

## 10. Malleable Youth

### Forging Female Education in Early Modern Rome

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#### Abstract

Founded in Rome by a Jesuit confraternity, the Conservatory of Santa Caterina began its activities in the 1540s. First designed as a shelter for daughters of prostitutes, the Conservatory later opened its doors to young women from poverty-stricken families and marginalized groups. In their time spent at the shelter, the girls received an education: religious instruction, needlework, music, and basic literacy skills were the pillars of the instructional curriculum. By removing girls from their adverse backgrounds and shielding them from sexual exploitation, the Conservatory attempted to carve a formative period for its wards at a time when there were no set standards for the education of young women.

**Keywords:** Santa Caterina; prostitution; early modern Rome; women's shelter; education; confraternities; youth

During the sixteenth century in Rome, Florence, Venice, and other Italian cities, special concern for young women, especially those burdened by poverty and social degradation, led to the foundation of charitable institutions and asylums.<sup>2</sup> The goals of these Catholic institutions were to sequester girls from the dangers of urban life and to educate them so that, upon achieving adulthood, they could marry and live respectably. Despite common aims, however, these houses differed in their programmes and regulations. Several

<sup>1</sup> This essay abridges a section of my doctoral dissertation, 'The Conservatorio di Santa Caterina'.

<sup>2</sup> For Rome, see Groppi, *I conservatori della virtù*; for Florence, Terpstra, 'Mothers, Sisters and Daughters', 201–29 and Terpstra, *Lost Girls*; for Venice, Puppi and Ellero, *Le Zitelle*, and Chojnacka, *Working Women*, 121–37.

scholars have stressed the restraining aspects since these organizations attempted – with various degrees of success – to use cloister in order to secure their wards' reputations and marriageability.<sup>3</sup> However, a primary focus on restriction obscures the complexities of the conservatories' social function and their broader impact on the experiences of some young early modern women.

In the early modern period, the boundaries between girlhood and womanhood were fluid. With poor children going to work at a young age and little formal schooling available to them, neither girls nor their guardians had clear means to track their progress toward adulthood.<sup>4</sup> At this time, humanistic ideas dominated educational programmes for young people, but these models were rarely deemed suitable for girls, and especially not for socially marginalized ones.<sup>5</sup> In this context, offering not only protection but also education, the Roman Conservatory of Santa Caterina della Rosa – or dei Funari (ropemakers) – carved out a distinctive space for young women, a de facto 'youth'.

Founded by a Jesuit confraternity, the Compagnia delle Vergini Miserabili, and with the early support of Ignatius Loyola and Filippo Neri, the Conservatory of Santa Caterina ambitiously undertook a special mission to prevent girls from joining the ranks of the many prostitutes in the Pope's capital. In sixteenth-century Rome, prostitution was a legal business and, not uncommonly, older prostitutes propelled their young kin into the trade.<sup>6</sup> Weak social structures and loose legal boundaries around the age of sexual consent made girls particularly vulnerable to being plunged, barely pubescent, into the sex trade and fast-tracked into adulthood. Although the Conservatory's programme at times clashed with the assumptions and expectations of the girls' immediate families and their social environment, it offered them resources to shape their lives for the better.<sup>7</sup>

3 Camerano, 'Assistenza richiesta', 226–60; Cohen, *Evolution of Women's Asylums*.

4 Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 87–108. On child labour, see Caracausi, 'Beaten Children and Women's Work'.

5 On female education as training in various 'female skills', see Whitehead, *Women's Education*. On exceptional women who pursued literary studies normally reserved to men, see Labalme, *Beyond their Sex*.

6 A chronicle of the foundation history credited Loyola and Neri as 'the main founders': Archivio di Stato di Roma (hereafter ASR), S. Caterina, Tomi 56, 3v. On the Confraternity, see Lazar, 'Protecting the Roots' and Aleandri Barletta, 'La confraternita di Santa Caterina'; on the Jesuits' ministry to prostitutes, Chauvin, 'Ignace et les courtisanes'; on prostitution, Storey, *Carnal Commerce*, 67–76 and 141–47.

