

THESIS

FROM *NOBILISSIMA DUX* TO *BEATA*:

EXPRESSIONS OF FEMALE AUTHORITY AND INFLUENCE IN MEDIEVAL FLORENCE

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## ABSTRACT

### FROM *NOBILISSIMA DUX* TO *BEATA*:

#### EXPRESSIONS OF FEMALE AUTHORITY AND INFLUENCE IN MEDIEVAL FLORENCE

This thesis argues that by examining four influential women of Florence and northern Italy over some five centuries' time (circa 1060-1471A.D.) historians can view change over time related to female authority and how it reflects larger social norms that became increasingly entrenched over time. These women inform our understanding of the role and status of women in medieval Florence through their exceptionality. By considering such a large expanse of time these women's lives can be compared to one another, as well as to their contemporaries.

Chapter 1 introduces the topic and discusses general themes that are occurring contemporaneously across Europe that serve to inform and provide context for the laws and social norms that are occurring in Florence. Chapter 2 focuses more directly on each woman and her familial and social circumstances in which she uses and exercises her authority. Chapter 3 builds on the base of Chapter 2 and makes arguments regarding the extent to which each woman wielded her authority and the ways in which that authority was exercised. Chapter 4 provides a brief conclusion in relation to each woman and how the four, together, help to inform historians' knowledge about the ways in which patriarchal power structures, including patrilineage, worked to increasingly exclude women from positions of authority.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The ability of elite women in Florence to exercise political and economic authority free from the influence of male relatives steadily declined over the period of the High Middle Ages. This was a result of the increased entrenchment of patrilineage and patriarchal power systems that was occurring across Europe.

Scholars have discussed at length the role of women within medieval European society and how much real or official authority they enjoyed. They have addressed questions about religious, political, family, economic, and military elements in contemporary society to expand on ideas of female subordination: subordination to secular law, canon law, and male family members. Scholars generally concur that women were subordinate to all of these elements of society and had fewer freedoms and rights than men. This essay will contribute to this conversation by adding nuance through the examination of changes over time in Florentine society's allowance of women's activities and roles as these changes are reflected in the lives of four elite women - Matilda of Tuscany (1046-1115), Umiliana de' Cerchi (1219-1246), Villana dei Botti (1332-1360) and Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi (1406-1471).

Though scholars have certainly examined the ways in which the primary sources for the period reflect contemporary social norms in Europe and Florence, and how they portray ideal visions of proper women, there have been few, if any, directed comparisons across such a large span of time in relation to the increasing entrenchment of patrilineal ideas and reduction of female authority. This essay contributes to the conversation by bringing together women from four consecutive centuries to demonstrate the change over time that occurred in Northern Italy relating to female authority and the increasing entrenchment over time of society's views of women and their relationship with men.

Medieval sources, in their extensive variety, portray women as the weaker sex, governed by their emotions and their bodies, unfit and ill-suited for politics, war, and business. Women who broke into male, public realms of society were rare, and extant sources reflect the ambiguous position that such women inhabited. However, this portrayal did change over time and is reflected in the lives of the women identified above. The shift in attitudes towards women was due to changing social and cultural norms within the medieval European context of Christendom; part of this included the replacement of partible inheritance with primogeniture and a focus on patrilineage over matrilineage after the year 1000 A.D.

Patricia Skinner argues that the eleventh century was a high point for women in Europe, in that they owned more land, a mother's name was more commonly used for identification, they inherited more often, and they were the testator more often than in any other medieval century.<sup>1</sup> Matilda of Tuscany exemplifies a woman living in a society in flux over the appropriate roles of women. Sources even in the eleventh century already show an uncomfortable relationship with Matilda's status as a woman who ruled in her own right. However, that she controlled lands and military forces in northern Italy reflects the still flexible role of women. This elasticity in roles was to become much less flexible due to changing canon law and secular reaction to those changes. These alterations were related to marriage and monogamy and had repercussions throughout medieval Europe.

