111, 112, 113, 116, 126
 nuns, 3, 25, 26, 47, 56, 81, 105, 109, 139,
 180
 becoming a nun. *See* monachization
 familial connections, 90, 126, 136, 152
 from prominent families, 126
 honour of, 81, 90
 literacy, 3
 poor, 84
 work done by, 86, 139–140, 183
 Ognisanti, 37
 Oltrarno, 1, 2, 7, 46, 50, 52, 54, 55, 139,
 174, 184, 191, 198
 Onestà, Ufficiali dell', 11, 12, 13, 18, 59, 63,
 69, 71–73, 74–78, 81, 82, 84, 90, 100,
 131, 134–136, 146, 149, 151, 156–158,
 162, 173, 176, 181, 186, 192, 194
 court, 59, 76, 80
 to counter sodomy, 71, 74, 193
 deregistration, 75
 enforcement, 75, 80, 82, 90, 134–135,
 158

- Onestà (*continued*)
 exemptions to rules, 136, 147, 159, 162,
 172, 173, 194
 expenses, 74
 fees, 75, 147, 151, 156, 157, 162, 172, 173,
 194
 financial exploitation of prostitutes,
 159
 fines, 77, 90, 147, 151, 156, 158, 159, 160,
 162, 173, 181, 194
 founding, 71
 incentives, 75, 76, 80, 90, 159
 income, 74
 licences, 75, 80, 90, 156
 magistrates, 76
 management of prostitution, 74, 82,
 146, 147, 159, 192
 pillory, 79. *See also* corporal
 punishment
 as professional body, 75–76, 78, 80
 profits, 74, 132
rassegna, 156–157
 recruitment of foreign women, 73, 77
 reforms of, 145, 156, 159, 162, 194
 registration of prostitutes, 100, 131,
 159, 194
 registration with, 75, 76, 90, 149, 152,
 156, 158
 statutes, 71, 74, 75, 78, 156, 158, 162,
 172, 173
 taxes, 122, 134–136, 156, 158
operai, 85, 90, 91, 100, 108, 132
 Orbatello, 155, 196
Ordo Sanctae Mariae Magdalenae de
poenitentia, 6, 191
 orphans, 4, 5, 196
 Orsanmichele, 54, 59–60, 85, 90, 91,
 174, 194
 Orsini, Cardinal Gian Gaetano, 45–46
 Orthodox church, 1
 Ospedale degli Innocenti. *See* Innocenti
 Ospedale di Orbatello. *See* Orbatello
 Ospedale di San Gherardo, 58
 Otto di Guardia e Balia, 12, 13, 18, 19,
 113–114, 115, 121, 122, 127–130, 133,
 136, 140–141, 146, 160, 193, 194–195
 Otto di Practica, 151
 Padua, 73
 Palazuolo, Dianora di Lorenzo di, 171
 Palazzo della Signoria, 54–55, 62, 70
 Palazzo Pitti, 145, 176, 179, 181
 Paris, 9, 26, 30
 parish. *See* neighbourhoods
 patronage, 174
 Paul, 4
 Paul III, 149
 Pazzi, Maria Maddalena de', 175
 Pazzi Conspiracy, 97
 peasants, 55
 penance (sacrament), 27, 28, 38
 penance, 27, 38, 51, 57, 112, 129, 138, 145,
 154, 162, 193, 195
penitenti, 3, 27, 28
 penitential piety, 9, 23, 24, 38, 113
 penitents, 103
 Perugia, 50
 Peruzzi bank, 46
 petitions, 122
 Philadelphia Museum of Art, 103
 Phylipo, Friar, 56
pianelle, 63
 Piccione. *See* Compagnia di Santa Maria
 delle Laude di Santo Spirito
 Pieri, Luigi di Tommaso, 139
 Pietà girl, 152–153, 195
 pilgrims, 11, 53, 57, 91, 145
 pillory, 79–80
 pimps, 35, 62, 70, 76, 80
pinzochere, 27, 28, 31
 Pisa, 27, 52, 149, 181, 185
 Pistoia, 49, 58, 71, 149
 Pius V, 145, 148
pizzochere. *See* *pinzochere*
 Placentinus, 34
 plague, 89, 177, 178. *See also* Black
 Death
 Podestà, 47, 61, 62, 100, 115
 Poggio Imperiale, 181
 poison, 129
 Ponte alla Carraia, 46
 Ponte Santa Trinita, 46
 Ponte Vecchio, 46
 poor, 50, 54, 55, 60, 150
 poor of Christ, 53
 poor relief, 54, 57. *See also* welfare
popolo, 64
 Por Santa Maria, 80, 86
 Porta a Faenza, 37
 Porta alla Croce, 79, 139
 Porta Giano della Bella, 52
 Porta Pinti, 35
 Porta Romana, 79, 112, 114
 Porta San Frediano, 55
 Porta San Niccolò, 36, 79
 Portico (nunnery), 86, 139
 Portinari, Folco, 5
poveri vergognosi (shamed poor), 54, 150
 poverty, 11, 27, 30, 32, 51, 53, 55, 77, 84
 Practica Segreta, 156
 preaching, 28, 50, 103
 pregnancy, 58
 prevention, 145, 151, 152, 154, 162, 195
Primo Popolo, 32