7 Camerano, 'Assistenza richiesta', 231–40 presents several examples of conflict between the institution and the wards' families.

Moved by Catholic zeal, coupled with a practical awareness of the risks of rape and sexual exploitation for adolescent girls, the Conservatory of Santa Caterina claimed parental rights and removed girls from their families, notably their tainted mothers. The institution was a blend of old and new. The founders framed it on older Catholic patterns for communities of female religious. Since the fifteenth century, affluent Italian families had customarily placed their daughters in convents for education, a practice known as *serbanza*.<sup>8</sup> Cloister at the same time protected their honour. Although such education had been too costly for poor families, the same root idea of protection or conservation underlay the new refuge at Santa Caterina. The contrast between the wards' former life on Roman streets and the safe haven provided by the institution often surfaced in its own narrative, pointing to the dramatic separation that the Conservatory deemed essential to its mission.<sup>9</sup>

Inside the enclosure, the girls were led through an innovative educational programme carefully targeted to their social situations. The curriculum incorporated not only the core of religious instruction, including music, but also literacy and vocational skills. Later, when the girls were ready, the Conservatory provided dowries so that the wards could choose to marry or, in some instances, to become nuns. It also helped find suitable husbands so that the young women returned to society as adults with their virtue intact and their skills enhanced. Thus, the leaders of the Santa Caterina asylum created a safe and supportive space for the daughters of prostitutes and, later, other needy girls during a critical interval of their malleable youth. In this way, the Conservatory provided a model for the notion of female youth as a formative, in-between time during which girls were sheltered from precocious encounters with the economic and sexual demands of adulthood, and given access to moral education as well as occupational training to make them ready for their future responsibilities.

During the Conservatory's first century, it admitted and educated over 500 girls. In the later sixteenth century, shifting policies on admissions moved the institution away from its original, very specific mission of the social rescue and education of girls at risk.<sup>10</sup> In the 1580s, as a means of financing its charitable activities, the Confraternity decided to begin accepting paying

8 The practice of *serbanza* was linked to the flourishing of sixteenth-century institutions for the education of women. See Strocchia, 'Taken into Custody'.

9 Expressed in the apocalyptic terms of 'Heaven' and 'Hell' in Folco, *Effetti mirabili*, 4v.

10 Lazar, 'Protecting the Roots', 90; Fedeli Bernardini, '*Madri gravate di figli inhumili*', 327.

boarders.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the number of daughters of prostitutes admitted steadily declined. In the first decade of the seventeenth century, some external pupils were also allowed to attend the refuge's textile school, further transforming the institution and expanding its educational work into the outside community.<sup>12</sup> Although by the eighteenth century the memory of the institution's original mission against prostitution seemed lost, according to Ridolfino Venuti's *Accurata e succinta descrizione topografica di Roma moderna*, Santa Caterina was still listed as 'a comfortable shelter for impoverished girls'.<sup>13</sup>

In the Conservatory's early days, male officers of the Confraternity carried out most of the work. Beyond general administrative oversight, men assessed girls for admission, collected alms to fund their dowries, and arranged their marriages.<sup>14</sup> Although women were not listed among the officers, some acted as benefactresses and were involved with the wards' care. The patronage of the noblewomen Giulia Orsini, Beatrice Caetani, and Livia della Rovere signalled the institution's high regard among Rome's most prominent families.<sup>15</sup> After two decades it became clear that more womanpower was needed to sustain the project, which hosted about 150 girls by the late 1570s.<sup>16</sup> In 1560, twelve alumnae of Santa Caterina had already received papal permission to take religious vows and form a community of nuns. From that point forward, women religious became the primary caregivers and educators of the wards.<sup>17</sup> An internal religious order not only made economic sense, but also was a very efficient way to assure continuity in running the institution, since the nuns had themselves been educated there.

During its first century the Conservatory acquired a substantial physical plant in the *rione* Sant'Angelo. Financed by Federico Cesi, the first Cardinal Protector and munificent patron of the Confraternity, the community's church of Santa Caterina was built on the premises of the medieval church of Santa Maria Dominae Rosae.<sup>18</sup> The site of the Conservatory buildings and garden occupying an area now wedged between the modern streets of via

11 Sixteen wards were admitted in 1586, paying a boarding fee of five *scudi* per month: ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 12 January 1586.

