


Following in the Apostles' Footsteps: Martyrdom, Mysticism, and Protofeminism in Lucrezia Marinella's *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* (1648)

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This article examines the relationship between protofeminism and faith in Lucrezia Marinella's "Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina" (1648). In particular, it explores Marinella's departures from her sources, which serve to assert women's excellence as preachers, exegetes, and rulers. Situating the life of the martyr Saint Justina within the context of the querelle des femmes and the Counter-Reformation backlash against public displays of female mysticism and religious authority, this contribution proposes that the hagiography promotes a form of female holiness inspired by the mystics and living saints who dispensed with male ecclesiastical mediation and exercised power beyond the monastic enclosure. This reading complicates the hypothesis that Marinella relinquished her pro-woman advocacy in her later years.

INTRODUCTION

The prolific Venetian author Lucrezia Marinella (ca. 1571/79–1653) is renowned for her pioneering protofeminist treatise *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* (*The nobility and excellence of women*), published in 1600.¹ Yet Marinella's

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¹ Lucrezia Marinella, *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne, co' diffetti, et mancamenti de gli huomini* was published in Venice by Giovanni Battista Ciotti in 1600 and 1601, and a third edition was published in 1621 by Giovanni Battista Combi.

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religious narratives outnumber her secular works and proved more popular among her contemporaries: throughout the seventeenth century, her most successful book was a life of the Virgin Mary, *La vita di Maria Vergine, imperatrice dell'universo* (*Life of the Virgin Mary, empress of the universe*), which was originally published in Venice in 1602 and later reissued and expanded in three further editions.² Marinella's sacred writings are characterized by a sustained engagement with spiritual questions, considered deeply and with erudition, through scriptural exegesis and the study of philosophy and theology.³ Although biblical women and female saints, mystics, and martyrs do not constitute Marinella's sole focus, the towering figures of the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Saint Columba of Sens, Saint Justina of Padua, Saint Clare of Assisi (ca. 1193/94–1253), and Saint Catherine of Siena (1347–80)—to name but a few—dominate her production, which encompasses five hagiographies centered on female protagonists.⁴ *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* lists the mystics Saint Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Saint Birgitta of Sweden (1302/23–73), and Saint Catherine of Siena under the heading “Of Learned Women and Those Who Are Illustrious in Many Arts,”⁵ while in the *Rime sacre* (*Sacred rhymes*, 1603) approximately 40 percent of the verses are devoted to holy women, meaning “the number of female saints . . . exceeds that of their male counterparts—an imbalance . . . for which Marinella stands out among early modern writers.”⁶ Nonetheless, her hagiographies have not been granted sufficient critical consideration as vital components of her philogynous project. Her last work in particular, a life of Saint Justina of Padua entitled *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* (*The loving sacrifice of the virgin Saint Justina*, 1648), has not received any scholarly attention to this date.⁷ It is within

² Lucrezia Marinella's *La vita di Maria Vergine, imperatrice dell'universo descritta in prosa & in ottava rima* went through four editions, published in Venice by Barezzo Barezzi in 1602, 1604, 1610, and 1617.

³ On Marinella's engagement with the Bible, see Ardisino. After the acceptance of this article, a new study of Marinella as a philosopher was published by Deslauriers.

⁴ In addition to the lives of the Virgin Mary and Justina of Padua, Marinella published *La Colomba sacra. Poema Heroico* (Venice: Giovanni Battista Ciotti Senese, 1595), *De' gesti heroici, e della vita meravigliosa della Serafica S. Caterina da Siena* (Venice: Barezzo Barezzi, 1624), and *Le vittorie di Francesco il Serafico. Li passi gloriosi della diva Chiara* (Padua: Giulio Crivellari, 1643).

⁵ Marinella, 1999, 83–93.

⁶ Rolfe Prodan, 164.

⁷ In some cases, Marinella's hagiography of Saint Justina is erroneously described as “mystical poetry in honor of St. Justine”: Letizia Panizza's introduction to Marinella, 1999, 15. *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* is a rare volume that has survived in three copies (one held in the Biblioteca Civica of Padua, one in the Biblioteca comunale “Francesco Melosio” of Città della Pieve, and one in the Biblioteca capitolare Dominicini of Perugia). For this article,

this text that Marinella's pro-woman arguments, which were somehow latent in her previous saintly lives, become overt, making this the most openly feminist among her biographies of holy women. As the first comprehensive analysis of this vita of Justina, this article delves into Marinella's departures from her sources, which serve to assert women's excellence as mystics, exegetes, preachers, and rulers. Exploring the relationship between profeminism and faith in *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina*, I argue that Marinella promotes a form of female holiness that is deeply inspired by the mystics who dispensed with male ecclesiastical mediation and exercised power beyond the monastic enclosure, while also conveying pro-woman ideas in line with the *querelle des femmes*. This reading challenges the hypothesis that, in her later years, Marinella drifted toward misogyny or resignation, revealing instead a continuity in her profeminist advocacy.

FEMALE SANCTITY IN COUNTER-REFORMATION ITALY

In early modern Italy, male authors of hagiographies were predominantly drawn to the male *vita activa*, focusing on early martyrs, church fathers, and mendicants and bishops who lived between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁸ Even if Antonia Pulci (1452/54–1501) inaugurated the “trend of hagiographic plays centered on female protagonists who were chaste, heroic, and persecuted,”⁹ and although several saintly biographies were dedicated to women,¹⁰ few female authors penned hagiographies of non-biblical

I examined the copy of *Holocausto d'amore* that is housed in the Biblioteca Civica of Padua. Furthermore, nearly all of Marinella's biographies maintain that she published an earlier poem on Saint Justina of Padua titled *Vita di S. Giustina* in Florence, in 1606. The first references I could find to this vita are in Bergalli, 287; and Tiraboschi, 162. However, the 1606 *Vita di S. Giustina* is not mentioned in any of Marinella's published texts, and it is not featured in Barezzo Barezzi's preface to *De' gesti eroici e della vita maravigliosa della Serafica S. Caterina da Siena*, which aims to list all writings by Marinella up to 1624. I have undertaken a thorough search for this volume, but, like Virginia Cox, 2008, 372n250, I have found no evidence of its existence.

⁸ Knowles-Frazier, 2005.

⁹ Ventrone, 4.

¹⁰ Cox, 2011, 143.

saints.¹¹ Therefore, in Virginia Cox's words, Marinella's decision to initiate her career with the hagiographic poem *La Colomba sacra* (The sacred dove, 1595) shows her "determination to insert herself into a prestigious male literary tradition."¹²

In part, hagiographies established idealized exemplars, and have thus frequently been connected to the idea of imitability.¹³ The *Golden Legend* (1481) and other collections of holy lives offered role models to emulate, fostering the belief that everyone should aspire to sainthood.¹⁴ In addition to the theological question of intercession, then, the issues of exemplarity and imitability of saintly *passiones* were at the core of the humanistic debate on hagiography in the fifteenth century.¹⁵

Women striving for holiness found motivation and guidance in hagiographies. Consider, for instance, the case of Saint Angela Merici (1474–1540), founder of the Company of Saint Ursula, who "drew her divine spirit" from the hagiographies she consumed,¹⁶ or the early reading of Dimessa Maria Alberghetti (1578–1664), predominantly focused on the life of Catherine of Siena, whom she sought to emulate.¹⁷ In like manner, the Venetian aspiring saint Cecilia Ferrazzi (1609–84) modeled her actions and composed her "inquisitorial autobiography"¹⁸ after the exemplary lives of holy women that she had initially encountered "read aloud at her mother's knee and many times thereafter."¹⁹ This kind of reaction was precisely what the authors of hagiographies intended, and it seems that Marinella was no exception. Her writings are populated by a succession of holy women engrossed in the act

¹¹ Aside from Marinella, other female writers of hagiographies between the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are the Bergamasque Benedictine nun Flavia Grumelli (d. after 1609), Angelica Baitelli (1588–1650/57), abbess of the Benedictine convent of Saint Giulia in Brescia, and the Roman Margherita Costa (ca. 1600–57). Furthermore, the Benedictine nun Cherubina Venturelli composed *sacre rappresentazioni* with female saints as protagonists. According to Virginia Cox (2011, 312), hagiographic works that have been lost include a poem on Saint Barbara by Maddalena Campiglia (1553–95) and a poem on Saint Eustace by Lucchese poet, dramatist, and singer Leonora Bernardi Belatti (1559–1616). Additionally, the Sicilian Camilla Bonfiglio (ca. 1578–1649) wrote a manuscript poem on Saint Placidus, and the Lucchese Isabetta Coreglia (fl. 1628–50) reputedly published a life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria in 1634, both now lost. See Grumelli; Costa; Baitelli; Pulci; and Venturelli.

¹² Cox, 2011, 143.

¹³ Compare, 2006a, 141–64.

¹⁴ Copeland, 85.

¹⁵ Knowles-Frazier, 2005, 95–98.

¹⁶ "trasse il suo principio di Spirito divino": Gondi, 15.

¹⁷ Botti, 41.

¹⁸ Ferrazzi, 5.

¹⁹ Ferrazzi, 42.

of reading about the virtuous lives of other female saints, expressing a desire to match their exemplary actions. For instance, the Virgin Mary admiringly reads the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 about a virgin who is destined to give birth to the Messiah—unaware that she is designated to fulfill it.²⁰ Similarly, Marinella's Catherine of Siena immerses herself in the life of the Virgin Mary, aspiring to follow in her footsteps.²¹ A passage from Marinella's joint hagiography of Francis and Clare of Assisi, *Le vittorie di Francesco il Serafico. Li passi gloriosi della Diva Chiara* (The victories of Francis the Seraphic: The glorious steps of the Diva Chiara, 1643), which represents Saint Clare of Assisi in the act of reading martyrs' lives, illustrates how early modern women may have interacted mimetically with these texts: "[Clare] made them read the lives of those who through torments and death acquired crowns of sempiternity; at times [the women] exhorted each other to new and unusual modes of penance; with holy emulation, each attempted to surpass the other in contemplations, beatings, and fasts."²²

Although, as Virginia Cox puts it, "hagiography was a relatively safe field"²³ (unlike vernacular rewritings of the Bible) and "hagiographic epic was considered appropriate reading matter for women,"²⁴ in the post-Tridentine years, their access to saints' biographies was not always uncontroversial due to questions surrounding imitability. In 1601 Alessandro de' Medici (1535–1605), Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, recognized the peril of allowing vernacular Bibles and hagiographic texts within the convent's walls:²⁵ "Care must be taken that they read suitable books, for the sake of both faith and honesty. I commend that they possess books, but they must be appropriate for religious women; therefore, the translated Bibles and all the dogmatic volumes should be removed because they do not understand them Nor should they be allowed to have those works that deal with the

²⁰ Marinella, 1602, 15–16.

²¹ Marinella, 1624, 299.