- prisons, 7, 9, 13, 85, 127, 140, 194.
See also Stinche prison
- Procopius, 9, 24–25, 30
- procuring, 36, 62, 76, 132
- prostitutes, 2, 3, 5, 7, 13, 35, 140, 146, 149, 172
 access to city, 36, 62–63
 attendance at Lenten sermon of Mary Magdalene, 103, 156–157, 185, 197
 banishment, 47
 benefits of registration with the Onestà, 73, 75–77, 80
 census of, 147
 clandestine, 75, 135, 157
 clients, 48
 conversion of, 84, 103, 157
 daughters of, 137–138, 151, 152–153, 154
 debt, 77
 definition, 32, 33
 distinguishing signs, 49, 62–63, 136, 147, 157
 estates of, 13, 14, 121–122, 131, 132, 134, 151, 153, 155, 158, 181, 194, 195
 evasion of registration, 134–135
 expulsion from cities, 62, 71, 90, 150
 financial exploitation of, 74–75, 77, 159
 fines due from, 146
 funding Sant'Elisabetta, 122, 130
 gloves, 63
 as identity, 75
 independence of, 70
 legal personhood of, 76–77, 80, 185
 linked with Jews, 147
 male, 85
 marginality of, 70, 73
 marrying, 9
 mixing with 'good' women, 150, 155
 number of, 59
 poor, 147
 population, 136, 149
 privileges, 73, 76
 prohibited from using coaches or carriages, 157
 public women, 26
 reform, 23
 registered, 122, 130, 134, 149, 152, 157
 repentant, 7, 9, 26, 28, 31, 32, 98, 134, 181
 restrictions imposed upon, 73
 retirement, 3
 sacrificed virtue of, 77, 193
 social exclusion of, 73
 sumptuary rules for, 63, 77, 136, 146, 157, 160–161, 172
 unregistered, 122, 134–135
 wealthy, 134–135, 157
 working for the city, 73
- prostitution, 3, 12, 49, 57, 70, 74, 75, 146–147, 150, 152, 175, 191
 ambivalence towards, 49, 62
 civic purpose, 73
 contaminating effect of, 62
 customers, 59, 77, 80
 enforcement of rules, 62, 71, 80
 exclusion zones, 35, 37, 62, 185, 192
 exit from, 47, 50, 131
 facilitation of, 131–132
 illicit, 69. *See also* prostitution, clandestine
 inevitability of, 70, 191
 legalisation, 8, 24, 38, 69, 84, 191
 legislation, 8, 24, 25, 32, 34, 36, 47, 53, 62, 70–71, 146
 licences, 71
 licit, 78
 long-term, professional, 55, 75
 male, 76
 management, 24, 198
 penalties for, 36, 61, 62
 permitted areas, 48, 70, 71, 73, 74, 75, 148
 poverty as cause, 51, 55, 70, 77, 147, 175, 191–192, 198
 professionalisation of, 75–76, 77–78, 80
 prohibition, 8, 10, 24, 47–48, 61, 62, 148, 175, 192
 prosecutions for, 61–62
 as public service, 62
 short-term, temporary, 54, 55, 75
 social function of, 73
 tacit acceptance, 62, 69
 taxes on, 49
 toleration, 10, 24, 34, 37, 63
 women trapped in, 52–53, 192, 193–194
- Protestant Reformation, 148, 149, 150, 198
- Provveditori del Sale, Vino e Macello, 115
- Prussia, 73
- Ptolemy of Lucca, 33
- Pulci, Lucrezia di Jacopo, 128–129
- putta*, 153–154
- puttana*, 153–154
- Quattro Buonomini delle Stinche, 151
- rape, 71
- Raphael, archangel, 102–103
- rassegna* of prostitutes, 156–157
- repentance, 2, 191
- repenties*, 3, 9
- Rialto, 71