12 ASR, S. Caterina, Libro, f. 131, 18 June 1609.

13 Venuti, *Accurata e succinta descrizione*, 357.

14 *Constitutioni della compagnia*, 9–11.

15 ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 26 March 1584 and 8 December 1589; Libro, f. 131, 18 June 1609.

16 Martin, *Roma Sancta*, 131; Lazar, 'Protecting the Roots', 89–90.

17 *Equum reputamus*, 6 January 1560, published in Tacchi Venturi, *Storia della Compagnia di Gesù*, 317.

18 Sabatine, 'The Church of Santa Caterina', 54–63. The Cesi family's patronage continued throughout the sixteenth century: Cardinal Pierdonato was the third Cardinal Protector

delle Botteghe Oscure, via Caetani, and via dei Funari has recently been the object of an extensive archaeological dig to recover the ancient complex of the *Crypta Balbi*.<sup>19</sup> These excavations have clarified the sequence of building campaigns that, between 1549 and 1640, considerably extended the Conservatory's establishment. Beginning in 1549, the Confraternity purchased a small lot of land (about 125 square meters) and began building living quarters on the western part of the block, attached to the old church of Santa Maria. After the opening of the new street of S. Caterina in 1559 and the acquisition of more property in 1579 (a lot of about 480 square meters), two new buildings were erected in the early 1580s along the northern and southern limits of the garden behind the new church, with a tall wall separating the Conservatory's premises from its neighbouring houses.<sup>20</sup>

Given the precarious lives of the girls that the Conservatory targeted, establishing criteria for admission was a serious matter. Its Constitutions, put in writing by a special committee appointed by the Confraternity in the 1570s and printed in 1582, specified that entrants should be between ten and twelve years of age, because this time immediately preceded puberty and was the most dangerous but also still malleable period.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the Constitutions required that candidates should be, on the one hand, daughters of prostitutes or otherwise extremely poor, and, on the other, attractive and healthy virgins whose lives and reputations were manifestly in great danger of 'turning out badly'. Anyone who suspected that a girl was at risk could appeal to the Confraternity, but its officials were responsible for vetting every applicant.

The Conservatory's registers show a more tangled and fragmented reality in comparison with the norms prescribed by the Constitutions. Although early records are very sparse, and even after 1560 entries were not consistent, it is possible to tease out some information about admissions.<sup>22</sup> The wards' average age was just over ten years, with a few girls entering as young as

(1578–1586) and Federico, Duke of Acquasparta, was a Confraternity officer in the 1580s: ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 8 December 1589.

19 Only a very small part of the Conservatory still stands, attached to the church of Santa Caterina. The rest was demolished in 1943–1944 after via delle Botteghe Oscure was widened according to fascist urban plans. See Venditelli, *Crypta Balbi*, 27–28.

20 Manacorda, *Crypta Balbi*, 97 and 93–97.

21 *Constitutioni della compagnia*, 22–23.

22 Some data about admission were recorded in two volumes that listed the Conservatory's wards: the 'Alfabeto' and the 'Libro'. In addition, the Confraternity's meeting minutes (*Decreti*) often report details about the application process or admission of new wards.

nine and a few as old as thirteen and fourteen.<sup>23</sup> While the administrators sometimes made exceptions concerning age, virginity was a *sine qua non* for admission. A possible new ward was finally accepted only after a *matrona* (a reputable woman appointed by the Confraternity) had verified the girl's virginity.<sup>24</sup> Two women, Donna Lucrezia and Donna Paola, appear in the records as having received payments for 'services' rendered to the Conservatory. It is possible that their duty was to verify the girls' virginity on behalf of the Confraternity.<sup>25</sup>