²² "Faceva poi leggere le vite di coloro che per via di tormenti e di morte acquistarono corone di sempiternità; tallora si essortavano queste quelle e quelle queste a nuove e strane penitenze; quasi con una santa emulazione tentava una superar l'altra alle contemplazioni, alle battiture, alli digiuni": Marinella, 2018, 192. All translations are the author's except where otherwise noted.

²³ Cox, 2011, 131. Sainly biographies were featured in lists of recommended books for women and were allowed in convents. See Laven, 15.

²⁴ Cox, 2011, 143.

²⁵ Cabibbo, 266.

lives of saints, because many are not fitting for them.”²⁶ Tracing the vicissitudes of one of these compilations of saintly lives, the popular *Legendario delle santissime vergini* (Legendary of the most holy virgins), Carmela Compare observes that some female hagiographic models caused particular concern after the Council of Trent.²⁷ The *Legendario*, one of the most widespread volumes in convents’ libraries,²⁸ was a collection of stories about female martyrs. The protagonists usually came into the world by divine grace and consecrated themselves to God in their youth. If thwarted by family members, they faced persecution with courage. Some prophesied, others preached, others fought against the devil, and some had a mystical, unmediated relationship with God. Laura Benedetti has ascertained that the *Legendario* was the main reference for *La Colomba sacra*; therefore, it is likely that this text also influenced Marinella’s later hagiographies.²⁹ It is not difficult to imagine why these tales of holy mavericks appealed to Marinella: their unconventional behavior, fighting, preaching, and prophesying posed a challenge to patriarchal hierarchical authority within the family and the church. After its first edition, in 1511, the *Legendario* was reissued multiple times with various cuts and additions throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—in Venice, three editions were printed between 1520 and 1525 by Nicolò Zoppino.³⁰ In the years that followed the Council of Trent, the collection was significantly amended: in the 1571 edition, three stories were expunged, only to be reinstated with substantial edits. Two of these, the legends of Domitilla and Febronia, reveal elements that might have caused concern: while Domitilla eloquently argued in favor of chastity by expertly citing an impressive array of sources, from Jerome to the scriptures to classical authors, Febronia enjoyed a continuous and private relationship with the Bible, at a time when women’s access to Holy Writ had been restricted. According to Compare, these hagiographic models aroused a certain mistrust and were accordingly censored because they promoted a female

²⁶ “Si deve haver cura che libri legghino, sì per conto della fede come ancora dell’onestà. Lodo bene che habbino libri, ma proportionati a donne e religiose, però si levino le bibbie tradotte e tutti i libri dogmatici perché non l’intendono. . . . Non si concedino ancora tutti quelli che trattano della vita de’ santi, perché molti non sono a proposito loro.” The passage, taken from the *Trattato sopra il governo de’ monasteri* (1601) by Alessandro de’ Medici (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vaticano Latino 10444) is cited by Zarri, 2000, 128.

²⁷ Compare, 2006b; on the *Legendario delle santissime vergini*, see also Zarri, 1999, 100–01.

²⁸ Cabibbo, 268.

²⁹ Benedetti; Marinella, 2012, 34.

³⁰ The story of Saint Justina of Padua was added to the *Legendario* in the late Cinquecento. Compare, 2006b, 465, 474.

sanctitas that, inspired by the public, prophetic spirituality of earlier *sante vive* (living saints),³¹ escaped ecclesiastical control.³²

During the first decades of the Cinquecento, the mystical figure of the *santa viva*—a charismatic, typically female prophet—became an institutionally recognized feature of Renaissance courts. In the Italian context, Saint Catherine of Siena was the quintessential prototype for these holy women. The Sieneese tertiary professed to have undergone several ecstatic visions, a mystical marriage and an exchange of hearts with Christ, and the reception of the stigmata. By virtue of her extraordinary experiences of mystical union with the divine, Catherine wielded tremendous authority in medieval society. An “ecclesiastical activist,”³³ she tirelessly attempted to reform the church, facilitated peace between Pope Gregory XI and the Florentine coalition during the War of the Eight Saints (1375–78), wrote the *Libro di divina dottrina* (Book of divine doctrine), alongside hundreds of letters to popes, monarchs, and cardinals, and zealously advocated for a crusade.³⁴ In her own writings, Catherine portrayed herself as an *apostola*, a designation that integrated her contemplative activities with her political calling.³⁵ The Dominican tertiary is key to understanding Catholic female religiosity in early modern Italy, for she served, as Gabriella Zarri points out, as the model to which generations of women aspired, by imitating her asceticism while also taking on a commitment to the world.³⁶ Like the Sieneese visionary, the later *sante vive* were distinguished by their active commitment to society, operating as spiritual guides for the princes who sought their political advice and directing their attention toward the urgent need for church reform.³⁷ Living saints such as Stefana Quinzani (1457–1530), Columba of Rieti (1467–1501), and Lucia Broccadelli (1476–1544) took on roles as “maternal” spiritual leaders, challenging expectations of female subordination.³⁸

After the *sante vive* came their reversed doubles—the *finte sante* (counterfeit female saints)—who, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, strove to emulate their ancestors’ actions, but faced rejection from the post-Tridentine church. In fact, as testified by the amendments to the *Legendario delle santissime vergini*, the advent of the Counter-Reformation coincided with a redefinition of “distinct feminine and masculine zones of involvement.”³⁹ Three synchronous

³¹ On early modern *sante vive*, see Zarri, 1990.

³² Compare, 2006b, 479–80.

³³ Walker Bynum, 417.

³⁴ *Companion to Catherine of Siena*, 1–22; Vauchez.

³⁵ Scott, 37.

³⁶ Zarri, 2017, 11.

³⁷ Zarri, 1999, 88.

³⁸ Zarri, 1992, 234.

³⁹ Sluhovsky, 267.

trends characterized this period, according to Anne Jacobson Schutte: the ascent of the male spiritual director, an increasing obsession with the discernment of spirits, and a growing mistrust of women's religious experiences that did not conform to the norm.⁴⁰ Measures like Pius V's apostolic constitution *Circa pastoralis* (1566), which mandated *clausura* for women, resulted in the ecclesiastical curtailment of the most transgressive and public facets of female religiosity in favor of a more private and moderate spirituality. Gabriella Zarri describes this shift as a "progressive eclipse of the 'leadership' roles achieved by women between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the establishment of a 'male religion' characterized by the internalization and rationalization of religious phenomena—the direction of which was officially recognized by the Church as resting on the authority of Fathers, be these pastors, spiritual directors, inquisitors, or the male heads of families."⁴¹ Between 1618 and 1750, seven men and nine women were tried by Venetian ecclesiastical authorities on a charge of "pretense of holiness" because they claimed spiritual grace and revelations.⁴² The *finte sante* convicted of heresy were women of modest social extraction who professed to have experienced visions and received communications from above; the men were typically the clerics who supported them, despite not claiming any mystical experience themselves.⁴³ The inquisitional resistance to this prophetic-mystical paradigm of holiness sought to promote the cultivation of a model of sanctity grounded in obedient conduct rather than in a direct communion with God.⁴⁴

Reflecting these tensions is Vincenzo Puccini's printed *Vita* (1609) of the Florentine Saint Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi (1566–1607),⁴⁵ whose lifetime coincided with the post-Tridentine backlash against expressions of mysticism and prophecy, and with the Catholic clergy's growing unwillingness to recognize vatic powers in a woman. The biography, which simultaneously heavily borrowed and deflected attention from the original accounts created by the nuns of the convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli, was composed with the express purpose of expanding Maria Maddalena's cult and igniting her canonization process. At a time when claims of communication with the divine among women were likely to attract the scrutiny of ecclesiastical authorities, Maria Maddalena

⁴⁰ Jacobson Schutte.

⁴¹ Zarri, 1999, 86.

⁴² Jacobson Schutte.

⁴³ Jacobson Schutte.

⁴⁴ Zarri, 2008, 196.

⁴⁵ Puccini.

“experienced visions, received intelligences, fell into abstractions of the mind, and was able to prophesy.”⁴⁶ According to Clare Copeland, Puccini reported some of her raptures carefully, diminishing their frequency. These ecstasies were introduced gradually and interspersed with reminders of the spiritual guidance received by the Carmelite nun, in an effort to reassure readers that “her extraordinary experiences had been accompanied by signs of their divine origin.”⁴⁷ Puccini’s anxiety about the reception of these visionary claims is most evident in his recurrent declarations that the original accounts of the mystic’s life had been approved by several clerics, and in his decision to draw parallels between Maria Maddalena and Francis of Assisi, rather than comparing her to Catherine of Siena, as was the case in the original records.⁴⁸ Anna Scattigno and Chiara Vasciaveo concur that, despite the prominence of the Catherinian model in the Carmelite nun’s vocation, references to the Sienese mystic are decidedly rare in Puccini’s *Vita* and other reworkings, such as that by Don Anton Maria Reconesi (1629).⁴⁹

Exemplary of this trend are also the lives of the Venetian holy women Angela Maria Pasqualigo (1562–1652), Graziosa Cecchini (1586–1655), and Maria Felice Spinelli (1621–83), who exhibited exceptional piety from an early age, made vows of chastity, practiced self-flagellation, and experienced ecstasies.⁵⁰ These traits are to be found also in Marinella’s hagiographies of female saints. Unlike most of the protagonists of Marinella’s narratives, however, Pasqualigo, Cecchini, and Spinelli were nuns, whose adherence to the norms of *clausura* and obedience to spiritual directors were underlined in their biographies.⁵¹

These post-Tridentine hagiographies reveal the clergy’s effort to regulate—or stymie—women’s unmediated access to God and the apostolic gifts that flowed therefrom, while also confining female spirituality to the private, enclosed dimension of the monastery. Yet the celebration of women’s intimate proximity to the divine and public religious leadership endures in the works of Lucrezia Marinella: her Justina of Padua presents the same insubordinate, non-cloistered, learned, and mystical female religiosity that characterized the lives of Catherine of Siena and the *sante vive*, and the stories of Domitilla and Febronia in the *Legendario*.

⁴⁶ Copeland, 4.

⁴⁷ Copeland, 88.

⁴⁸ Copeland, 92.

⁴⁹ Scattigno, 90–91; Vasciaveo, 309, 314.

⁵⁰ Jacobson Schutte, 92.

⁵¹ For instance, see Bagatta, 22–23, 68, 107.

