



Strategic Minimalism through Food and Music in Early Modern Nunneries

Minimalismo Estratégico através da comida e da música nos conventos do início da Idade Moderna

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Abstract: Food and music were both considered dangerous stimulants for women. During the modern age they could express themselves as ‘artists’ only inside nunneries: Isabella Leonarda – an Ursuline nun from Novara – was the most prolific female composer of the seventeenth century. Moreover, the first book of recipes ever written by a woman comes from an Italian nunnery: Maria Vittoria della Verde, a Dominican nun from Perugia, wrote down 170 recipes from 1583 to 1607. While bishops considered elaborate music and food dangerous for the spiritual well-being of nuns, it is evident that both were used to maintain a lively relationship with the external world. Fasting was the opposite system of affirming themselves.

Key-words: Nuns; Seclusion; Modern age; Food; Music; Creative acts

Resumo: Comida e música são ambos perigosos estimulantes para mulheres. Durante a Idade Moderna elas podiam expressar-se como “artistas” apenas dentro de conventos: Isabella Leonarda – uma freira Ursulina de Novara – foi a mais prolífica compositora do século XVII. Além disso, o primeiro livro de receitas já escrito por uma mulher vem de um convento italiano: Maria Vittoria della Verde, uma dominicana da Perugia, escreveu 170 receitas de 1583 a 1607. Enquanto bispos consideravam música e comida perigosas ao bem-estar espiritual de freiras, é evidente que ambos foram usados para manter uma avivada relação com o mundo externo. Jejum foi o sistema oposto para se afirmarem.

Palavras-Chave: Freiras; seclusão; Idade Moderna; comida, música, criatividade.

“Der Mensch ist, was er ißt” (“Man is what he eats”) is probably the most famous sentence by the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872),¹ we say this to talk about ourselves on both everyday and important occasions. Feuerbach’s image

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¹ The saying appears in an essay written by Feuerbach in 1862 entitled *Das Geheimnis des Opfers, oder Der Mensch ist, was er ißt* (‘The Mystery of Sacrifice, or Man is What he Eats’), published in the first edition of his complete works (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1846-1866), vol. X, 1866, pp. 1-35.

raises the consequential connection between what we take *from* the outside world (food and experience) and what we return *into* it (complex processing), and this is universal and always true. Thus it has always been and always will be and has been known to mankind since Homer called civilized men “bread eaters”, because of their ability to manipulate nutrients, setting them apart from the intellectual simplicity of uncouth primitives. This concept is also the starting point of the relationship between female Christian religiosity of the early modern age, and food and art in general.

Ravenously hungry women, or those just interested in food, are often considered sexually uninhibited today, just as they were in the past.² Basically, Western religious women have followed the cultural nutritional model designed for monks in the Middle Ages, according to the strict *Regola* laid down by St. Benedict of Norcia in the sixth century.³ The original idea was based on the utterly male certainty that female sexual *continentia* could be exercised by *abstinentia* from food from a very early age.⁴ As the mirror of a weak body,⁵ the matchingly fragile female intellect needed to be supported and guided towards maximum restraint of sensual impulses in order not to stray into the darkness of eternal perdition. The effectiveness of this cultural model is confirmed by the medieval iconography depicting skinny women (and therefore virtuous) who do not eat in public, even when they sit at table in a convivial atmosphere.

The affirmation of *moderation* as a result of *reason* comes in the early modern age. The change was due to the shift of the behavioral axis, above all intellectual, from the outside (the group) to the inside (self), as postulated by the Scholastic philosophy from the thirteenth century onwards. Thus, especially for women, the potentially *rational* relationship between moderation and food turns into a specific *means* aimed at achieving high spiritual purposes. The Desert Fathers of the fourth century already knew about the cathartic potential of fasting from food to break away as much as possible from their own human state to grow nearer to God. The women who imitated this practice of fasting in the early modern age thus exploited a socially subversive purpose which was to take personal charge of their own lives upsetting premeditated paternal plans.⁶ Among those practising fasting was St. Catherine of Siena (1347-

² M.G. MUZZARELLI and F. TAROZZI, *Donne e cibo: una relazione nella storia*, p. VII.