Miscalculations and last-minute surprises sometimes occurred. Morally compelled, the Confraternity might waive the normal vetting procedures if a young woman was deemed in immediate danger of being raped or prostituted.<sup>26</sup> In those cases, the Conservatory relied on the local police to enforce its decrees by placing a request to the court for the young women's removal from their families.<sup>27</sup> Even when urgent, however, the step of verifying virginity was never skipped. The records mention a girl sent back to her mother after the administrators found out that she was not a virgin.<sup>28</sup> Even in the case of one Antonia – whose admission was recommended by Pope Gregory XIII himself – the young woman, who had been found 'wandering in the streets of Rome', was placed temporarily in a widows' shelter until she was physically inspected and found to be intact.<sup>29</sup> Although over the years the Conservatory often bent its rules over the criteria of admission, exceptions were never made for girls known to have lost their virginity. Even though defloration did not mean a permanent loss of honour in early modern Rome, charitable institutions preferred to avoid mixing virgins and non-virgins. They believed that it was harmful to expose maidens to the conversation of the sexually experienced.<sup>30</sup> In the Confraternity's view, the physical loss of virginity could mark a premature end to childhood malleability.

23 This number is approximate, since age at admission was recorded in about one third of the cases listed in the *Alfabeto*. I calculated the average age at admission by comparing the available data in both the *Alfabeto* and the *Libro*.

24 *Constitutioni della compagnia*, 22.

25 ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 1 July 1576; Camerano, 'Assistenza richiesta', 257, note 31.

26 *Constitutioni della compagnia*, 23.

27 *Constitutioni della compagnia*, 24.

28 ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, January 1579. In 1596 the Confraternity established that physical inspections had to be conducted a few days in advance: ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 11 November 1596. See also Lazar, 'Protecting the Roots', 89; and Camerano, 'Assistenza richiesta', 233.

29 ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 2 January 1582.

30 Cohen, *Evolution of Women's Asylums*, 63–64. On honour and virginity for marginalized Roman women, see Cohen, 'No Longer Virgins'.

In removing girls from the dangers of the world and beginning their formation as the Conservatory's wards, correct timing was paramount. At the other end of the process, prolonging their stay into adulthood was incompatible with the asylum's reintegration objectives. The wards spent an average of nine years within the mostly enclosed, all-female community.<sup>31</sup> Finding suitable husbands for the wards was a challenge for the overseers. The girls had limited contact with the outside world, and with their families in particular. The exceptions were a few ritual festivities and, especially, the procession on the feast day of Saint Catherine. This procession, which brought into crowded streets young maidens who normally lived in a cloistered setting, increased the institution's visibility and encouraged offers of marriage. On the other hand, it exposed the wards to the curiosity of viewers and to the dangers of the city.<sup>32</sup> The Confraternity carefully planned the procession and even determined the girls' attire. Some years, the youngest wards dressed up like saints; other years all the girls paraded dressed in white or wearing simple tawny dresses with white veils covering their heads.<sup>33</sup>

Seventeenth-century diarist Giacinto Gigli reported one incident that occurred in 1610, when one of the wards 'was abducted' or 'got lost'.<sup>34</sup> The incident prompted the Confraternity to cancel the procession for the following years. According to Gigli, the Confraternity only decided to resume the ritual 30 years later, in 1640, because without the social exposure allowed by the procession the wards could not find suitors and get married. The archival data, however, suggests that Gigli's interpretation erred. Marriage records for the decades before and after the procession's cancellation show, instead, that the average number of marriages remained steady at about seven per year.<sup>35</sup>

More than general public visibility, the Confraternity relied on an informal network of supporters and benefactors to help arrange marriages. Occasionally, a proposal came from a suitor for a specific girl, as in the puzzling case of Alessio Lorenziano that ended up in front of a judge of the Corte

31 This average is calculated by comparing the wards' year of admission with their exit date, recorded in the *Alfabeto delle Zitelle* and *Libro delle cittelle*.

32 San Juan, *Rome*, 95–128.

33 ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 11 November 1593.

34 Gigli, *Diario Romano*, 192.

35 ASR, S. Caterina, *Alfabeto* and *Libro*. The procession was resumed during the protectorate of Cardinal Antonio Barberini as one of the many steps he took to increase the public visibility of the Conservatory. Barberini issued several printed warnings regulating the procession and the penalties for violators: ASR, S. Caterina, *Instrumenti*, 22.