REIMAGINING SAINT JUSTINA OF PADUA: THE CONTEXT
AND SOURCES OF *HOLOCAUSTO D'AMORE DELLA
VERGINE SANTA GIUSTINA*

No historically accurate version of Saint Justina's life has been preserved. In fact, there is scant evidence that the Paduan martyr ever existed: her story is mostly medieval fiction, stemming from the discovery of her relics in 1177.⁵² Saint Justina was often depicted in the company of Saint Prosdocimus, Saint Daniel, Saint Luke, or Saint Anthony, standing out as the only woman among the patrons of Padua.⁵³ By 1648, she was both the patroness of the city, with a basilica erected in her honor, and the symbol of the Holy League's military triumph in Lepanto on 7 October 1571—her feast day. The saint was given credit for this victory, with works such as Celio Magno's *Trionfo di Cristo per la vittoria contra Turchi* (Triumph of Christ for the victory over the Turks, 1571) or Valerio Moschetta's *Vita, e trionfo di Giustina vergine, et martire santissima* (Life and triumph of Justina, virgin and most holy martyr, 1572) stressing the connections between the Republic of Venice, Padua, Saint Justina, and military success.⁵⁴ In the post-Lepanto and post-Tridentine years, Justina rose significantly in the Venetian pantheon of heavenly intercessors and held greater importance within the Republic.⁵⁵

Although she was born and spent most of her life in Venice, Lucrezia Marinella had personal ties to the nearby Padua, where she resided for a period of time after 1607.⁵⁶ The subject matter of *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* may therefore have been partly determined by personal devotion and geographical proximity to Justina's relics.⁵⁷ The primary factor in Marinella's choice of topic, however, appears to have been politics. In fact, this vita of Saint Justina bears an ambitious dedication to Doge Francesco Molino, whose tenure, spanning the decade between 1646 and 1655, coincided with the War of Candia (1645–69), when the Republic of Venice battled against the Ottoman Empire for control of Crete.⁵⁸ In the introduction to the text, Marinella asserts that the current war

⁵² See Tilatti's introduction in Tilatti and Trolese.

⁵³ See, for instance, Andrea Mantegna's altarpiece *Saint Luke Polyptych* (1454) for the church of Saint Justina in Padua.

⁵⁴ Cocke, 392.

⁵⁵ Salvati, 40–42.

⁵⁶ Haskins, 206.

⁵⁷ Previously, numerous humanists' *passiones* had been motivated by the nearby presence of relics. See Knowles-Frazier, 2005.

⁵⁸ This is not the first time Marinella dedicates one of her literary works to a doge: she previously did so with her life of the Virgin (1602), addressed to Doge Marino Grimani (1532–1605), and with her epic poem *L' Enrico, overo Bisantio acquistato* (1635), dedicated to Doge Francesco Erizzo (1566–1646).

awakened her memories of Venice's past victories, particularly of Lepanto, which attests to the protection of Holy Providence over the Senate of the Republic. Attributing the Turkish defeat at Lepanto not only to the government's political sagacity and the might of its fleet but especially to Saint Justina's intercession, Marinella resolves to write about her, in the hope that the martyr will intervene to grant another triumph to the Serenissima and call for the renewal of the church and society through warfare. Echoing the prophetic voices of female mystics and, at the same time, aligning herself with the Republic's geopolitical interests, Marinella frames the narrative of Justina's brave resistance against the atrocities committed by the "pagans" as a mirror image of Venice's Christian victory over the Muslim Ottoman Empire. This paratext, tethering the volume to the Serenissima's propagandistic and self-celebratory discourse, potentially acts as a defensive facade that facilitates the conveyance of feminist messages within the following narrative.

In writing her hagiography, Marinella was not burdened by the constraints that come from chronicling the existence of a more recently canonized or contentious figure—such as Francis of Assisi or Catherine of Siena. The remoteness of the events proved liberating, enabling her to fill the gaps and invent a substantial amount of information, while remaining faithful to the essential components of Justina's story. *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* draws mainly from the *Vita sancti Prosdocimi*, the earliest known hagiography of Saint Prosdocimus, which is believed to have been written sometime between the tenth and eleventh centuries.⁵⁹ According to this text, the proto-bishop was dispatched by Saint Peter to Padua to carry out an evangelizing mission. While there, he cured King Vittaliano of a serious ailment, and subsequently converted him and his wife to Christianity. The previously barren couple bore a daughter named Justina, whom Prosdocimus baptized and instructed in the faith. Upon the death of the monarchs, the emperor Maximian arrived in the city, determined to marry Justina. Despite the emperor's advances, she refused to forsake her beliefs, and, as a result, she was executed by sword. Among the many elements that Marinella incorporates from the *Vita sancti Prosdocimi* are the significant role of Prosdocimus in Justina's life and the king and queen's struggle with infertility. Nonetheless, she also revises several details, for example presenting the queen as the first convert to Christianity and removing the emperor's proposal of marriage to Justina.

Approximately ten different retellings of Justina's life were published between 1570 and 1630, but it appears that Marinella was the only author to write about this saint in the middle of the seventeenth century.⁶⁰ Some of the

⁵⁹On the hagiographies of Saint Prosdocimus, see Daniele.

⁶⁰Among the works regarding the life of Saint Justina of Padua published on the Italian Peninsula between 1570 and 1630, I examined Moschetta; dell'Uva; Liviera; Basso; da Potenza; Bordoni; Martini; Viola; and Pignoria.

early modern lives of Justina that preceded Marinella's account were in verse, others in prose; most were brief and unassuming; all were penned by men. These early modern accounts come in different formats, including dramatic or poetic renderings as well as brief summaries within larger collections of saints' lives. They all narrate similar episodes: the protagonist is the aristocratic daughter of King Vittaliano, she converts to Christianity, she vows to retain her virginity, she is baptized by Saint Prosdocimus, she refuses to forsake her faith, and she is subsequently put to death by sword. Her martyrdom is usually placed within the period of Diocletian's persecutions, though there are some exceptions, such as Cortese Cortesi's *Giustina Regina di Padova* (Justina queen of Padua, 1608), which dates it to the reign of Nero. With approximately four hundred pages arranged into three main sections, Marinella's hagiography is by far the longest, the most erudite, and the most experimental. While the earlier, more succinct narratives tend to feature only the most basic of plot points, at times providing little insight into the protagonist's interiority, Marinella elaborates on the existing details and adds new information, delving into the heroine's background, feelings, motives, and thoughts. *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* deviates from prior early modern narratives in significant ways. First, Marinella elevates Queen Prepedegna (Justina's mother), typically absent or marginal in previous accounts, to a central role as both a political and religious leader.⁶¹ A related point is that while the existing narratives merely ascribed royal status to Justina, Marinella repeatedly dwells on her skilful decision-making as a stateswoman. Swerving from its sources, Marinella's hagiography presents lengthy justifications of women's right to rule and attributes their exclusion from public office to misogynistic prejudice. The saintly model of the martyr is altered to include mystical and visionary elements, as Justina frequently consorts with God and the angels. Marinella also celebrates the protagonist's extraordinary intelligence and knowledge, which enable her to expound on the Bible and preach to large crowds. Justina's courage is emphasized by her decision to walk to her execution "ablaze with a thousand rays of beauty . . . formidable, almost like a strong, ordered army at war against her enemies,"⁶² rather than hiding like a frightened "little sheep"⁶³ fleeing from wolves, as was the case in previous iterations of the narrative.⁶⁴ Indeed, she

⁶¹ In giving Prepedegna a protagonist's role, Marinella breaks with the conventions of the martyr's hagiography genre. See Winstead, 6.

⁶² "Spargendo mille folgori di bellezza . . . quasi un esercito forte, armato, e ordinato per guerreggiar contra li nemici suoi . . . terribile e invitta procede avanti priva di timore tra le nemiche schiere": Marinella, 1648, 364–65.

⁶³ "Pecorella": Liviera, 36.

⁶⁴ Such as Liviera; da Potenza; Martini.

expressly desires self-immolation, and envies those who have died as martyrs: “blessed are you, who have demonstrated your love for the Savior by death and blood . . . I would consider myself happy, if I could give such a display of my affection, and of my fidelity.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, unlike its sources, Marinella’s hagiography repeatedly depicts the titular character being enticed by demons, seemingly to accentuate her fortitude in refusing to yield to Satan’s temptations.

In doing so, the author upholds the post-Tridentine paradigm of sanctity as the holy individual’s quotidian and victorious duel against Satan⁶⁶—especially true for women, whose fights against the devil served as a model of heroic virtue that men could achieve through more public and institutional paths.⁶⁷ Finally, the influence of the *Vita sancti Prosdocimi* is evident, as Saint Prosdocimus takes on the prominent roles of Justina’s teacher and spiritual guide to the royal family, with countless pages devoted to his sermons. The protagonist declares her submission to him—“she was obedient to the Bishop’s teachings, almost like soft wax, into which every figure could be impressed.”⁷⁰ This dynamic between Prosdocimus and Justina may have been developed by Marinella as a nod to the hierarchical relationship usually established between male spiritual directors and female mystics in the seventeenth century, reflecting the growing importance of obedience after Trent. But the analogy ends here. In fact, Prosdocimus is never presented in an authorizing, legitimizing, disciplining, or mediating capacity in relation to Justina’s religious practices: her visions are independent of his influence, and he is absent whenever she converses with angels and Christ. The proto-bishop reciprocates Justina’s admiration, recognizing her as a semi-divine being: on observing her luminous countenance, he “seemed to glimpse a divine form in her, and . . . he saw sitting within her, like a King on his throne, that highness to which everyone bends.”⁶⁹ In another instance, Marinella declares that “Prosdocimus, the wise women, and the maids . . . revered [Justina], and loved her, as a celestial Deity.”⁷⁰

As will be demonstrated in the following analysis, these deviations from the reference material share a common objective: to exalt women’s holiness and their aptitude for ministry and government. What should be the core and culmination

⁶⁵ “Beati voi, a cui lecito colla morte, col sangue far testimonianza al vostro Salvatore dell’amore; . . . io mi terrei felice, se tal foggio dare potressi del mio affetto, e della mia fedeltà”: Marinella, 1648, 311.

⁶⁶ Cabibbo, 261.

⁶⁷ Cabibbo, 291; Weinstein and Bell, 235–36.

⁶⁸ “Si pose ubidente alli ammaestramenti del Vescovo, quasi molle cera, in cui si possa imprimere ogni figura”: Marinella, 1648, 245.

⁶⁹ “Considerandola pareva vedere una forma divina, e . . . vide sedere in essa, quasi Re nel proprio soglio, quell’altezza, a cui ogni altezza si piega”: Marinella, 1648, 244.

⁷⁰ “Prosdocimo, e le savie Donne, e Damigelle . . . la riverivano, e amavano, come una celeste Deità”: Marinella, 1648, 250.

of Justina's story—her martyrdom—only comes after hundreds of pages that not only chronicle the holy woman's heroic deeds and visions but also provide a rather forthright protofeminist commentary. Departing from her sources with additions and alterations that are chiefly philogynous in nature, Marinella's *vita* makes the case that women can excel as preachers, theologians, and rulers.