³ The *Regula Benedicti* consists of a prologue and 73 chapters. Those devoted to permitted food and beverages are ch. XXXIX (*De mensura cibi*) and ch. XL (*De mensura potus*). About the monastic rules relating to pleasure, its variations over the years and its spread, see C. CASAGRANDE and S. VECCHIO, *Gola*.

⁴ M.G. MUZZARELLI and F. TAROZZI, *Donne e cibo: una relazione nella storia*, p. VIII.

⁵ For St. Thomas Aquinas *femina est mas occasionatus* ('a female is an abortive male': *Summa Theologiae*, I, quaest. XCII, 1, 1). Thus, he echoes Aristotle's own philosophical thought (*Politica*, 1254b).

⁶ As stated by R.M. BELL, *Holy Anorexia*.

1380), patroness of Italy⁷ and Europe,⁸ the first of only four women Doctors of the Church proclaimed to date.⁹

The exceptional blossoming of literature by women, that took place in Italy in the mid sixteenth century,¹⁰ began with the publication in Parma (Antonio Viotti, 1538) of the *Rime* by the noblewoman Vittoria Colonna, the first ever printed collection of poems composed by a woman. This was not sufficient, however, to alter the traditional intellectual role of women which required them to echo and be subordinate to the dominant male.¹¹ To avoid upsetting the social order of the time, as depicted in the *Courtier* by Baldassarre Castiglione, one of the most famous and influential texts in Europe,¹² even learned women taking part in courtly conversations «do not intervene directly, nor have any active speaking function in *creating with words*».¹³ Women's education expected them to comply with the established male order and perspective, as confirmed by the flowering of several treatises on the best way to choose a wife.¹⁴

The strict monastic seclusion for women, as pursued between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century, also had a vital role in preserving the social order, first to avoid the dissipation of the family assets, second to find a worthy position for daughters, either illegitimate¹⁵ or born from a previous marriage, or simply difficult to settle. The case of the Venetian Benedictine nun Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652) is one of the most resonant denunciations in the early modern age of a young woman being obliged to

⁷ She was proclaimed Patron Saint of Italy by Pope Pius XII in 1939 together with St. Francis of Assisi.

⁸ Pope John Paul II in 1999 proclaimed her one of the Patron Saints of Europe together with St. Cyril and St. Methodius, St. Benedict of Norcia, St. Bridget of Sweden and St. Teresa of the Blessed Cross.

⁹ The other three women to become Doctors of the Church are St. Teresa of Àvila (proclamation in 1970, with St. Catherine), St. Thérèse of Lisieux (in 1997), and St. Hildegard of Bingen (in 2012).

¹⁰ As described by C.DIONISOTTI, *La letteratura italiana nell'età del concilio di Trento*.

¹¹ To shed light on this custom, see M.ZANCAN, *La donna e il cerchio nel "Cortegiano" di B. Castiglione. Le funzioni del femminile nell'immagine di corte*.

¹² On the circulation and influence following the publication of Castiglione's book in 1528 see P.BURKE, *The Fortunes of the Courtier: The European Reception of Castiglione's "Cortegiano"*.

¹³ M.ZANCAN, *La donna e il cerchio nel "Cortegiano" di B. Castiglione. Le funzioni del femminile nell'immagine di corte*, p. 25. The education of women at court is dealt with in the third book of the *Courtier*.

¹⁴ On this topic, see D.FRIGO, *Dal caos all'ordine: sulla questione del "prender moglie" nella trattatistica del sedicesimo secolo*.

¹⁵ A famous case is that of the Poor Clare Maria Celeste Galilei (born Virginia Galilei, 1600-1634), the illegitimate daughter of Galileo and the Venetian Marina Gamba, who entered the convent of St. Matthew in Arcetri (near Florence) at thirteen with her sister Livia, who was a year younger and became sister Arcangela. Her father carefully kept all the 124 letters sent to him by his eldest daughter from 1623 to 1633, published in V.GALILEI, *Lettere al padre*.

take vows.¹⁶ However, the cloister proved to be the only place that could guarantee some sort of self-determination for many women.¹⁷

Strange to say, the phenomenon became more evident as seclusion was more enforced. In fact, the need for more rigorous conventual seclusion for women was stressed in the last session of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The meeting which led to the drawing up of the *Decretum de regularibus et monialibus* was held between the 3rd and the 4th of December 1563 (XXV Session), and Chapter V of the Decree sets out for the nuns the absolute prohibition to leave the convent, even for a short time and under any pretext, without a legitimate reason approved by the local bishop. Excommunication was also threatened for those entering the convent enclosure without the permission of the Bishop or the Mother Superior. So, notwithstanding the undeniable tightening of social relationships within the convent brought about by the new rules, in many cases it is possible to note a real increase in productivity on the part of the nuns, regarding both the management of food and music.