Savelli. Alessio wished to marry the ward Lucretia Casasanta and tried to conclude the match with the help of several intermediaries. When the Confraternity, which in the beginning seemed to favour the match, rejected his proposal, Alessio accused the Conservatory of having manipulated Lucretia into choosing religious life.<sup>36</sup> Nuns and married alumnae could also act as intermediaries. On occasion, even the wards' families might become involved and, at times, they had considerable leverage. Only rarely, however, did the chosen partner come from the same town as the girl's parents or have the same trade as the father.<sup>37</sup>

With the Confraternity's help in funding their dowries and selecting a spouse, the wards typically left the Conservatory and entered marriage in their early twenties.<sup>38</sup> Giulio Folco, a businessman and an active confraternity member, highlighted the tension of this long formative period in a booklet on charity he wrote in 1574 to plead for donations:

The many young women who had been previously admitted had already reached that age at which they should marry or become nuns; and, besides this, I saw that there were a great number of others who, in order to avoid falling into bad situations, asked to be admitted. [...] All of this tormented my soul and I greatly suffered because I saw, on the one hand, that keeping the maidens still cloistered was a bad and despicable thing, and, on the other hand, rejecting those who wanted to enter was very dangerous.<sup>39</sup>

Folco's concern clearly highlights how the Confraternity sought to create a formative and educational space during the malleable years of youth in order to facilitate young women's transition into adulthood.

During the nine years that the average ward spent at Santa Caterina she encountered an educational programme designed to strengthen the moral and intellectual resources of working-class Roman women. Religious formation was at the centre of the project. The Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on individual reading and interpretation of Scripture, highlighted the need for accessible schooling to educate all well-formed Christians. The response in Catholic regions, in continuity with the Fifth Lateran Council

36 Cohen, *Love and Death*, 45–69.

37 ASR, S. Caterina, *Alfabeto* and *Libro*. From all the entries in which the places of origin of both the wards and their husbands are recorded, this occurred in about 5 per cent of the cases.

38 This data is based on the entry and exit records found in both the *Alfabeto* and the *Libro*.

39 Folco, *Effetti mirabili*, 2v. The translation is mine. The first edition of the work was printed in Latin in 1574. The book was then reprinted several times and translated into French (1583) and Spanish (1589).



(1512–1517), renewed a longstanding yet often disregarded norm that called for the free education of children, including the poor, as part of the Church's evangelical mission.<sup>40</sup> During the sixteenth century confraternities and religious orders began to organize programmes to provide basic education for all.<sup>41</sup> For example, in Rome, contemporaneous with the Conservatory of Santa Caterina's development, the Archconfraternity of Christian Doctrine counted about 1000 volunteers, men and women, devoted to teaching children.<sup>42</sup> Since illiteracy and religious ignorance were considered two aspects of the same problem, these charitable campaigns taught reading and writing alongside catechism.<sup>43</sup> In a holistic approach, learning how to read using pious texts and prayer books accomplished the twofold purpose of training the specific skill of reading while also delivering religious instruction.

The Conservatory's Constitutions did not detail the content of instruction, but generically referred to learning 'things that are convenient respectively for those maidens who will marry or enter religious life'.<sup>44</sup> The rules insisted only that the memorization of Christian doctrine – probably as catechism – was deemed essential for women of all statuses. Teaching was entrusted to the community of nuns. Nonetheless, the Conservatory was receptive to 'modern' pedagogical tendencies that integrated literacy skills with religious education. The institution combined the traditional practice of educating girls in a convent setting with the specific mission to serve the daughters of prostitutes, a constituency difficult to reach.

In the Confraternity's view, educating girls at risk meant first and foremost teaching them virtuous behaviour in order to coach them into a life path different from their mothers, so that they could become functional adults and 'reputable' women. With the primary aims of saving the wards' souls and preserving the chastity of their bodies, the Conservatory sought to familiarize them with standard prayers and instruct them to receive the sacraments properly. For these goals, the Tridentine catechism, known as the *Christian Doctrine*, was a core reading. Printed in 1566 under the auspices of Pope Pius V and the Council of Trent, the text was broadly used by religious schools and also reprinted by local bishops in abbreviated or adapted forms.<sup>45</sup>

40 Pelliccia, *La scuola primaria*, 22–25.

41 Bireley, *Refashioning of Catholicism*, 121–25.

42 The Archconfraternity of Christian Doctrine started in Rome in 1560. By 1612, it counted 78 schools with 529 brothers and 519 sisters teaching children catechism. See Black, *Italian Confraternities*, 226–27.