According to David Herlihy medieval households were a product of profound transformation that took place after circa 1000A.D. The church was reorganizing, especially under the leadership of Pope Gregory the Great, including new regulations on marriage and

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Skinner, *Women in Medieval Italian Society 500-1200*, (Person Education Limited, Essex, 2001), 141-152.

social changes were occurring as well in the new forms of kin organization, namely, patrilineage. Prior to this point, marriages had not been under the purview of the Church but had largely required the approval of a feudal lord over his vassal's marriage. Though this shift to the requirement of Church sanction and validation of marriage vows proved less problematic in Italy, in those areas of Europe where lords controlled every aspect of their vassals' lives this represented a significant shift in the balance of power between secular and church authority. Marriage became a sacrament and the church claimed sole authority to define what was and was not a marriage. This shift in the balance of authority also interfered with a father's ability to force his child into an unwanted marriage, since the church required that all those that it married came to the marriage of their own free choice. The solidification of the church's influence over marriage and its increasing economic and secular power had other, likely unintended, consequences. For instance, since fathers could neither force nor prevent an undesirable marriage, some began to require that only their male heirs could inherit their wealth upon their death, and beyond that that only their first-born son could inherit.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the eleventh century, and becoming more common over time, the father and his sons, and increasingly his eldest son were now privileged in inheritance over female kin in almost every circumstance; the tendency toward the use of primogeniture expanded over the four centuries treated in this study. The prior traditions of splitting land wealth between offspring had greatly diminished landholdings of elite families. As a response to the splitting of wealth and landed authority, and the dilution of power that it resulted in, concentrating that wealth in a single heir seemed most reasonable.<sup>3</sup> Males were seen as less likely to be influenced by their in-

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<sup>2</sup> David Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge), 1985. 81.

<sup>3</sup> See also Francis William Kent, *Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence: The Family Life of the Capponi, Ginori, and Rucellai*, (Princeton University Press, 1977).

laws than a female heir who “married in” to her husband’s family; it was, therefore, logical to concentrate the family’s wealth in an eldest son. This greatly reduced the status of daughters, who now almost never inherited.

Social norms were based largely upon a system of patriarchal power. This line of descent through males in the family arguably resulted from the church’s increasing insistence upon monogamy and the indissolubility of marriage.<sup>4</sup> David Herlihy argues that prior to this insistence on monogamy that attempting to trace a child’s descent from a male, rather than a mother, was much more difficult.<sup>5</sup> He suggests that “from the eleventh century, the stabilization of feudal principalities and the partial pacification of European life reduced the chances of collecting plunder...Many great families now looked for support primarily [from] their landed properties.”<sup>6</sup>

The deterioration of the status of women in Europe was also related to lineage: families, and particularly the elite men, were now making collective decisions about whom a young girl should marry; it was no longer a decision made on a nuclear family level but at the lineage level, reducing the influence a mother would have had on choosing her daughter’s husband. The resulting increase in elite families marrying their daughters to other elite families for diplomatic reasons became problematic. In some cases war had depleted the relative number of eligible men, while in many societies across Europe families were only greatly concerned with marrying off just the first born of their sons but all of their daughters. This created imbalances in the prospective pool of eligible single persons and was a problem across Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 86.

<sup>5</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 86.

<sup>6</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 86.

Part of the solution was to place those “excess” daughters into religious houses; rather than paying a dowry to a man and his family a girl used her dowry to secure a place in a convent. This was a way for girls and their families to retain honor even while there were fewer males to become their husbands. However, combined, these social circumstances, that is, those of war and primogeniture, as well as families being mostly concerned with making sure a first-born son was married, created the issue where there were not enough religious houses to accept all of the “excess” women who could not be placed in marriage.<sup>7</sup>

That women were more commonly placed in convents is evident, in part, by the increase in the number of female saints during the later Middle Ages. These female saints came during a time at which the Church was more thoroughly taking over the role of canonization, so many of these women were *beati* (blessed), rather than saints recognized and canonized by the church.<sup>8</sup> These *beati* tended to fulfill and supplement roles that priests or other clerics could not themselves provide.<sup>9</sup> Though hagiographies were written about many saintly women during this time, hagiographies served a different purpose than other contemporary written material that addressed women and they focused on idealized perceptions of saintly women, which generally included rejection of worldly goods including children and sexuality. Their usefulness as the procreators of the next generation was, therefore, not being, utilized making their hagiographers often the only record we have of these particular women.

The position of elite women over the central and late medieval period in Florence was never a completely settled one – changes in secular law and church authority through canonical law, lineage, and a variety of other factors placed most women under complete subordination to

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<sup>7</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 102.

<sup>8</sup> John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 2006), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, 18.

males or male-dominated institutions. These developments have influenced the study by modern scholars of women's roles and statuses in medieval in Florentine society: because very few women ever held political or military authority during this period they are thus most often ignored in the historical records of the period. Consequently, context for the lives of women's must be extrapolated from only a few sources. This is true of the sources for most modern historical projects that look beyond the readily apparent and address people that the written words of politically or religiously elite males did not address.