With their ruling, the Council Fathers clearly wanted to undermine the nuns' intellectual independence. The strict seclusion was aimed at limiting any potential unrest, especially by those women coming from cultured or noble families, used to reading and to reasoning. The flattening of minds and the consequent personal fragility induced by the imposed seclusion for life, clearly was to enhance docility of character and to promote an essential spiritual stillness: this was to guarantee Paradise for the nuns and to reassure the society of the time. Moreover, the preceptors outside the monastery hoped for something very similar for ideal future wives: «Religious training that fashioned the reins of modesty and humility; selective education that showed a woman her moral duty without enflaming her undisciplined imagination or loosing her

¹⁶ Elena Cassandra Tarabotti, who became Arcangela as a nun, having entered a convent at the age of thirteen, left several thundering works against the practice of inducing naive young women to the cloistered life, starting with *Tirannia paterna*, published posthumously with the title *La semplicità ingannata* (Leiden, Gio. Sambix [pseudonym of Johannes and Daniel Elzevier], 1654) and under the pseudonym Galerana Baratotti, which is an almost perfect anagram of her nun's name. In the preface of her work, she addresses the reader with these words: «Here is *Simplicity Deceived*, that has at last seen the light, showing to the world the worst deception that the greatest evil, disguised as goodness, has ever perpetrated».

¹⁷ Arcangela Tarabotti herself also shows us the other side of the coin, and from her own writing we learn that: «our idea of the monastery as a prison is largely a historiographical construction [...] reading now *Le lettere familiari e di complimento* by Arcangela Tarabotti we can obtain a deeper documentary understanding of life inside the Italian cloisters during the Renaissance and Baroque ages that could have represented a real 'living death' for women, as required by the rules of the vocation, or a suitable place where to achieve self-fulfillment and social promotion» (G.ZARRI, *Presentazione*, p.7). In a nutshell, it was because of her *status* as a nun that she was able to maintain numerous literary contacts and have some of her treatises published.

tongue for public talk; honest work that busied her hands; and laws and constraints that made her subject to her husband».¹⁸ This long-lasting psychological attitude can also explain the social alarm generated in Europe in the mid twentieth century by the introduction of domestic appliances in people's homes, considered «as a dangerous attack on the unity and strength of the family». The reaction to the fear of social disintegration was then to centre on the housewife's role as the emotional mainstay of the family's affections.¹⁹

Even in the choice of what women should eat was to be approved by men, as clearly stated by the Dominican preacher Giovanni Dominici from Florence who, in his *Regola di governo di cura familiare* (1401-1403): «The food you prepare should be agreed with him [the husband]; and without his agreement do not cook strange foods, that he may not offend God».²⁰ Although always in charge of preparing food for the family, women were never officially allowed to be *creative* in the kitchen. The history of recipes proves it in full, since from Roman times culinary creativity was a full male prerogative, and was to remain unchanged through the Middle Ages and into the early modern age. The first systematic collection of recipes is the vulgate *Libro de arte coquinaria* by Martino de' Rossi (Maestro Martino da Como) written between 1450 and 1460,²¹ although several more fragmented writings by men on the subject can be traced back over the previous centuries.

The first recipe book compiled by a woman comes from a convent. It is a manuscript collection bearing the dates «1583» and «1607» containing 170 recipes written by a Dominican nun, Maria Vittoria della Verde, in Perugia. Unfortunately, the fact that there is no mention of the amounts of the ingredients listed makes these recipes impossible to reproduce, although they are a clear invitation to reflect on the role of cooking in convents. The regulation concerning the way to prepare food together with the many other notes in the same notebook reveal the pride for self-sufficiency of the community through very diligent management.

In another similar notebook, by the same nun and dated 1583, we find an eloquent note on the need for «a religious person to acquire proper decorum inside and outside because the spiritual life requires strict morality and good manners as there is no disarray in heaven».²² Thus, recipes can become means of *self-regulation* of life on this

¹⁸ Quote in N.ZEMON DAVIS, *Women on Top*, p.126.