- Richa, Giuseppe, 31, 37, 51, 105, 184
 Ridolfi, Tommaso di Luigi, 18, 139
 Rinuccio di Jacopo, 31
 Robert d'Arbrissel, 9, 26, 38
 Rocke, Michael, 82
 Roman law, 32
 Romana, Ipolita Bessi, 171
 Rome, 9, 57, 137, 148, 149, 152, 157, 162, 175
 Rondinelli, Scholastica, 84

 salt tax, 122
 San Barnaba, 102, 123
 San Cristoforo, 79
 San Donato, 32
 San Felice in Piazza, 179
 San Frediano, parish, 55
 San Gaetano, 174
 San Gaggio, 86
 San Giorgio, 139
 San Jacopo, Via Ghibellina, 124
 San Jacopo di Ripoli, 86, 124
 San Lazzaro, 37
 San Lorenzo, church, 48, 174
 San Lorenzo, parish, 47, 48, 49, 54
 San Luca, 127
 San Marco, 108, 123
 San Martino, 86
 San Martino a Cozzi, 60, 89
 San Miniato, 86
 San Pier Gattolino, parish, 114
 San Pier Maggiore, 31, 127
 San Piero, 174
 San Salvatore, parish, 60
 San Salvatore di Settimo, 32
 San Sepolcro di Monticelli, 60
 San Silvestro, 168
 San Vincenzo. *See* Annalena
 Sandrina dall'Antonia da Pistoia, 136–137, 138
 San'Onofrio, 124
 Santa Chiara, 2, 179
 Santa Croce, 28, 29, 31, 79, 173
 Santa Felicità, 173–174
 Santa Lucia, 139
 Santa Maria degli Angeli, 175
 Santa Maria del Fiore, cathedral, 70, 103, 150, 173, 174
 Santa Maria della Disciplina.
 See Portico
 Santa Maria di Crespino, 31
 Santa Maria Impruneta, 87
 Santa Maria Maddalena delle
 Convertite, Pistoia, 58
 Santa Maria Maddalena Delle Penitenti.
 See Santa Maria Maddalena Di
 Cestello

 Santa Maria Maddalena Di Cestello,
 9–10, 23, 31–32, 37–38, 39, 45, 52,
 58, 175
 Santa Maria Monticelli, 29
 Santa Maria Novella, 18, 33, 174
 Santa Maria Nuova, 57, 89, 123
 Santa Maria Verzaia, parish, 55
 Santa Monaca, 2, 86, 179
 Sant'Agata, 127
 Sant'Ambrogio, 102
 Sant'Appollonia, 127
 Sant'Elisabetta, 34, 45, 47, 57, 60, 63,
 69, 74, 75, 83–84, 98, 99, 104, 113,
 114, 139, 145, 149, 150, 152, 156, 158,
 167, 191
 abbess, 12, 56, 87, 88, 106–107, 109,
 115, 123, 132, 172, 177, 178, 179–180
 accounts, 5, 14, 17, 89, 107–108, 110,
 122, 158, 167–168, 172, 176, 181, 182,
 186
 admission, 7, 13, 121, 132, 136, 141, 145,
 150, 151, 152, 155, 173, 195
 alms, 122, 172, 173, 174, 178, 179
 altarpiece, 102–108, 116
 anonymity of nuns, 125, 126
 artwork at, 102–108, 116
 bequests, 5, 63, 89–90
bocche, 17, 115, 123, 130, 134
 buildings, 6, 56
camerlinghe, 168, 172, 186
 cassette, 5
 chapel, 1, 5, 159, 185, 197
 chapel renovations, 6, 12, 101–108,
 110, 116, 169, 172
 chickens, 171, 182
 civic function, 3, 6, 11, 131–133, 192,
 193, 194
 civic funding, 12, 13, 85, 98, 115, 121,
 122, 127, 145, 156, 159, 197
 civic interest in, 74, 91, 97, 98, 117, 130,
 138, 145, 146, 167, 192
 civic interference in, 121, 122, 127,
 132–134, 136–138, 141, 145, 161, 192
commesse, 111
 constitutions of, 88, 133
contratti, 16, 60, 114
converse, 17, 111, 173
cura monalium, 55–56, 90, 197
 deals with nuns, 123
 debts, 109, 169, 177, 178
 direct payments from prostitutes, 160
 donations to, 63, 89–91, 98, 106,
 108–109, 116, 124, 146, 160, 176, 177,
 192, 194
 dowries at, 5, 108, 137, 139, 152, 153,
 173, 174
 escape from, 137