Another significant impediment to women's visibility in the historical record was their exclusion from political life. Though in certain instances women could gain influence, as in the case of the consort of a king of France or England, women in general were excluded at the highest levels of politics; this absolutely held true in Florence. The republican commune of Florence (a communal form of government among elites with revolving membership) had no royal family nor any nobility until the late fifteenth century, during the lifetime of Alessandra Strozzi when the Medici family took power. Beginning in approximately 1200A.D. not only were public offices unavailable to women, but women in Florence were also excluded from the public display and ceremony of those offices.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as this statement regarding fourteenth-century Florence proffers, the very idea of women having the capability of participating in social and political life outside of the home was not appealing:

Neither their government nor their domestic arrangements had room for female authority, perhaps because their communal government had even consciously and painfully formed in opposition to the power and practices of local feudal noble families in which women could have considerable authority.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Pamela Benson, "Debate about Women in Trecento Florence" in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Leeds eds., (Palgrave, New York, 2002), 167.

Just as women in Florence were variously excluded from legal contracts, the political sphere, and the organizations that operated all of the major industries in the city, they were also excluded largely from the outdoors. What constituted private space in medieval Florence? Sandra Weddle argues that in the fourteenth century the perception of public and private space did not necessarily mean inside and outside of the home.<sup>12</sup> Regardless, a woman being outdoors unnecessarily often called into question her honor, and also, by extension, that of her family.<sup>13</sup> Women therefore were relegated to activities that could be performed inside of the home or other private spaces. Even in those private spaces, though, their activities were circumscribed by their male family members who still held control over all major decisions.<sup>14</sup>

Florence, by the mid-fifteenth century, had developed a highly specialized “vocabulary for directing properties down the male line...”<sup>15</sup> Only in instances where there were no sons, nor any male nephews to whom inheritance could be given, did a woman inherit,<sup>16</sup> and that was increasingly rare through the course of these four centuries in Florence. The trend in decreased freedoms and authority for women has been well documented through reference to *catasti* (tax records), hagiographies, and family *ricordi* (private family records).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sandra Weddle, “Women’s Place in the Family and the Convent” in *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-), Vol. 55, No. 2, Gender and Architecture (Nov., 2001), 64.

<sup>13</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1996), 51.

<sup>16</sup> Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, (Longman of Pearson Publishers, New York, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Such documentation has been made possible through the use of computers over the last fifty years to compile data, from extant records, and expose trends has greatly influenced statistical interpretation that had not been possible previously. These data sets have become invaluable for finding both elite and non-elite women, where otherwise they would be invisible. The ground-breaking study by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber used this data to more accurately estimate population within Florence, the makeup of households, and kinship relationships is a prime example of such scholarship. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427*, (Yale University Press, New Haven), 1985.

In *Medieval Households* David Herlihy discusses the place of marriage within medieval Florentine society.<sup>18</sup> He, like many historians after him, examines the *catasti*, especially the *catasto* of 1427, to map patterns of social mobility,<sup>19</sup> the general makeup of average households,<sup>20</sup> and how they were organized.<sup>21</sup> This third element, how households were organized, has proven to be vital in understanding the place of women within a society that was increasingly patrilineal, as compared against the norm that had been prevalent in previous centuries.

One expression of the increasing importance of male-line descent in the twelfth century were towers. In Florence, as in other Italian cities, towers were an expression of the power of magnate families that sought to resist the growth of the ‘bourgeoisie.’<sup>22</sup> Though the origins of towers are debated by scholars, their symbolic value was that of a professed familial common descent, that is, a public indication and declaration that they, as a family, had descended from a single male ancestor.<sup>23</sup> The towers were owned by the most powerful and oldest lineages, called magnate families, traced through the male or patrilineal line, and the height of towers over the city served as a demonstration of magnate families towering over the other inhabitants. Women did not inherit these towers or the wealth that came with them because they were not the

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<sup>18</sup> See also: David Herlihy “Three Patterns of Social Mobility in Medieval History”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Spring, 1973), pp. 623-647.

<sup>19</sup> Herlihy, “Three Patterns,” 623-647.

<sup>20</sup> David Herlihy, “Mapping Households in Medieval Italy” in *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Apr., 1972), pp. 1-24.

<sup>21</sup> David, Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 82-98.

<sup>22</sup> Magnates were those families who had been rural feudal nobility prior to the rise of the Florentine commune. They were considered the most elite families and continued to hold power within the city for centuries. As the commune strengthened the rising merchant class began placing more and more restrictions on magnate families. Compared to magnate families upper middle-class families were often rich but did not have their origins in the feudal nobility of northern Italy.