HAGIOGRAPHY AND THE *QUERELLE DES FEMMES*

Preoccupied with the question of women's access to political and religious leadership, *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* presents Queen Prepedegna as a sagacious woman, skilled in public service and apt at overseeing military operations.⁷¹ In her plea to share the responsibilities of government with her spouse, Prepedegna deploys arguments from the *querelle des femmes*, echoing pro-woman statements from *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* and citing the same sources. The following excerpt from *Holocausto d'amore* would not look out of place in Marinella's philogynous treatise:

Women as much as men are produced by nature good and capable of administering a kingdom. . . . The philosopher Plato would approve of this, and everyone praises and honors his wisdom and knowledge. It seemed to her not only right but also advantageous that women, as much as men, should put their force and intellect at the service of their city, and that both sexes, as the enlightened Socrates argues, should be able to fight with arms, to keep the order, to command an army, and to be strong and formidable in bloody battles. . . . The great woman was surprised that the teachings of so great a philosopher would not be observed and practiced by the world as useful and necessary measures, for she deemed happy those ambidextrous cities where women worked as public servants to ease the tremendous heaviness that otherwise weighs only over Atlas's shoulders.⁷²

⁷¹ "Di stirpe generosa, di animo elevato e regio, ornata d'alto sapere, avezza a vedere e ad udire opere e commandi militari, e bellezza non ordinaria": Marinella, 1648, 5.

⁷² "Tanto l'huomo come la Donna la natura produce buoni, e sufficienti nelle regie amministrazioni. . . . Come piace al Filosofo Platone, di cui con ogni spirito laudava, e honorava la spienza e 'l sapere. Si mostrava a lei cosa giusta e conveniente che la Donna come l'huomo alli bisogni della Città piegassero le forze, e la sapienza, e ambo fossero, come aggrada al prudente Socrate, saputi a maneggiar l'armi, ad ordinar le schiere, a condur gli esserciti pronti, e sufficienti; e esser forti, e formidabili nelle horribili battaglie. . . . Stupiva la gran Donna come la dottrina e insegnamenti di un tanto Filosofo non fossero posti in uso dal mondo; come utili, e necessari, stimando felici quelle Città che sono ambidestre, e adoperandosi le Donne ne' bisogni pubblici venissero in parte a sgravare do gravosi pesi tallhora maggiori di quelli che premono le spalle di Atlante": Marinella, 1648, 9.

Throughout *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne*, Marinella refers to Plato's and Socrates's claims in support of female rule and praises them for nearly recognizing "that women are nobler and more excellent than men."⁷³ Like Prepedegna in the section quoted above, Marinella's feminist treatise vehemently argues that, if properly educated, women would be capable of holding public office, ruling, judging, punishing, and commanding an army:

Oh, how many women there are, who with their greater prudence, justice, and experience of life, would govern empires better than men. . . . Would to God that in our times it were permitted for women to be skilled at arms and letters! What marvelous feats we should see, the like of which were never heard, in maintaining and expanding kingdoms. And who but women, with their intrepid spirits, would be the first to take arms in defense of their country? And with what readiness and ardor they would shed their blood and their lives in defense of males.⁷⁴

Prepedegna's complaints, then, unmistakably restate Marinella's views on women's leadership as espoused in *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne*.

Despite being barred from public office by her husband, Prepedegna acts as a leader, exerting significant influence on Padua. One key episode, which is Marinella's invention, best exemplifies this: it is Prepedegna who first decides to convert to Christianity, thus influencing her husband and her people to follow suit. Following the king's death, the queen ascends to the throne and invites Justina to join her—perhaps in a parallel to Marinella's previous dedicatees Christine of Lorraine (1565–1637) and Maria Maddalena of Austria (1589–1631), the mother and daughter-in-law duo who ruled Florence during the minority of Ferdinand II (1621–28). Prepedegna, who draws from her own expertise in political matters and is attuned to the needs of her realm, is esteemed by everyone "for her learning and sage judgments,"⁷⁵ while Justina develops into an accomplished ruler who understands when to be strict and when to be clement, and whose authority is sanctioned and inspired by God.⁷⁶ Political and religious leadership thus coexist in the early martyr, as was the case, albeit without royal titles and official roles, for holy women such as Catherine of Siena and the *sante vive*. Because of their skillful,

⁷³ "Marinella refers to Plato, *Republic*, 540c, where Socrates tells his audience: 'you must not forget that some of [the philosopher-kings] will be women. All I have been saying applies just as much to any women who are found to have the necessary qualities': Panizza's introduction to Marinella, 1999, 40n2.

⁷⁴ Marinella, 1999, 80.

⁷⁵ "Per il suo sapere, e maturo giuditio": Marinella, 1648, 196–200.

⁷⁶ "Governava . . . non allontanando mai l'anima sua da Dio, riposando ogni sua attione in lui, chiedendo alla sua clemenza saper, prudenza, e Sapienza per poter giustamente reggere li popoli suoi": Marinella, 1648, 255.

equitable, and wise administration, Justina and Prepedegna's joint reign is enlightened and fair. As the following description reveals, the prosperity and success of their rule confirms the veracity of Marinella's protofeminist views, establishing that women are as capable as men of handling public affairs:

They governed without any fury or excess of passion; . . . the women taught, rectified, and admonished without anger . . . but with piety and discretion. . . . They ruled perfectly . . . over their kingdom and city, which were no less happy than when the King was alive. . . . With regal greatness they listened carefully to difficult disputes, giving judgements that were as good as those of the wisest and most prudent kings that ever existed. So many commendable virtues were born of their minds, informed by divine beauty and by extraordinary spirits, so that it was clear that the dew of God's grace irrigated their blessed souls.⁷⁷

After Prepedegna's demise, Justina assumes sole control of the government, thereby demonstrating that she "had nothing to envy the Wise Solomon; nor Queen Sheba":⁷⁸

With prudent manners, to ensure harmony in the City she did not listen to the deceitful words of people who were not good; . . . she subdued those who continually exert themselves to offend others, . . . she made sure that her Kingdom abounded in all those things without which man cannot live comfortably . . . she prohibited . . . discord, brawls, persecutions, enmities, . . . she took pains that blasphemies not be heard, . . . using all diligence, so that in her Kingdom . . . there be no treachery, deception, betrayal.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ "L'animo loro era senza ira, o passione; . . . ma con pietà e discretezza. . . . Con queste e altre perfetioni d'impero governavano . . . il Regno e ogni Città soggetta, né meno che vivendo il Re contente si ritrovavano. . . . Con regal grandezza porgevano udienza alle differenze altrui, dando alle difficili contese . . . pareri . . . ch'ad invidiar non havevano a quelle de li più sapienti, e prudenti Re che stati fossero. Così laudabili virtù nascevano dalle loro menti, informate di divine bellezze, e da spiriti, che superavano l'ordinario e si conosceva che la rugiada della gratia divina irrigava con piacevolezza le benedette anime": Marinella, 1648, 196–200.

⁷⁸ "Giustina non poteva invidiare al Sapiente Salomone; né alla Regina Saba": Marinella, 1648, 292–94.

⁷⁹ "Con prudenti modi cercava la concordia della Città; non porgeva orecchio alle parole adulatrici, venute da gente poco buona; . . . abbassava coloro, li quali del continuo si essercitano in offendere altrui, . . . faceva che abbondasse il suo Regno di tutte quelle cose, senza le quali non può vivere l'huomo agiatamente: . . . Vietava . . . che non fossero discordie, risse, persecuzioni, inimicitie, . . . si affaticava che non si udissero Bestemmie, . . . usando ogni studio, che nel suo Regno . . . non si essercitassero fraudi, inganni, tradimenti": Marinella, 1648, 252–55.

The reigns of Justina and Prepedegna are distinguished by the virtues of temperance, justice, and wisdom, standing in stark contrast to clichés about the putative irrationality, weakness, cowardice, and fickleness of the female sex, which led to the prejudicial attitudes that excluded the vast majority of women from holding positions of authority during the early modern period. Marinella's polemic had already articulated a sharp condemnation of these stereotypes in the section titled "Of Temperate and Continent Women," which lists several female monarchs and noblewomen who exhibited sound judgment, careful consideration, and astute intelligence.⁸⁰

Mirroring the sentiments expressed in *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne*, Marinella's hagiography condemns a culture that denies women the opportunity to exercise their abilities—not only violating women's liberty but also impeding the progress of society as a whole. In line with this theme, the narrative portrays Prepedegna as a competent ruler who is unjustly prevented from reigning due to the king's insecurity. According to Marinella, Vittaliano's apprehension might stem from his fear of being overshadowed by Prepedegna's brilliance, which would expose his inadequacies.⁸¹ In order to maintain his dominance, Vittaliano restricts Prepedegna's powers, "so that she would remain ignorant, like the other women, who lack education and awareness."⁸² Following his demise, the prosperity of Justina and Prepedegna's reign is met with hostility by several male rulers, who resent their success: "These queens' just reign appeared so fair and right that it prompted more than one prince to blush; . . . many disdained to be surpassed by the merit of these generous monarchs. . . . Many criticized their notable deeds and could hardly stand women's power; perhaps because they were unaware of Plato's admiration for female rule, knowing that nature, which always operates rationally, had formed woman, as much as man, capable of rising to royal eminence."⁸³ These insights into male envy expand on a point made in Marinella's protofeminist treatise, which adduces women's lack of training and access to education to men's envy: "the few women who are

⁸⁰ Marinella, 1999, 93–104.

⁸¹ "Proprio è dell'amante allontanare l'Amato dalle laudevole discipline, sforzandosi a suo potere, che di quelle spogliato ne resti, perché teme; e s'avvisa, che se d'esso più valoroso diviene, rimaner da quello sprezzato, e di niuna stima": Marinella, 1648, 9.

⁸² "Acciocchè priva di sapere rimanesse, e simile alle altre Donne inscientiate, e semplice": Marinella, 1648, 9.

⁸³ "Così bella, e retta la giustizia di queste Regine appariva, che arrossare faceva più di un Principe; . . . molti sdegnavano essere superati dal valor di queste generose Regine . . . Erano anchor molti, che gl'atti laudabili di queste Regine biasimavano, e con difficoltà sopportavano l'impero donnesco; forse non sapendo che il reggimento muliebre è laudato dal Filosofo Platone, e in molti luoghi, avvisandosi egli, che la natura, che sempre opera con ragione haveva costituito così l'huomo, come la Donna all'altetze dell'eminenze reali": Marinella, 1648, 196–200.

interested in learning become so skilled in the sciences that men envy them, as lesser people tend to envy greater ones.”⁸⁴ Hence, an intertextual reading of *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* and *Holocausto d'amore* reveals that the author's profeminist convictions remain largely consistent across her publications, spanning several decades and encompassing both her religious literature and her secular treatise. In her last work, Marinella intertwines the hagiography genre with the *querelle des femmes*, boldly using the saint's story to substantiate her pro-woman claims. She seems to be the only early modern female author to explicitly undertake this combination within a saint's life.