43 Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 338–39.

44 *Costituzioni della compagnia*, 27.

45 Bellarmino, *Dichiarazione più copiosa della Dottrina*.

The wards also learned basic reading skills and were trained in traditional female handicrafts like sewing, embroidery, weaving, and knitting. Finally, as a support to religion, music was an important component of the institution's curriculum. Prestigious composers and singers from the papal *Cappella* provided high-quality musical instruction to the girls.<sup>46</sup>

The Constitutions' wording suggests some differences of curriculum for the vast majority of wards destined for marriage and for those few who entered religious life. Although details are lacking, some hypotheses may be advanced. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the girls who became nuns stayed at Santa Caterina for an average of fourteen years, about five years longer than the girls who married.<sup>47</sup> There was likely more than one reason. For some wards, religious life was the last resort after the failure to find a spouse. For others, it may have taken more time to raise the convent dowry, which was at Santa Caterina typically more expensive than a marriage dowry.<sup>48</sup> In either case, nuns had a longer formation that continued into their novitiate years. It is difficult to gauge the effects of nine years' instruction on the wards who left to marry. Yet it seems that those who became religious made more progress in literacy skills.

A wider variety of religious books enriched the nuns' training at Santa Caterina. The community's Rule, an adaptation of the Augustinian monastic rule specifically written for Santa Caterina early in the seventeenth century, stated that:

In the refectory during meals & in the working quarter, in addition to the Statutes, at the appropriate times, the Christian Doctrine, Granada's *Symbol of Faith*, the Lives of the Saints and other approved books shall be read.<sup>49</sup>

The *Symbol of Faith* was a translation of a text of 1583 by the Dominican theologian Luis de Granada.<sup>50</sup> Following the tradition of natural theology, Granada described even the smallest animals, such as spiders, worms, and

46 O'Regan, 'Scandal Averted', 207–09.

47 ASR, S. Caterina, Zitelletti, 79, 80, and 81.

48 The Confraternity's Constitutions recommended giving the wards who entered religious life a dowry that was twice that for the girls who married: *Costituzioni della compagnia*, 25–26. On dowries: Esposito, 'Ad dotandum puellas'.

49 *Costituzioni sopra la Regola*, 32. Subsequent page references to this document appear parenthetically.

50 Granada, *Introducción del Símbolo de la Fe*. On Granada, a disciple of the mystic and priest Juan de Avila, see Franklin Lewis, 'Fray Luis de Granada', 318.

bees, as well as plants and human bodily organs. His aim was to use these marvels of the natural world to prove the existence of God as a divine intelligence that shaped a rational order. The prescribed reading of such a book, while not high theology, signalled a desire to foster more than rote learning. Although secular books were disallowed, the novice mistress and the prioress, with the approval of the Confraternity officials and the convent's confessor, could grant permission for other books to be read (32).

Since all the passages in the Rule on the permitted books referred to the Conservatory nuns, we do not know what the wards heard or read beyond the catechism. Because the nuns and wards shared at least some living and working spaces in which the monastic practice of reading out loud took place, it is likely that texts such as hagiographies were shared, but not prohibited secular books.

Although all wards learned basic reading skills, only a few were likely taught handwriting. The nuns who took on leading roles could write (53). In the 1580s, those with administrative and teaching responsibilities included, in addition to the mother prioress and vicar, three mistresses of wards and three of novices, and one work mistress charged with coordinating the institution's textile production. These roles required at least basic writing skills since the nuns had to keep records, write receipts, and list the commissioned work. The manuscript chronicle of the institution's history, written by one of the nuns in the mid-seventeenth century, shows good writing skills and familiarity with the stylistic components of hagiographic literature.<sup>51</sup> But perhaps her accomplishment was exceptional.