<sup>23</sup> Trevor Dean *The Towns of Italy in the later Middle Ages: selected sources translated and annotated by Trevor Dean*, (Manchester University Press, New York), 2000., 142. Trevor Dean suggests that some scholars argue that they were fortified residences built by knights and nobles representative of their country estates while others contend that their functions were primarily military, while still others suggest that they were already a feature of towns when magnate families moved into cities and took them over from the town.

transmitters of the family name. However, because true dowries had been re-implemented, requiring that both men and women contribute equal capital to the marriage, men who owned these towers were marrying women of approximately equal social status who could afford to contribute an equal amount of money to the new household being created.<sup>24</sup> However, this situation did not last long after the year 1000 A.D. and had disappeared completely in Northern Italy by 1200 A.D. Over the course of the twelfth century the increasing importance of the male lineage made alliances between powerful lineages much more desirable while at the same time reducing drastically the number of marriageable males. As the centuries progressed and thus the patriarchal power structures became entrenched within society, the relative abundance of potential wives caused women to become less important in household economics, as well.

In Florence, early in the commune's existence women had been critical to the administration of a new household; elite women generally had sufficient reading and writing skills to maintain family and household accounts. In some situations they were also the dyers and weavers of cloth, though this was more common for middle- and lower-class women. As the wool industry in Florence grew exponentially, however, women lost these traditional roles, diminishing their positions in the economics of the household. Elite women also lost their control of household accounts due to the development of external bureaucratic offices, which took over many of the administrative roles that women had held. Female exclusion from guilds, which controlled and regulated all production of goods in the city, also greatly contributed to the reduced administrative and economic positions – and thus also influence -- of women in Florence.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 98.

<sup>25</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 101.

By examining such a large period of time in this thesis, it is possible to see how the city state of Florence placed increasingly restrictive laws on women regarding their freedoms and authority and is reflected in contemporary legal documentation.<sup>26</sup> The types of authority that the four subject women of this study wielded differed because contemporary circumstances of and restrictions on women and their behavior shifted over these centuries. Authority was also based upon a woman's various statuses within society.

I use the term "statuses" rather than the singular "status" because there was no single status that medieval Florentine women were afforded; rather, they had an economic status, a class status, and a marital status, among others. I will address these statuses through the course of this thesis, but it is necessary to note that all of the women I address are of the most elite classes. Matilda of Tuscany (1046-1115) came from a family that ruled all of Northern Italy, Umiliana de' Cerchi (1219-1246) was from a magnate family of Florence, and Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi(1406-1471) was born into an economically elite family and then married into another of the most elite families. All three women were of magnate status. Among the four women subjects of this study, the only who was not part of a magnate family is Villana dei Botti (1332-1360). Rather, hers was one of the richest families of the increasingly influential merchant class. It was the merchant class who became more politically powerful as the city became more economically prosperous. Though not magnates, her family had elite economic status within Florence. All of these women, then, enjoyed status in the city as the very elite.

As elite women, their roles were considerably more influenced by the law than were those of their middle- and lower-class counterparts because it was often these elite women's

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<sup>26</sup> Isabelle Chabot, "Lineage Strategies and the Control of Widows in Renaissance Florence" in Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, (Longman of Pearson Publishers, New York, 1999), 131.

male family members who were creating and enforcing Florentine law. Allowing a woman of an elite family to transgress societal norms would have brought dishonor not only upon her but also her father or husband and their family. It was, therefore, very critical that elite women be taught very early in life to obey without question the patriarchal structure. Elite women were under the firm control and authority of, first, their father and his family, and, later, their husband and his family. Due to contemporary ideas of honor there were few opportunities for elite women to wield any type of authority beyond simple household activities.

It is useful here to define and describe the types of authority that this thesis addresses. Rather than focusing only on one type of authority, I will look at multiple types. Not only political and military authority, but also spiritual/religious, and familial/economic authority, are all important to consider as critically influential factors in the functioning of a historical society. All four of the subjects of this essay wielded one or more of these types of authority. By expanding the definition of authority beyond the typical meaning of political and military authority, not only do more women become apparent as actors in the historical record, but also the picture of medieval Florentine society as a whole becomes more complete.

Political and military authority have long been used as the examples of ‘official’ authority. They have long been the purview of males; so much so, in fact, that when a woman gained or took authority in one of these areas of activity she was considered an anomaly and, often, out of place. An example, as demonstrated in this thesis is Matilda of Tuscany, who held both types of positions of authority in her own right, and not as regent for either her husband or son.