- expenses, 6, 14, 89, 107, 168, 169–171, 182
- familial connections, 99, 109, 110, 126–127, 198
- financial difficulties, 60, 74
- financial relationship with the Onestà, 77–78
- food, 17, 124, 168–169, 170–171, 193
- funding, 7
- garden, 170, 182
- girls in, 112, 121, 125, 126, 127, 127–129, 133, 137–138, 160, 171, 193, 195
- hunger, 60, 123, 130, 177
- income, 14, 60–61, 89–91, 110, 121, 122, 124, 127, 135–136, 137, 140, 148, 158, 159, 168, 171–172, 174, 176, 182
- as intermediary, 145–146, 160–161
- in kind income, 60, 89
- laywomen within, 124–125, 127, 128–130, 133
- literacy of nuns, 125, 126
- loans from nuns, 108–109, 115–116, 139, 169, 198
- location, 6, 55, 60
- masses for patrons, 99
- meat eaten at, 168, 170, 178, 182, 196
- Medici patronage of, 167
- miraculous crucifix, 179–181
- municipal control of, 176, 177, 181, 186, 196
- noble and gentlewomen inhabitants, 88, 108, 112, 113, 123, 209–210
- nuns, lists of, 17, 87, 99, 100, 109, 111, 113, 114–115, 125, 201–210
- nuova fabbrica, 14, 181–182, 186, 196
- obligatory donations to, 89
- operai*, 12, 85, 90, 91, 100, 102, 108, 132
- origins of nuns in, 87–89, 100
- petitions from, 122, 134–136, 137, 138, 145–146, 151–153, 155
- plague at, 57, 124
- population, 11, 64, 86, 87, 88, 110, 114, 122, 136, 197
- poverty, 11, 98, 101, 108, 109–110, 114, 116, 122, 127, 130, 132, 162, 169, 176, 177, 198
- predella panels, 103–106, 116
- prison, 7, 98, 121, 127–130, 133, 140–141, 194–195
- private wealth of nuns, 139–140
- procuratore*, xv, xvi, 7, 14, 15, 16, 88, 115, 125, 126, 167, 169, 177, 178, 179, 182, 186, 196
- property owned by, 61, 63, 85
- prostitutes' estates income, 13, 14, 121–122, 131, 132, 134, 151, 153, 155, 158, 181, 194, 195
- purpose, 7, 11, 34, 39, 85, 88, 98, 104, 132–133, 192, 195, 196
- records, 57, 122, 124, 125, 159, 167–168
- rents. *See* income
- retirement home, 3
- ricordi*, 16, 89, 106, 110, 177
- secolare, 17, 125
- self-sufficiency, 167
- serbanza* at, 111, 112, 129, 136–138, 171–172, 174, 182
- servaglie*, 170, 178
- sewing, 56
- silk work, 85
- spedale*, 10, 17, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 83–84, 90–91, 114
- suppression, 6
- tax relief, 98, 122
- Te Deum* for Cosimo II, 178, 179
- textile work, 14, 182
- velate*, 17, 111, 125, 173
- vicaria*, 111
- wage labour, 5, 14, 56, 86, 91, 101, 108, 139–140, 167, 182–183, 186, 194, 196, 198
- wine, 17, 123, 168, 170, 177–178, 179, 193
- workers employed by, 168, 169, 170–171
- Santi di Simone, friar, 100
- Santini, Caterina di Domenico, 133
- Santo Spirito, 7, 10, 45–46, 50, 55, 79, 89, 100, 102, 103, 172, 173, 179, 193
- Sant'Orsola, 61, 62
- Sarfatti, Gad, 184
- Savonarola, Girolamo, 97–98, 113, 123, 150
- Savonarolan movement, 152, 193
- Sebastian, St, 89
- serbanza*, 111, 112, 113, 116, 126, 129, 136–138, 139
- Serragli, Lionardo, 112–113, 209
- Serragli family, 112–113
- Seville, 150
- sex crimes, 121, 127, 129, 140
- sex trade. *See* prostitution; sexual economy
- sex work. *See* prostitution
- sexual abuse, 128, 133, 140, 195, 196
- sexual economy, 25, 69, 70, 75, 90, 146–147, 192, 197
- Sibilla, Suora, 172
- Siena, 100, 149, 175
- Signori di Notte, 71
- Signoria, 12, 35, 62, 71, 78, 84, 85, 98–99, 100–101, 113. *See also* city government
- silk-workers' guild. *See* Por Santa Maria