EXEGETE AND PREACHER: THE SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY OF SAINT JUSTINA (AND LUCREZIA MARINELLA)

In contrast to earlier accounts, which contain no mention of Justina's education or activities beyond martyrdom, Marinella presents the saint as a learned religious leader, who teaches, preaches, and converts souls. In addition to qualities such as modesty and temperance, the protagonist stands out for her intelligence. A precocious student, Justina is “always eager to learn”⁸⁵ and is admired “as an excellence of nature, a wonderful prodigy, with something divine within her.”⁸⁶ Under Saint Prosdocimus's guidance, the young girl becomes proficient in “political doctrines”⁸⁷ and effortlessly absorbs “the law of Christ”⁸⁸ and “theology.”⁸⁹ This enables her to interpret and teach the Bible in expert fashion:

She offered comprehensive explanations of arcane passages from the scriptures. She illustrated the obscure divine sciences so clearly that everyone marveled at the prodigy: nor could they understand with their own minds even part of the supreme heights that she discovered. With superhuman, excellent knowledge she understood and possessed the beauty of the spirits that sustain the body of the great Bible; for she, with unusual intelligence for a mortal, received through divine influence every wonderful art, every secret doctrine, every occult wisdom that was passed from the Heavens to the earth.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Marinella, 1999, 83.

⁸⁵ “Sempre desiderosa di nuovo sapere”: Marinella, 1648, 107.

⁸⁶ “Come una eccellenza di natura, un mirabil prodigio, ch'avesse in sé del divino”: Marinella, 1648, 92–94.

⁸⁷ “Politiche Dottrine”: Marinella, 1648, 107.

⁸⁸ “La legge di Christo”: Marinella, 1648, 97.

⁸⁹ “La Theologia”: Marinella, 1648, 107.

⁹⁰ “Alli occulti arcani della Scrittura Sacra erano . . . pienamente da lei le interpretationi date, . . . così li sensi oscuri delle divine scienze illustrati, e fatti chiari, . . . che ogn'uno vedendola

The idea that women may possess epistemic authority only as passive vessels of infused wisdom is a well-worn patriarchal trope that Marinella both reflects and subverts: on one hand, the text exalts the singularity of Justina's God-given knowledge; on the other, it affirms the value of theological and political education in equipping Justina to serve as a witness to divine truth.

Like Justina, all the other holy women in Marinella's pantheon are represented as enlightened and authoritative readers of the scriptures. Within *La vita di Maria Vergine, imperatrice dell'universo*, Marinella's studious Mary is endowed with an innate talent for scriptural exegesis: "Her mind's eye bore the light of the splendors to which the tongues and pens of God's scribes had access in dark prophetic passages."⁹¹ The emphasis is placed on the intellectual facet of the Virgin's faith, as she is envisioned in moments of intense concentration, surrounded by a crowd of "virgins, priests, and high priests" who are "overcome by wonder on hearing her interpretations of the obscure meanings of the Holy Scriptures and the way she sweetly unlocked confused interpretations in the arcane subjects, arching her brows and pursing her lips together."⁹² Similarly, Marinella's *De' gesti heroici, e della vita meravigliosa della serafica S. Caterina da Siena* (On the heroic deeds and wonderful life of the seraphic St. Catherine of Siena, 1624) represents Catherine as a "source of sacred and holy knowledge,"⁹³ whose understanding of sacred texts elevates her to the same level as Saint Paul, Saint John, Saint Dionysus, and Saint Dominic. The full significance of Mary's, Justina's, and Catherine's theological education and autonomous readings of the Bible only surfaces in the context of women's restricted and contested engagement with the Holy Writ and theological study in Counter-Reformation Italy:⁹⁴ while they were exhorted to read devotional materials and to practice religious meditation such as that advised by rosary manuals, the independent intellectual engagement with the biblical text pictured by Marinella would have

si ritrovava involto... dalle braccia di una immobile meraviglia: né potevano intendere coll'acume dell'intelletto parte delle supreme altezze, che da lei scoperte, ... essa con una eccellenza sopra humana di sapere capiva e possedeva le bellezze degli spiriti dalli quali è sostenuto il mirabilissimo corpo della gran Bibbia; perciocchè ella con intelletto non praticato più tra mortali riceveva ogni mirabil arte; ogni incognita Dottrina; ogni occulta sapienza, che dal Cielo alla terra trasmessa fosse per divina influenza": Marinella, 1648, 125.

⁹¹ Marinella, 2008, 150.

⁹² Marinella, 2008, 150.

⁹³ "Fonte di sacro e santo sapere, le cui acque traevano l'origine loro dalle caverne de' monti del Paradiso": Marinella, 1624, 98.

⁹⁴ See Ardissino; Fragnito; and Valerio.

been a matter of concern.⁹⁵ Furthermore, women were denied access to the *magisterium*: Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia (1646–84) was precluded from pursuing a doctoral degree in theology by Cardinal Gregorio Barbarigo on grounds of Catholic orthodoxy, which forbade women from assuming instructional roles in matters of faith. Instead, she was admitted to the University of Padua as a student of philosophy, graduating on 25 June 1678.⁹⁶ Marinella's erudite holy women, therefore, present propitious mimetic opportunities for female readers: if they can study theology and the Bible, so should any woman who wishes to model her behavior after them. By showing that the virgin martyr Justina, the apex of perfection, excelled at theological reflection and scriptural exegesis, the hagiography provides an important assertion of women's epistemic authority, valorizes literate devotion, and promotes biblical study as a significant component of girls' education. Turning Justina's unmediated and authoritative reading of the Bible into an exemplum, Marinella also challenges the church's patriarchal control over the sacred text.

While lengthy sermons pronounced by Saint Prosdocimus are interspersed throughout the text, Justina is equally committed to the propagation of Christian faith through the practices of teaching and preaching. The martyr's evangelistic mission begins in her childhood, with her female peers, whom Justina exhorts to pray,⁹⁷ to worship the Virgin Mary,⁹⁸ and to join her in pronouncing vows of chastity.⁹⁹ Justina's eloquent speeches soon attract the attention of noblemen, who "were drawn to her like . . . a magnet toward iron. They assembled around her like the disciples around the teacher."¹⁰⁰ Her audience is not solely comprised of ladies in waiting but also of princes¹⁰¹ and noblewomen,¹⁰² who are mesmerized by her persuasive words: "Like the Primum Mobile that seizes the planets tenderly and not violently, in the same way she grasped the hearts of noblewomen."¹⁰³ Drawing a parallel to the Acts of

⁹⁵ "In Catholic countries, one could not approach the sacred text except through the filters of hierarchical interpretation, and the biblical message could only be savoured through piecemeal readings of authorized texts or through the normal channels of liturgy, preaching and iconography": Valerio, 15–16.

⁹⁶ On Elena Cornaro Piscopia, see Maschietto; Robin, Larsen, and Levin, 291–93.

⁹⁷ Marinella, 1648, 112.

⁹⁸ Marinella, 1648, 100–03.

⁹⁹ Marinella, 1648, 151–53.

¹⁰⁰ "Si rivolgevano a lei, come . . . il ferro alla calamita. . . . Si adunavano intorno a lei, come li discepoli intorno al maestro": Marinella, 1648, 112.

¹⁰¹ Marinella, 1648, 112.

¹⁰² Marinella, 1648, 266.

¹⁰³ "Come il primo Mobile rapisce seco dolcemente, non violentemente li Pianetti . . . così ella traheva seco il cuore delle nobili Donzelle": Marinella, 1648, 112.

the Apostles (Acts 2:1–31), where the Holy Spirit descends upon Christ's followers and imbues them with the power to preach the Gospel in different tongues, Justina beseeches God to grant her the ability to convert individuals beyond the court: "Deliver over me, O Lord, a ray refulgent with your eternal light, whose brightness might illuminate people to see how right and true your law is."¹⁰⁴ This occurrence mirrors a passage in Marinella's hagiography of Catherine of Siena, wherein the transmission of divine wisdom into the saint's mind is likened to a golden shower, utilizing the image of the Pentecostal flames shining over the heads of the disciples.¹⁰⁵ When Justina's plea is answered, she leaves the palace to disseminate the divine word, "following in the apostles' footsteps:"¹⁰⁶ "she beckoned several noblewomen who were previously against the true faith, and now came to her, not only from local towns but also from distant, heathen, and enemy lands, that were rebellious to Christ."¹⁰⁷ The saint's sermons attract a devout following, and her words are sought and revered mostly by crowds of women: "Justina was pleased to see not only the shepherdesses from the Euganean Hills, but also noblewomen and young virgins, who all came to serve and honor her. To them, both rural and aristocratic, she preached the Christian faith with graceful sermons. . . . Her reasoning was endowed with such divine virtue . . . that it elicited veneration and reverence. . . . She would not return from her journey without an abundant harvest of many virgins' and matrons' souls. . . . Justina taught them the doctrine of Christ."¹⁰⁸ For her holy didacticism, active ministry, and missionary efforts,

¹⁰⁴ "Manda sopra me, o Signore, un raggio acceso nella tua sempiterna luce, al cui lume possano chiaro vedere le genti quanto sia certa e vera la tua legge": Marinella, 1648, 264.

¹⁰⁵ "Having opened the rich fountain of divine intelligence, He drew from it waters filled with infinite worth and a ray similar to that blessed fire, which already flared up above the head of those twelve champions of Christ; and with the excellence of these celestial favors . . . sprinkled and illuminated the soul . . . of the regal youth, so that . . . she could . . . understand . . . the darkest senses, the most unknown arcana, the most recondite secrets that were hidden to the sacred pens of holy men and inspired prophets in the blind shadows of their writings": Marinella, 1624, 98.

¹⁰⁶ "Segnar li passi per l'orme segnate dalli piedi de gli amici di Christo": Marinella, 1648, 128.

¹⁰⁷ "Traheva a sé gli animi repugnanti alla vera fede di tante nobilissime Donzelle, le quali venivano alli servigi suoi, non pur da paesi prossimi; ma da lontani, Idolatre, nemiche, e in tutto ribelle di Christo": Marinella, 1648, 128.

¹⁰⁸ "Godeva Giustina nel veder venire a lei non pur le Pastorelle de' Monti Euganei; ma nobili Donne, e Vergini giovinette per servirla e honorarla, a ciascuna tanto alle gentili quanto alle rusticane predicava con maniera di gratioso sermone la fede di Christo . . . Tanta virtù Divina havevano . . . li suoi ragionamenti . . . che induceva venerazione e riverenza . . . Né ritornava dal suo viaggio, che prima di molte e molte Verginelle e savie Matrone non havebbe fatto una laudabile raccolta . . . Giustina insegnava a quelle la Dottrina di Christo": Marinella, 1648, 266–67.