¹⁹ F.TAROZZI, *La società contemporanea*. In: M.G.MUZZARELLI and F.TAROZZI, *Donne e cibo: una relazione nella storia*, p.152.

²⁰ *Regola del governo di cura familiare compilata dal beato Giovanni Dominici fiorentino dell'ordine de' frati predicatori*, a cura di Donato Salvi, p.90.

²¹ MAESTRO MARTINO, *Libro de arte coquinaria*.

²² G.CASAGRANDE, *Introduzione*. In: [SUORM. V. DELLA VERDE], *Gola e preghiera nella clausura dell'ultimo '500*, p.17. The notebook has 96 pages and is kept in the Archives of the Convent of the

earth for week days or feast days, as the order of things must always reign supreme. Consequently, even the cooking time is calculated using the most common prayers (for «4 misereres», «a vesper for the dead», etc.).²³ This way of measuring time was still practised outside the convents and the monasteries throughout the sixteenth century, when it was still only the *passing of time* which marked people's lives.²⁴ But the recipes of these nuns do not only show the need for meticulous self-organization: there is, of course, also the satisfaction of feeling *creative* with well presented and perfectly prepared food. However, in a minor key, this was achieved with a constant balance between complacency and modesty, as it should be for the «perfect Christian [...] whose greatness is to humble himself».²⁵

In the early modern age, this very same philosophy can be noticed again in the attitude towards polyphonic music in nunneries.²⁶ After the confused statements about all this resulting from the Council of Trent, the thorny management of polyphony inside the cloistered convents was placed completely in the hands of the local religious authorities who were invited to act by taking into account existing traditions.²⁷ At this stage, the prelates appointed to decide on the matter acted in a curiously schizophrenic way: if in certain places, male musicians were allowed to work with the nuns (as in Siena), in others, even the idea of producing and performing polyphonic music in convents (as in Bologna) was refused. The bishops' prohibition on music was aimed at

Blessed Columba in Perugia; see also the description in G.CASAGRANDE, *Inventario dell'Archivio del monastero della Beata Colomba*.

²³ In fact, Maestro Martino also calculates the preparation time in this manner. On fol. 84r, for example, he explains how to prepare rose water: the mixture was to steep from morning to the Ave Maria («tiene mane sina l'ave maria»): see [SUOR M. V. DELLA VERDE], *Gola e preghiera nella clausura dell'ultimo '500*, pp.326-327.

²⁴ «The need for a more accurate means of measuring time was felt only from the second half of the sixteenth century, consistent with an increase of wealth in the cities and with the new supremacy of city over country life. The spread of the use of the watch, the construction of ever more precise time-measuring instruments, in fact, dates to this period» (P.ROSSI, *I filosofi e le macchine: 1400-1700*, p.43).

²⁵ On fol. 68r of a similar notebook.

²⁶ The first scholar to devote himself to the study of music in convents in the early modern age was Craig Monson (C. A. MONSON, *Disembodied Voices. Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent*). Two other important monographs on the subject are by R.L.KENDRICK, *Celestial Sirens: Nuns and Their Music in Early Modern Milan* and by C.REARDON, *Holy Concord within Sacred Walls: Nuns and Music in Siena, 1575-1700*.

²⁷ The subject was debated in Session XXII on September 17, 1562 (*Decretum de observandis et evitandis in celebratione Missa*) and in Session XXIV on November 11, 1563, Chapter XII of the Decree on the Reform (*Quales esse debeant promovendi ad dignitates, & Canonicatus Cathedralium Ecclesiarum; quidve promoti prastare teneantur*).

repressing the spirit of initiative of the cloistered nuns, at taming their vanity and the pride of the families of origin.