- silver thread, 86, 139
 Simone da Cascia. *See* Fidati, Simone da Cascia
 sin, 1, 3, 10, 25, 27, 30, 38, 48, 53, 54, 74, 79, 84, 85, 104–105, 131, 148, 149, 150, 156, 157, 191
 proceeds of, 84
 prostitution as, 54, 148
 remission of, 26, 30, 73
 repentance for, 51, 156, 159
 women's propensity for, 70
 social welfare. *See* welfare
 Soderini, Piero, 98, 140
 sodomy, 11, 12, 69, 71–73, 74, 78, 79, 81–82, 191, 192
 sons, 155
Sorores Poenitentes Beate Mariae Magdalenae, 9, 31
Sorores Repentite Hospitalis Santa Maria Magdalene de Spina, Pisa, 27, 31
 Sozomeno da Pistoia, 58
spedalingo, 83
 Stampino, Maria Galli, 183
 stigmata, 176
 Stinche prison, 128, 129, 137, 151
 Strocchia, Sharon, 3, 168
 Strozzi, Carlo di Tommaso, 45, 51, 57
 suicide, 175
 sumptuary laws, 62–63, 71, 72, 75, 157
Supra montem, 29
 Sustermans, Justus, 181
 syphilis, 148, 149

 tax, 49, 75
 Terpstra, Nicholas, 2, 36, 185, 198
 Theatines, 174
 theft, 71, 79, 80, 113
 Theodora, Empress, 9, 24, 25–26, 30
 Third Lateran Council, 37
 Third Order, 29
 Tinghi, Cesare, 181
 Tobias, 102–103
 Torelli, Leo, 135
 Torre della Zecca, 79
 Torrigiani, Lucretia di Salvestro, 171
 Torrigiani Gardens, 170
 Trexler, Richard, 32, 73, 100
 Tridentine reforms, 136, 149, 151, 153
 Trieste, 73
Trinity with Saints Mary Magdalene and John the Baptist, 102–104

 Turco, Orlando, 159
 Tuscany, Grand Duchy, 121, 131

 Ugolino di Segni. *See* Gregory IX
 Ulpian, 32, 34
 Umiliana de' Cerchi, 29
 unemployment, 54

 vagrants, 54
 Val di Pesa, 60
 Valdarno, 87
 Vallombrosians, 31, 35, 36
 Vanis, Soror Daria, 59
 Vannini, Caterina, 175–176
 Vasari, Giorgio, 102, 116
 velvet, 157
 Venice, 27, 71, 73, 100, 157, 185
 Vernaccini, Lessandra di Francesco, 171, 173
 Via Chiara, 45–46, 51, 56, 60, 83, 112
 Via del Campuccio, 52, 55, 182, 183
 Via Della Scala, 86
 Via Mandorla, 152
 Via Pellicceria, 86
 Via San Benedetto. *See* Via del Campuccio
 Via San Gallo, 56, 58, 139
 Via San Pier Gattolino, 56, 60
 vicar of Florence, 154
 Villani, Giovanni, 57
 Virgin Mary, 108, 175
 Viterbo, 27

 wage labour, 5
 walls, city, 35, 38, 47, 48, 52, 56, 62, 69, 191, 192
 weather, 60. *See also* Little Ice Age
 welfare, 4, 6, 10, 24, 121, 141, 145, 162, 196, 197, 198
 whipping. *See* corporal punishment
 widows, 4, 11, 54, 55, 155, 196
 wine, 17, 31, 49, 84, 87, 123, 167, 168, 170, 171, 177–179, 186, 193
 women, vulnerable, 61
 women religious, 28
 Worcester White Ladies, 31
 work, labour, 27, 54, 70
 Works of Mercy, 4

 Yashiro, Yukio, 102, 103

 Zaballi, Suora Obbedienza, 172