Justina is repeatedly compared to the apostles: her nature “was similar to that divine grace that descended from Jesus’s breast and was diffused above the simplicity of his twelve followers.”¹⁰⁹

While public preaching was a feature of Catherine of Siena’s apostolate,¹¹⁰ in the midst of the Counter-Reformation this practice was the prerogative of religious women like Maria Alberghetti, who conducted it privately and ex officio in front of her sisters.¹¹¹ The type of public ministry performed by Justina, delivering sermons in open spaces and in front of mixed audiences, would have been highly contentious in seventeenth-century Italy.¹¹² The saint’s itinerant preaching may have struck a Counter-Reformation readership as particularly disquieting, given the emphasis on the enclosure of women religious. Notably, moreover, her preaching is not always mitigated by Marinella through the emphasis on a narrow, all-female audience of young peers, as was the case in works by other women writers.¹¹³ Employing the topos of divine inspiration and attributing her protagonist’s public sermons to a blend of personal erudition and supernatural illumination, the author implicitly invokes authoritative female predecessors like the powerful mystics and *sante vive* of the previous centuries. Marinella thus defies the Pauline injunction and instead asserts women’s right to learn and impart instructions through the figure of Justina.

It is likely that Marinella’s portrayal of Justina as a female apostle, as well as her emphasis on her holy women’s intelligence and learning, was partly motivated by a self-legitimizing aim. In fact, the author embraced an evangelizing role¹¹⁴ from her early treatise *Discorso del rivolgimento amoroso verso la somma bellezza* (Discourse on the loving turning toward the highest beauty, 1597) to her later works, particularly *Holocausto d’amore*, which extensively incorporates, paraphrases, and interprets numerous scriptural passages, as well as citations from theological authorities such as Saint Paul, Pseudo-Dionysius

¹⁰⁹“Si conosceva essere somigliante a quella divina gratia; che discese dal seno di quella Sapienza increata, che si diffuse sopra la semplicità de’ dodici amici di Gesù”: Marinella, 1648, 129.

¹¹⁰Kienzle, 127–54.

¹¹¹Maria Alberghetti was a remarkably prolific writer of religious texts, which are preserved in almost two hundred manuscripts within the Archivio Biblioteca del Collegio delle Dimesse in Padua. Among her published works are Alberghetti’s homilies (1656). On Alberghetti, see Botti; Maurutto, 2014 and 2018.

¹¹²On women’s preaching and teaching, see Minnis, 62; Zarri, 2010, 177–93.

¹¹³Cox, 2011, 222.

¹¹⁴Ardissino defines Marinella as a “popularizer of the Bible” (“divulgatrice biblica”). Ardissino, 211.

the Areopagite, Saint Augustine, Albertus Magnus, and Marsilio Ficino.¹¹⁵ Although Marinella did not produce full-length theological treatises or biblical commentaries, she did integrate elements of these genres into her writings, to the point that her theological acumen was recognized by her contemporaries: Barezzo Barezzi's introduction to her hagiography of Catherine of Siena proclaims that the work "abounds in theological wisdom,"¹¹⁶ and the publisher's preface to *Le vittorie di Francesco il Serafico. Li passi gloriosi della diva Chiara* describes it as a "theological and philosophical book."¹¹⁷ Additionally, it should be noted that Marinella engages in religious discourse also by ventriloquizing the male clerical voice of Prosdocimus and crafting his lengthy sermons. By granting such a significant space to learned holy women in her literary corpus, Marinella may have sought to authorize her own intellectual engagement with sacred matters and to establish her credibility as a writer of religious texts.

THE GENDER POLITICS OF FEMALE MARTYRDOM AND MYSTICISM

Marinella's choice of an early martyr as her subject matter is in line with post-Tridentine sensibilities, which, in response to the Protestant Reformation, brought to the forefront a heroic paradigm of commitment to Christianity both in liturgical celebration and hagiographic literature.¹¹⁸ The exaltation of the martyrs in the wake of Trent was directly linked to the recognition of the Catholic Church as the sole legitimate heir of the Primitive Church.¹¹⁹ Correspondingly, in a survey of Counter-Reformation sacred literature, Cox found that narratives about martyrs loom large, accounting for twenty-one out of forty-four hagiographic poems.¹²⁰

Published five decades apart, both Marinella's first and last literary works—respectively, the poem in octaves *La Colomba sacra* and *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina*—are hagiographies of early female martyrs. The virgin martyrs were frequently presented as symbols of female strength in

¹¹⁵Cox deems *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* "a remarkable attempt to fuse hagiographical narrative with philosophical and theological doctrine, . . . incorporated via a dense series of marginal notes" in Latin. Cox, 2008, 372n250. On Marinella's use of Latin annotations, see Carinci.

¹¹⁶"Abbonda di sapienza teologica": Marinella, 2011, 45.

¹¹⁷"Teologico e filosofico libro": Marinella, 2018, 97.

¹¹⁸Zarri, 2008, 191–92; Knowles-Frazier, 2015, 23.

¹¹⁹Compare, 2006a, 141.

¹²⁰Cox, 2020, 37.

early modern “defences of women,”¹²¹ and *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne* adheres to this tradition. The section “Of Strong and Intrepid Women,” featured in the 1600 edition, demonstrates the appeal of female martyrs for Marinella: in this category several such women are listed, including the saints Felicitas and Columba, who, in Marinella’s words, “unconcerned about their lives, have achieved great and wonderful things . . . putting themselves in all kinds of dangers.”¹²² The heroic bravery of female martyrs is held up against men’s cowardice: “Who would not tremble and turn pale upon learning of his impending demise? Yet these courageous women were delighted and joyful, for they did not fear death.”¹²³ The fourth book of Marinella’s *Vita di Maria* chronicles Mary’s vision of a crowd of female virgins who offer their bodies “to swords, arrows, razors, flames, scourges, and poisonous serpents, to the savage talons of wild lions, to the darkness of prisons, to hooks and cords, to the tenacity of hard chains,” welcoming these torments, so that “it appeared . . . that they desired more than feared such martyrdoms.”¹²⁴ In this instance, five of the seven major saints who appear to Mary are female, including four martyred women: Columba, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Saint Ursula, and Saint Felicitas. In Marinella’s *Rime sacre*, six out of nine female saints are martyrs. Moreover, in *Le vittorie di Francesco il Serafico. Li passi gloriosi della Diva Chiara*, Marinella describes Francis of Assisi’s vision of a multitude of martyrs, among whom the towering figure of Justina stands out:

He saw her receive, with a bold generosity of spirit and after many temptations, travails and tribulations, a mortal wound in the chaste breast . . . flood with the purple of her blood the garments and the earth, and . . . invite others to this glorious end. . . . It seemed to him to hear an angelic voice say, “O glorious virgin, who left royal but mortal dominion, you receive the crown of the immortal kingdom by the hand of the eternal King. O Justina, it is given to you because you have earned it. O wise one . . . it shall be the reward of your invincible fortitude.”¹²⁵

¹²¹ Cox, 2011, 43.

¹²² “Disprezzando la propria vita hanno operato cose grandi, e maravigliose . . . e hanno eletto di mettersi ad ogni pericolo”: Marinella, 1600, 20.

¹²³ “Qual è colui che udendo l’annuncio di morte non si impallidisca, e tremi? Ma queste valorose donne haveano allegrezza, e giubilo, come quelle che non temeano la morte”: Marinella, 1600, 23.

¹²⁴ Marinella, 2008, 228.

¹²⁵ Marinella, 2018, 210.

Within the same text, Clare of Assisi delivers a spiritual call to arms in front of her sisters, comparing the female martyrs crowned in heaven to the Amazons:

We have to understand that if we want the crowns we must fight, and not only to engage in battle, but to win; whence these glorious Amazons combat valiantly and devoutly . . . Oh how many of these blessed virgins . . . who . . . tried to reach the heavenly homeland not only by way of bitter penance but also by way of martyrdom . . . have acquired a life of peace and joy in heaven! . . . Oh how much, virgin sisters, we can conscientiously envy the daring virtue they courageously exerted in honor of their celestial Bridegroom.¹²⁶

As it transpires from Clare's words, to construct the figure of the martyr Marinella combines the attributes of the Amazon and of the warrior with those of the saint, mixing religious zeal and military prowess, and merging epic and hagiography. As Justina, like an epic heroine, is compared to an unassailable fortress¹²⁷ and a formidable army,¹²⁸ her martyrdom is accordingly recounted with the martial language of the volume's paratext.

The fusion of traditionally secular genres under the umbrella of religious subject matter typical of Counter-Reformation "spiritual *riscrittura*"¹²⁹ serves the text's profeminist ends. It is evident that for Marinella the ancient tale of Justina's martyrdom acquired fresh, even urgent relevance, not only in view of the Counter-Reformation and the Ottoman-Venetian wars but also because it shed light on female fortitude, courage, and devotion: its martyred heroine disproved stereotypes about feminine weakness by fearlessly embracing self-sacrifice and asceticism, refusing to be submissive, publicly speaking up for her convictions against powerful men, and sacrificing her life in defense of

¹²⁶"Bisogna intendere che chi vuol le corone è necessario combattere; né solo combattere, ma combattendo vincere; onde animosamente guerreggiano e fedelmente queste gloriose amazzoni . . . oh quante di queste beate vergini . . . non pur tentarono per via di aspra penitenza acquistarsi la Patria celeste ma per la via del martirio . . . si hanno acquistato una vita piena di pace e giocondità! . . . Oh quanto, oh vergini sorelle, possiamo virtuosamente invidiare alla virtù animosa, animosamente essercitata da quelle in onore del loro celeste Sposo?": Marinella, 2018, 191.

¹²⁷"Era simile ad una fortezza combattuta e tormentata con armi, e mine ad affligger la quale ogni opera e fatica si conosca vana": Marinella, 1648, 287.

¹²⁸"Formidabile, e quasi un esercito forte, armato, e ordinato per guerreggiar contra li nemici suoi": Marinella, 364.

¹²⁹Cox, 2020, 29–54.

her beliefs. In this case, then, the merging of hagiographic and epic genres in the figure of the martyr serves to “emphasize the possibilities for female power to exercise itself in a way that is beneficial to both Church and state,” as Michael Subialka observes with regard to Marinella’s hagiography of Catherine of Siena.¹³⁰

While Marinella’s glorification of martyrdom is in tune with her time, this work exhibits the persistence of an earlier model of “mystical and prophetic sanctity.”¹³¹ As with the author’s previous hagiographies, *Holocausto d’amore* assigns a central place to ecstasies, visions, and other conspicuous mystical phenomena.¹³² The text contains multiple references to the protagonist’s desire for her beloved Christ, conveyed in a typically mystical fashion: “Here she attracted the divine beauties to her bosom; here she became a Citizen of Heaven and ran through the celestial Jerusalem, seeking the cherished footsteps of her Beloved; here she found him and led him *in domum matris suae*; there, with delicate amusements, she experienced the bliss of eternal life, she dissolved, and, filled with heavenly nectar, she cried out in the halls of Paradise. *Cupio dissolvi, et esse tecum.*”¹³³ In the margin, the Latin annotation “Salom. Cant. Cantis. *Inveni que [sic] diligit anima, tenui illum, nec dimittam*” denotes this passage as a paraphrase of the Song of Songs (3:1–5), which recounts the maiden’s restless quest for her beloved, until she finds him and brings him to her mother’s chamber. The poetic dialogue between two lovers constitutes the Bible’s “mystical book par excellence”¹³⁴ and the epithalamium “on which seventeenth-century mystics exercised themselves in a precarious balance between carnality and spirituality.”¹³⁵ Like the mystics Hildegard of Bingen, Clare of Assisi, Camilla Battista da Varano (1458–1524), and Battistina Vernazza (1497–1587), Marinella portrays the amorous relation between the female saint and the Savior evoking the bride and bridegroom of the Song of Songs.¹³⁶ The in-text citation “*cupio dissolvi, et esse tecum,*” from Paul’s epistle to the Philippians,

¹³⁰ Subialka, 185. On Marinella’s merging of epic and hagiography, see also Benedetti; Maggi’s introduction in Marinella, 2011, 29–30.