As in the case of fame acquired through the preparation of exquisite food, which was to make several convents famous, the practice of music was to become an obvious means of inward and outward self-assertion of the cloistered nuns.²⁸ However, the self-promotion was always understated. Food and music acted as a means of communication with the outside world. Besides the written word, they were among the few real forms of creativity coming out of the nunneries. Food turned into an art, while many convents specialized in delicacies that became famous and much sought after: nuns were the only women recognized and rewarded as *chefs* in the early modern age.²⁹

The very few female composers of the seventeenth century are also mostly nuns, sometimes perfectly conversant with new techniques and often eager to acquire some sort of earthly fame through the publishing of music. Isabella Leonarda (1620-1704) was the first woman ever to publish instrumental music, a genre not generally performed in convents, in 1693. However it was from the music by Vittoria Aleotti published in 1591³⁰ that other nuns would begin to publish their musical works.³¹ In a life that offered no unexpected events, some nuns made use of their art to achieve a strong *cultural mediation* that reminds us of the observations by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss on the relationship between man and nature that is implicit in the act of cooking food: between the natural and the cultural stands the element of *socialization*.³² This phenomenon seems even more relevant where the prohibitions on the part of the bishops were more stringent (it is interesting to observe that no publications of music composed by nuns come from liberal Siena).

However, the introductions to the music collections contain acknowledgments of great humility, protected under the umbrella of the benevolence of the other nuns and under the dedication to the high prelates. I think that this ostentatiously humble

²⁸ On this topic, see G.FILOCAMO, *Vergini oltre la grata: musica per donne invisibili tra Cinque e Seicento*.

²⁹ MS B.3574 in the Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio di Bologna, written in the nineteenth century, which contains many color images of nuns in Bologna busy preparing culinary delights, can be taken as an example of this rightful recognition. On this subject, see also M. FANTI, *Abiti e lavori delle monache di Bologna*.

³⁰ This is the five-voice madrigal *Di pallide viole*, contained in the anthology *Il giardino de' musici ferraresi* (Venice, Giacomo Vincenti, 1591). All the other pieces featured in the book are by male composers.

³¹ Among the lay women, Maddalena Casulana (Maddalena Mezari, ca. 1540 - ca. 1591) was the first to publish her compositions as part of an anthology of madrigals in 1566, but in 1568 she published a book of madrigals composed entirely by herself.

³² C.LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Le Cru et le cuit*.

attitude can be taken as a specific system of mental survival, a deliberate, public, self-imposed depreciation of their creative work that, at the same time, would make these ventures socially acceptable. This creativity produced something exportable *outside* the convent embodying a sort of ransom to establish a *passage towards the outside world* for women evidently condemned to perpetual confinement. It is my opinion that these nuns produced a kind of *seductive nourishment* for the world outside the cloister walls.

As in all forms of courtship, they showed to the outer world only the best, thus dreaming of existing beyond the convent. In the quest for sanctity (and recognition in the lay world), some nuns chose to deprive themselves of nourishment, denying all interest in food, to come closer to Christ's sufferings, while others made use of the food itself to build a bridge from the convent to the outside world. The «use of the food system as a means of social communication» as expressed by Massimo Montanari,³³ is then fully confirmed also in this dual context, culinary and otherwise: indirectly, the preparation of food enhances human ingenuity that is capable of synthesis,³⁴ thus granting a certain visibility otherwise denied. In doing so, the nuns of the early modern age regained a small part of what they could no longer experience: contact with the outside world, care of other people through the nourishment of the body and of the mind.

In this way, some nuns managed to regain a small piece of the traditional role of the woman which would otherwise have been lost forever: that of being a wife and a mother devoting herself entirely to the care of the family. By using their intellect in addition to their hands, these nuns managed to turn themselves into a subliminal image for the outer world. However, it cannot be forgotten that the most important social function of the nuns was to support the city by propitiatory prayers. Some of them sought individual self-assertion by rejecting the leveling that made their group indistinct and, consequently, blurred and vague. They did so by seeking forms of self-organization, often pursuing the authorial recognition that the era denied them.³⁵ However, they did so by making use of the *topos of ignorance* as a shield to avoid the judgment of the inevitable critics.³⁶

Food and music, therefore, prove to be a valuable litmus test. The nuns of the early modern age were also *what they ate*.

³³ M.MONTANARI, *Gusti del Medioevo. I prodotti, la cucina, la tavola*, p.24.

³⁴ Ibid., pp.7, 192.

³⁵ In the seventeenth century the lack of confidence in female authorship can be noticed mostly in painting, in fact «women signed their works much more frequently than men»: see G. ZARRI, *Presentazione*. In: A. TARABOTTI, *Lettere familiari e di complimento*, pp. 16-17.

³⁶ On the extensive use of this oratory technique by women, once more refer to G. ZARRI, *Presentazione*. In: A. TARABOTTI, *Lettere familiari e di complimento*, p. 17.

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