Like reading, manual work was valued not only for its practical benefits but also as morally formative. Working with cloth – weaving, sewing, embroidering, and knitting – was prominent in the typical female curriculum. A commonplace already present in classical culture, the association of needlework and good morals, especially in reference to female chastity, continued in the early modern period.<sup>52</sup> Several early modern theorists reiterated the link by instructing women to cultivate these traditional womanly skills.<sup>53</sup> Even the commentators who embraced more innovative ideas on female literacy and encouraged women's reading endorsed handiwork as a path to virtue. In a study of sixteenth-century embroidery pattern books, Stacey Shimizu writes: for the early modern period, 'the value of clothworking lay not so much in the production of textiles as in its role

51 ASR, S. Caterina, Tomi, 56, 3r–7v.

52 Frye, *Pens and Needles*, 6–9.

53 Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 88–89.

in the production of feminine women and good wives'.<sup>54</sup> In addition, these activities, performed in the enclosed spaces of home or convent, kept girls and women away from the moral dangers of the streets.<sup>55</sup>

At Santa Caterina, the Rule emphasized the spiritual relevance of manual work as a tool against the 'wickedness and sins' that originated from idleness (52). The custom of reading spiritual texts aloud and engaging in religious conversations during working hours reinforced the function of manual work as a sanctifying practice, in line with monastic tradition. The wards, being raised by nuns, became familiar with these practices and shared at least in part in the monastic sensibilities of the institution.

Besides fostering moral virtue, manual skills were crucial, for the girls and for the Conservatory, as a source of securing a livelihood. The institution needed the crafts of the nuns and the wards to pay its bills. Girls who would leave to marry also needed to work to help support the family economy. The section of the Rule outlining the nuns' educative duties acknowledged both moral and practical imperatives (53). The execution of high-quality work in a diligent and serious atmosphere edified not only the nuns and wards who produced it but also the customers who commissioned it (43). Since the quality reflected on the whole community, the mother prefect in charge had to ensure that everything complied with the institution's high standards.

In 1589, a Confraternity meeting discussed the need to broaden the Conservatory's textile production.<sup>56</sup> Administrators knew that keeping the textile business afloat depended on a network of elite female patrons who would attract more customers from among their peers. Signor Federico Cesi, Duke of Acquasparta and nephew of the homonymous prelate who had been the Confraternity's first Cardinal Protector, volunteered to ask his mother, Beatrice Caetani, and other noblewomen to visit the Conservatory and support the expansion of its textile production. In 1609, the Marchesa Livia Della Rovere appears in the Confraternity's records among the benefactresses purchasing textiles.<sup>57</sup>

The Conservatory's textile crafts became renowned to the point that the nuns were able to sell their instructional expertise to outsiders. In 1606–1607,

54 Shimizu, 'Pattern of Perfect Womanhood', 76.

55 Rome's imbalanced demographic ratio of men to women, associated with a high rate of prostitution and crime, created the perception of a dangerous and debauched city. See Nussdorfer, 'Priestly Rulers, Male Subjects', 110.

56 ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 8 December 1589. This was also the case for many early modern shelters for women. One notable example is the Casa della Pietà in Florence, which functioned almost as a factory producing wool and silk. See Terpstra, *Lost Girls*, 60–84.

57 ASR, S. Caterina, Libro 80, f. 131, 18 June 1609.

written permits (*license*) to enter the monastery listed six women 'who pay to learn how to work in the monastery school'.<sup>58</sup> These women, of whom at least two were married, were allowed to enter the Conservatory during the day for most of the year (but excluding the hottest summer months) to be instructed in textile production. Such arrangements were beneficial in more ways than one, given that the presence of external trainees helped to enrich and diversify the female community.