¹³¹ Zarri, 1991, 12.

¹³² This point is also suggested by Mongini, 401–02, in relation to Marinella’s entire hagiographic corpus.

¹³³ “Quivi attraheva nel seno le bellezze divine; quivi fatta Cittadina del Cielo correva per la celeste Gerusalemme cercando l’orme amate del suo Diletto; quivi lo ritrovava e lo conduceva *in domum matris suae*; quivi con delicati intertenimenti prendeva beatitudine di vita sempiterna, si sfaceva, e ripiena di celeste nettare gridava ne gli Atrii del Paradiso. *Cupio dissolvi, et esse tecum*”: Marinella, 1648, 251.

¹³⁴ McGinn, 249.

¹³⁵ Zarri, 2009, 148.

¹³⁶ McGinn, 249.

indicates the desire to be dissolved in a sort of “metaphysical suicide”¹³⁷ in order to become one with the divine. The images of loving chase, of the secret chamber, and of annihilation contained in this segment correspond to the lexicon and imagery of divine epiphany typical of women’s mystical writings.¹³⁸ In another instance, Justina enters a rapture while contemplating the “beauty of her Lover”:¹³⁹ “With the fire that inflamed her, she kindled the heart of her beloved, who, with the arrows of his beauty, wounded the bosom of the happy maiden. She, sending back the thunderbolts covered in the excellence of her perfections, wounded the heart of the eternal Good, who, overwhelmed by too much desire, said, ‘Oh how beautiful you show yourself, beloved of mine, how gentle and dear.’”¹⁴⁰ During this theophany, the union between the saint and God is erotically charged, echoing the language and imagery forged by mystics who communicated their visions with sensually vivid terminology. The verb *impiagava* (wounded) to describe the beams piercing Justina’s flesh may imply a potential stigmatization—a grace not previously documented in any hagiography of this saint. Resonating with both the bestowal of *sacra signa* on Catherine of Siena and the transverberation experienced by Teresa of Ávila in 1559, this occurrence establishes Justina not only as a mystic but also as a female Christic figure.¹⁴¹

Another episode of particular significance in this regard is Justina’s otherworldly ascent in the company of an angel, who guides her to admire the thrones and crowns reserved for martyrs in heaven and grants her a glimpse of the earth from above. Marinella had already incorporated visionary journeys in prior narratives, including the pastoral romance *L’Arcadia Felice* (Happy Arcadia, 1605), among others. Supernal travels had a long tradition and were particularly in vogue at this time, yet Shannon McHugh observes that “as a rule, women writers participated in neither Christianized nor classical versions of the trend.”¹⁴² Justina’s otherworldly voyage is therefore particularly daring, for it has a manifestly theological aim and features a heroine on a quest for truth that can be attained only from the Creator. Shining with sparks of divine love, Justina’s soul grows wings and soars heavenward, stating, “The beauty of eternal

¹³⁷ “Suicidio metafisico”: Pozzi, 32.

¹³⁸ Pozzi, 32.

¹³⁹ “Le bellezze dell’Amato”: Marinella, 1648, 337.

¹⁴⁰ “Del fuoco; ond’ella ardeva accendeva il petto del vagheggiato amore, il quale colle frezzie delle sue bellezze impiagava il seno della felice Donzella, la qual rimandando le saette, tinte nella venustà e eccellenza delle sue perfetioni, feriva il cuore del suo eterno Bene, il quale soverchiato da troppo desiderio diceva, o come bella ti mostri, o Diletta mia, come soave e cara”: Marinella, 1648, 337.

¹⁴¹ Graziano, 214.

¹⁴² McHugh, 26.

Truth lit up my soul, who, I can feel, unfurls her wings to . . . rise up in contemplation.”¹⁴³ Heaven presents itself as a bright landscape, pervaded by the *musica universalis* produced by the rotation of the celestial spheres. Surrounded by stars are a resplendent throne and two bejeweled crowns, “signs of virginity and martyrdom,”¹⁴⁴ which are destined for Justina. The holy woman then beholds the mortal world, which appears to her as a distant dot, marred by violence. Looking down, Justina is unable to fathom why anyone would forego the sweetness of paradise for the cruel pleasures of the earthly plane: “Stunned, she saw at once regions, realms, cities, rivers, mountains, and everything that is contained in these lowly places: she marveled at how humankind could place confidence in such ephemeral glories and groundless hopes. Human souls are blinded in a dark vale; like filthy beasts, they are content of enjoying their indignities . . . among fights, arrogance, injustice, ambition, and diabolical pleasures, they squander their unhappy days: and for the brief, fleeting gratification of a mortal face or appearance, they lose eternal delights.”¹⁴⁵

MARINELLA’S RELIGIOUS PROTOFEMINISM

Justina’s flight through the cosmos to see the crown and throne destined for her illustrates some of the key beliefs that permeated Marinella’s religious protofeminist thought since 1595. Chief among them is the idea that women can obtain such glorious rewards and eternal recognition in heaven that nothing in the fallen, patriarchal world could compare. Indeed, a dialectic between two gendered forms of authority is articulated throughout Marinella’s sacred works, and particularly within her martyrs’ hagiographies: the first kind of power is masculine, institutional, temporary, and terrestrial; the second is feminine, divinely authorized, external to institutions, eternal, and celestial. Although women struggle to gain worldly power and have their authority respected on the earthly plane, they can wield a greater, heavenly force, acquired directly from God. In *La Colomba sacra*, this conflict unfolds between the virgin martyr Columba and the pagan emperor Aurelian. In exchange for her renunciation of Christianity, the

¹⁴³ “La bellezza dell’eterna Verità acceso ha l’anima mia, la qual sento, che spiega le nascenti penne per . . . innalzarsi alla contemplazione di quella”: Marinella, 1648, 170.

¹⁴⁴ “Segni di verginità e di martirio”: Marinella, 1648, 175.

¹⁴⁵ “Stupefatta vedeva ad un solo sguardo Provincie, Regni, Cittadi, Fiumi, Monti e quanto è contenuto in queste bassezze: né senza maraviglia considerando diceva, come alle caduche glorie e vane speranze il cieco genere nostro sta tutto rivolto e convertito? . . . L’anime de’mortali, che ciechi in tenebrosa Valle, quasi immondi Animali, contenti s’affidono godendo delle loro indignità . . . tra risse, superbie intenzioni, ingiustitie, emulazioni, e diaboliche Harmonie, spendono que’ giorni infelici ch’alle vite loro destinati sono: e per breve, e fuggitivo piacere di mortal volto, o di pompa mondana, perdono quelle eterne dolcezze”: Marinella, 1648, 176–77.

antagonist offers to Columba his son in marriage, and, thus, the possibility of becoming an empress.¹⁴⁶ However, the martyr scorns the meager institutional authority that she could wield in that role compared to the higher accolades she would attain as bride of “the supreme Chief”.¹⁴⁷ “I do not yearn for mortal fame, or mortal life,” she declares, “but I desire eternal life, eternal honor: Christ is showing me the certain path to Heaven, so that I may delight in its splendor; where I will be happy, dressed of the sun, tied in glory, distant from harsh suffering, crowned with lively stars, a beautiful virgin among beautiful virgins.”¹⁴⁸ As Cox observes, in Marinella’s first hagiographic poem there is a clear emphasis on “the power reversal that occurs . . . between the young female saint and the emperor.”¹⁴⁹ Union with Christ invests the holy woman with superior glory and the promise of “eternal honor”—all of which are unsurpassable and non-negotiable by human standards.¹⁵⁰ This motif permeates Marinella’s religious works: in the conflict between men’s institutional authority and women’s divine might, the latter prevails.

The saint’s ascent to heaven also suggests that women do not require any male intermediaries to unite with God—rather, they can do so independently, for they are naturally closer to transcendence.¹⁵¹ This idea is developed through other works by Marinella, beginning with her short doctrinal treatise¹⁵² “Discorso del rivolgimento amoroso, verso la somma bellezza” (Discourse on the loving turn, toward supreme beauty), published in an appendix to *Vita del serafico et glorioso S. Francesco* (Life of the seraphic and glorious St. Francis, 1597), a poetic hagiography of Saint Francis of Assisi. The volume, written in Marinella’s youth, is dedicated to Christine of Lorraine, Grand Duchess of Tuscany, who features in the guise of a catechumen-dedicatee, while the author assumes the instructive tone of the *magistra*. Steeped in visual language, the meditation expounds on Marinella’s Neoplatonism, which holds that beauty offers a means of direct contact with the divine. In the words of Ferrari Schiefer,

¹⁴⁶ Marinella, 1595, 11.

¹⁴⁷ “Il sommo Duce”: Marinella, 1595, 11.

¹⁴⁸ “Mortal fama non bramo, o mortal vita, / Ma bramo eterna vita, eterni honori: / La via certa del Ciel Christo m’addita, / Perch’io goda il fin de i suoi splendori; / Ove lieta sarò di sol vestita, / Cinta di gloria, di ree pene fuori; / E coronata di vivaci stelle, / E Vergin bella fra le vergin belle”: Marinella, 1595, 14.

¹⁴⁹ Cox, 2011, 145.

¹⁵⁰ Gerry Milligan made similar observations with regard to women’s recourse to prayer in Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’ Medici’s (1425–82) sacred narratives. Milligan, 552.

¹⁵¹ Marinella, 1999, 45–68.

¹⁵² As defined by Mongini, 386.

Marinella espouses a “theology of beauty”: “beauty, according to her, leads us to deeper knowledge, it is vision that beatifies and raises us to God.”¹⁵³ Redemption, then, occurs through the eyes; hence, the *Discorso* proposes the observation of beautiful sensible objects as a path toward suprasensible revelation. In conclusion, Marinella describes the state of communion with the divine in mystical terms:

Imitating and loving, you will transform into the beloved, whose excellence belongs to those who love them. . . . Therefore, you will turn from a mortal man into the divine Providence. . . . Since your soul will be free and unfettered to anything else, it will only be shaped by the effigy of the Holy Maker, who is the only wish of your heart. . . . Since you, the lover, have been loved in return, the only thing left for you to do is to unite with the Creator, as a prize for all your love, . . . so that you can always enjoy the object of your love and desires.¹⁵⁴

In several respects, this text foreshadows *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* (published three years later, in 1600), which develops the *Discorso's* mysticism into a metaphysical protofeminist argument. Proposing that women are endowed with a greater proportion of physical attractiveness, Marinella suggests that their beauty—a sign of the grace that emanates from their souls—is the most concrete evidence of the ontological and spiritual superiority of the female sex. Against the Aristotelian *mas occasionatus*, Marinella posits woman as the fullest reflection of the divine, having been created in the “*imago Dei*” (Genesis 1:27) as the *humanae naturae exemplar*—the highest manifestation of the human.¹⁵⁵ For this reason, and in Neoplatonic fashion, the beautiful female physique is considered a window through which men can ascend to their maker: women’s pulchritude, Marinella concludes, “can raise men’s minds to God.”¹⁵⁶ Although the polemic halts before making any explicit pronouncements on a feminine pathway to the divine, the inevitable ramifications of Marinella’s line of reasoning have been deftly examined by Lisa Shapiro: as a natural conclusion to her argument, the Venetian author seems to suggest that if women possess

¹⁵³ Ferrari Schiefer, 201.

¹⁵⁴ “Imitando tu poi, e amando ti venirai a trasmutare nella cosa amata, la qual eccellenza è propria ad ogni amante. . . . Sarai tu adunque huomo mortale e caduco trasmutato nella somma Providenza. . . . Essendo l’anima tua in tutto libera e sciolta da ogn’altro oggetto, resterà solamente informata della effigie del Supremo Fabro, che è solo oggetto del tuo cuore. . . . Divenuto riamato amante, resterà che per premio di cotanto amore, tu ti unisca col Creator del tutto, . . . acciocché sempre presente godi la cosa amata & da te già tanto tempo desiderata”: Marinella, 1597, 49^v.

¹⁵⁵ De Tommaso, 75.

¹⁵⁶ Marinella, 1999, 62.

self-awareness and self-knowledge, they might also apprehend their own cause—that is, God.¹⁵⁷ Since in women the nexus between humanity and divinity is more immediate, Marinella would be claiming, in effect, that the female sex enjoys a lead in the journey toward transcendence: unlike men, women are not obliged to ascend to God by contemplating the physical beauty of others; rather, they can apprehend the divine by realizing the noble nature of their own souls. There is no need for male intermediaries in this process. Shapiro's hypothesis is supported by Marinella's hagiographies, particularly *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina*, which depict mystical experiences such as the saint's ascension to heaven and her encounter with Christ as interior and intimate occurrences that do not require the mediation of a clergyman or an institution.

Holocausto d'amore betrays Marinella's longstanding attachment to the mystic mode of female sanctity, indicating the persistence of her belief in women's superior proximity and direct access to God. "Deep within the mystical tradition lie rich resources for social critique," writes Sarah Apetrei, noting that "mysticism acts consistently as a source of inspiration for dissent within patriarchal structures, and opens up the channels for a highly critical and destabilising encounter with religious custom."¹⁵⁸ Catherine of Siena, to mention the most pertinent example in relation to Marinella's oeuvre, "violated expectations of both secular and religious women, transgressing the gendered borders of social space and mixing conspicuously in the world of men."¹⁵⁹ The ascendancy of the *mantellata* is apparent throughout Marinella's writings: Catherine is lauded as a paragon of learning in *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne*,¹⁶⁰ she then appears to the Virgin in a vision among the major figures who will glorify the church within the *Vita di Maria Vergine, imperatrice dell'universo*,¹⁶¹ and features prominently in the *Rime sacre*.¹⁶² In her vita of the Sienese saint, Marinella emphasizes the protagonist's eloquence and mystical powers, proving that women can preach, unite with the divine, and participate in worldly affairs. Marinella's Justina bears a strong resemblance to Catherine, sharing spiritual traits and experiences such as asceticism, ecstatic encounters with Christ, and a balance of contemplative and political activities. A reading of Saint Justina's hagiography alongside Marinella's prior works and in conjunction with women's religious history, then, reveals the role of mysticism in the earliest configurations of Italian feminist thought.

¹⁵⁷ Shapiro, 345.

¹⁵⁸ Apetrei, 283.

¹⁵⁹ Luongo, 3.

¹⁶⁰ Marinella, 1600, 14.

¹⁶¹ Marinella, 2008, 231.

¹⁶² Giorgetti.

In closing, I wish to suggest that the overlooked *Holocausto d'amore* may offer a novel angle from which to approach Marinella's ideological trajectory, prompting a reappraisal of her contiguous literary creation, the disconcerting *Essortationi alle donne et a gli altri se a loro saranno a grado* (Exhortations to women and to others if they please, 1645), published three years earlier. At first glance, this treatise supports traditionalist rules for women's conduct—an apparent recantation of *La nobiltà's* protofeminism. Gone is Marinella's plea for equal access to education and public life, replaced by reactionary maxims. The sobering message of the *Essortationi* appears to be an abjuration of Marinella's past: women must put aside their books to focus on protecting their reputations, by remaining secluded in the home, serving husbands, and minding children. Despite their patriarchal leanings, however, the *Essortationi* do not forsake Marinella's enduring belief in female superiority; instead, they issue a novel corollary that, precisely for this reason, women are bound to a withdrawn life: retreat and isolation befit their deific nature, Marinella argues, for they are “kept like something sacred and divine.”¹⁶³ Reiterating *La nobiltà's* claims on the semidivine nature of the female sex, Marinella associates women's domestic seclusion with the concealment characteristic of superior beings, such as deities, who are veiled “under marvelous guises,”¹⁶⁴ or God, who “refuses to be known by us, except in the effects of his clemency.”¹⁶⁵ Far from crowds and distractions, women “can enjoy the rewards of contemplation and lift their minds to God.”¹⁶⁶ Emphasizing once again the dialectic between male terrestrial power and female heavenly might, Marinella maintains that although women's deeds will be ignored on earth, their fame will flourish in heaven.

In their ostensible endorsement of the misogynistic ideas that *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* had so persuasively opposed, the *Essortationi* have presented a quandary to modern scholars. To what extent Marinella's patriarchal *volta face* should be taken literally is the main question that drives research on this work.¹⁶⁷ The treatise's bitter, disenchanted tone led Françoise Lavocat to interpret this enigmatic volume as a chronicle of unfulfilled dreams, a record of the plights Marinella faced while pursuing a literary career, and a final warning to other women.¹⁶⁸ Cox points out that “while the formal conclusion of this pitiless analysis is defeatist... [it] read[s] less as the

¹⁶³ Marinella, 2012, 45.

¹⁶⁴ Marinella, 2012, 45.

¹⁶⁵ Marinella, 2012, 46.

¹⁶⁶ Marinella, 2012, 52.

¹⁶⁷ For comprehensive, in-depth analyses of Marinella's *Essortationi* and an overview of the scholarly debate on this text, see Benedetti's introduction in Marinella, 2012, and Sinclair.

¹⁶⁸ Marinella, 1998, xxii–xxiii.

traditionalist *apologia* it claims to be than a kind of extended *j'accuse*.”¹⁶⁹ According to Laura Benedetti, the *Essortationi* never suggest that women “cannot reach or surpass men in their studies”; what Marinella offers, rather, “is advice on how women might operate in a world that does not accept their learning.”¹⁷⁰ It is my conviction that an adequate interpretation of the development of Marinella’s pro-woman thought can only be provided by taking into account the protofeminist commitment that permeates *Holocausto d’amore* and erupts in passionate vindications of women’s aptitude for leadership that are reminiscent of some of the most scorching passages of *La nobiltà*. The pro-woman vita of Saint Justina of Padua problematizes the hypothesis that in her old age, Marinella completely relinquished the protofeminist advocacy of her youth. Another element supporting this point is the very title of the *Essortationi*, which suggests that they are only the *parte prima* (first part) of what we can assume will be a series of books. But the *parte seconda* (second part) was never published, and instead Marinella issued *Holocausto d’amore*. Despite her disillusionment with earthly life in a patriarchal society, this hagiography demonstrates that Marinella’s hope for recognition of women’s excellence persisted. Perhaps, however, while her philogyny remained steadfast, its horizon progressively shifted from the earthly to the heavenly plane. Ultimately, as *Holocausto d’amore* confirms, Marinella remained faithful and dedicated to her protofeminist ideals until her death.

As noted by Eleonora Cappuccilli, the lives and reasoning of early modern women reveal the profound interpenetration of theological and political spheres: a “specificity of women’s political thought in the protomodern moment,” she writes, “lies in its . . . connection with theological discourse, in the light of that hardly distinguishable interweaving of politics and religion, spirituality and rationality.”¹⁷¹ This observation certainly finds resonance in the writings of Marinella, who, in her quest for a public voice, intersects sanctity and warfare, religion and politics, articulating a protofeminist reflection through the genre of the hagiography and by way of the composite figure of the martyr-Amazon-queen Justina. In the wake of Trent, Marinella’s portrayal of powerful womanhood may have been facilitated and tolerated due to her adherence to the hagiography genre and her embrace of the Venetian Republic’s military objectives. Limiting the study of Marinella to her lay works and considering her piety as a mere cover for a secular agenda means overlooking some of her most significant feminist insights and failing to notice their development across her writing career.

¹⁶⁹ Cox, 2008, 224.

¹⁷⁰ Benedetti’s introduction in Marinella, 2012, 33.

¹⁷¹ Cappuccilli, 9.

CONCLUSION

Lucrezia Marinella engaged in the *querelle des femmes* on both spiritual and social fronts. Inspired by a holy female genealogy, she stressed women's crucial role in ecclesiastical history, championed their power in both the secular and religious realms, co-opted the lives of holy heroines to shape contemporary discourses on her sex, and invoked the virtue of female saints to rebuke patriarchal stereotypes. Exploiting hagiography's functions as a form of historiography and as a prescriptive vehicle for ideal models (beyond its obvious purpose as a devotion tool), I propose that Marinella pursued a dual objective: she endeavored to present an alternative, feminocentric historical narrative, one that challenged the male-dominated account of the past, while simultaneously constructing a paradigm of female sanctity that broke with the Counter-Reformation's emphasis on obedience and seclusion, seeking to foster a positive transformation in women's self-perception through more affirmative role models. At a time when most authors of conduct books agreed that women ought to be demure, docile, and soft-spoken,¹⁷² Marinella's virgin martyr is notable for her visionary wisdom, her defiance of male authority, her skill in teaching and preaching, her charisma and fortitude, her apostolate, her mastery of theological reflection and interpretation of sacred texts, her mystical and direct relationship with God, and her aptitude for politics. Even though women were not—and still are not—permitted to hold the highest positions of leadership in the Catholic Church, *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* demonstrates that they are deserving of such roles.

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¹⁷² Sanson, 10.

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