Textile skills were evidently valued for girls who expected later to live and work outside the Conservatory. One girl who was admitted in order 'to learn how to work' was Cicilia, a weaver's daughter; the expertise she acquired would have enabled her to contribute to her family's craft. As the Rule emphasized, women's ability to participate in the family's trade was regarded as an asset and the young women's manual dexterity was believed to increase their chances of finding spouses (53). For example, suggesting that the quality of work indicated the value of a potential wife, a suitor might ask to see the work of the young woman he intended to marry.<sup>59</sup> Not surprisingly, of the brides whose husbands' identities are known, about 22 per cent were connected with textile trades: tailors, waistcoat makers, linen and silk workers, and weavers.<sup>60</sup> These men evidently found it advantageous to acquire a spouse whose skills could support their trade. A striking example was the ward Elisabetta Cattanea Parasole, who married Rosato Parasole, a painter and the brother of the printmaker Leonardo Parasole. The embroidery training that Elisabetta received at the Conservatory, together with woodcutting skills probably acquired by working with her husband's family, allowed her to publish six pattern books for lacemaking, destined to a female audience.<sup>61</sup> Since male authors designed most of the popular, early modern embroidery books, Elisabetta represented an important exception, and her case highlights the Conservatory's role in fostering young women's competencies.

Textile production skills were thus an essential component of the Conservatory's educational programme. Besides using sewing, knitting, and weaving as virtuous exercises that kept the wards occupied and safe from the temptation of idleness, the Confraternity also capitalized on the girls' work and – through the cooperation of some influential female patrons – secured

58 ASR, S. Caterina, Libro 80, f. 4, 1 April 1606–9 July 1607.

59 Cohen, *Love and Death*, 53.

60 These trades noted in *Alfabeto* and *Libro* represent 25 out of the 113 recorded crafts of the men who married wards from the Conservatory in the years 1563–1607.

61 On Elisabetta's (or Isabella's) work, see Lincoln, 'Parasole, Isabella Catanea'.

a profit that was reinvested to help pay expenses. The monastery's reputation for textile production attracted not only external apprentices but also potential suitors, drawn both by the ideal of virtuous femininity attached to maidens who mastered needlework and by the prospect of income they could gain from their wives' work.

Lastly, not only nuns but also wards of the Conservatory received training in liturgical music. Since they took part in some of the ceremonies at their church, all girls learned chanting and polyphonic singing, and some studied instrument playing.<sup>62</sup> Because music education was so important, the Confraternity granted several teachers permission to enter 'between the two doors' to give lessons in the presence of two elder nuns.<sup>63</sup> To highlight the Conservatory's contributions to Rome's Counter-Reformation music, historian Noel O'Regan has mapped the network of fine musicians, ecclesiastical patrons, and Confraternity sponsors who promoted and facilitated the teaching of music at Santa Caterina.<sup>64</sup> An outstanding early example of the high-quality musical education provided was a girl named Utilia. Admitted to Santa Caterina in 1561, she took religious vows in 1578 and died one year later.<sup>65</sup> In a rare annotation, the record reported her special gifts as a soprano singer, since musical ability was prized as a fine quality for nuns. Besides its liturgical and spiritual importance, excellent music was a way to attract donations.

This study reconstructs the religious, moral, and practical education that young women received at the Conservatory of Santa Caterina during its first century. Early modern society assumed low social mobility and constraining gender roles, and young people were expected to learn appropriate behaviours and perform them as adults. So, the Conservatory reached out to marginalized girls in their malleable years and created a space and time for a productive youth. The asylum not only protected young women from sexual exploitation, but also provided them with practical tools to live more respectably than their impoverished families might envision. To accomplish their educative objectives, the Confraternity designed an innovative curriculum that taught and reinforced the most important traditional female virtues of chastity, modesty, and piety. In an enclosed and sheltered setting, the Conservatory also emphasized literacy and

62 ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 16 October 1603.

63 ASR, S. Caterina, Decreti, 28 March 1602. The expression 'between the two doors' probably refers to a parlour, a space between an external and an internal door.

64 O'Regan, 'Scandal Averted', 207–12.

65 ASR, S. Caterina, Libro, 79.

vocational skills. This training, together with the institution's prestige for its embroidery and textile work, contributed to making its school desirable even for girls from well-established artisan families. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, the Conservatory of Santa Caterina in Rome helped shape expectations and standards for the education of female youth in the early modern period.

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