Political and military authorities are often perceived as being the ‘official’ types of authority because their influence is potentially felt much farther away than the city or area in which that authority is held. However, taking into consideration only these, though, the majority of complex societies are ignored in history. By considering other types of authority, such as spiritual authority or familial authority it is possible for historians to examine authority wielded through other segments of society, including that occupied by women. Often these types of authority have as much, if not more, reach across space and time than that of politics and warfare.

Spiritual or religious authority can and has reached across the boundaries of space, whether that authority has rested in the person of the pope or in a female saint. The dictates of the pope, especially those of Gregory VII, led to political strife and warfare across Italy and Germany in the eleventh century through the conflict that developed between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV. Spiritual authority sometimes has been used by political authorities to promote ideas of divine intercession and to support their political goals as being those directed by God, as we will see with the hagiography of Umiliana. The hagiographic texts written about pious individuals to promote their sainthood also provided examples to laity, as well as to the clergy, on proper Christian living that extended beyond the bounds of a single commune or city. Expansion of a holy person’s cult beyond a certain locale was a necessary element for their consideration for canonization. A person’s spiritual authority could, and for canonization must, extend beyond their immediate area and time. This was often accomplished by influencing those reading a particular hagiography to act in emulation of a saint. Families, such as we will see with the cult of Villana, were often connected with the expansion of a cult by

having others write hagiographies for their ancestors or by donating funds to the church where that saint was buried, in order to promote and expand a saint's following.

In certain cases familial authority had large repercussions well beyond the scope of a single member or relationship. As mentioned above, lineage had become a very important element for identification and prestige. When the church began dictating what constituted a proper marriage as well as the indissolubility of marriage, it directly influenced the place and importance of women within the family structure. The resulting widespread use of primogeniture to decide the issue of inheritance placed male children above their female siblings in importance. The sons' role as heir created large inequities between male and female family members, including the relationship between a mother and her sons. As the ideas of primogeniture and patriarchy became entrenched within society, it was only in rare cases that a woman was able to wield sole authority within the family. At the moment when a male child reached adulthood all the females of his family were expected to defer to his judgment, including his mother. For this reason, as we shall see, Alessandra's influence over her sons' economic, business, and political lives is all the more significant because of her subordinate role within a traditional medieval family structure.

I will employ these large categories of authority, including the political and military, spiritual and religious, and family and economic, to describe the ways in which these women wielded authority. In this thesis I examine Matilda of Tuscany (1046-1115), Umiliana de' Cerchi (1219-1246), Villana dei Botti (1332-1360), and Alessandra Strozzi (1406-1471), and I use their experiences and lives to discuss the changing statuses of women and female authority in Florence over the course of four centuries. Chapter 2 discusses each woman's particular social and familial circumstances through and within which they worked to gain authority. This chapter

also treats the changing social statuses of women in Florence as they relate to each woman and her temporal location. None of these women were “given” authority; each of them fought social and family norms to obtain authority in a variety of ways. This chapter provides the context needed to understand the actions of each of these women and the reasons that they acted in certain ways. Chapter 3 builds on the foundation that Chapter 2 provides by presenting evidence about what they did with the authority that they had fought to obtain. This chapter also examines the actions of the males in each woman’s social and familial circles, from fathers and brothers to husbands and religious men, which bolstered her authority.

Matilda of Tuscany, also referred to by historians as Matilda of Canossa, is an example of a woman possessing extensive political and military authority. She was the only surviving child of Boniface, Margrave of Tuscany, and Beatrice of Lorraine. Boniface had become Margrave of Tuscany in 1037 with his main fortress at Canossa. At this time the lords of Canossa were the most powerful dukes in Italy. The family controlled lands from the foot of the Alps to the southern limits of Tuscany. This fact, that a single family controlled lands covering most of Northern Italy, reflects that in Italy in the eleventh century power still rested in power families rather than in communes, the latter of which was later to become a factor limiting the amount of power that to any single individual, let alone a woman, could access. Boniface was assassinated in 1052, and his wife, Beatrice ruled on her own until she remarried 7 years later. At that time Beatrice married Godfrey IV, The Bearded of Lorraine, and Matilda married his son, Godfrey V, The Hunchback of Lorraine. Both marriages were conducted without the direct consent of the Holy Roman Emperor, their feudal lord.<sup>27</sup> Beatrice ruled after the death of her second husband,

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<sup>27</sup> David Hay, *The Military Leadership of Matilda of Canossa, 1046-1115*. (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2008).32, 36.

from 1069 until her death in 1076,<sup>28</sup> during which time both Beatrice and Matilda were active in supporting the Church. They were present at synods in Rome in 1074-1075, which led to Church reforms related to lay investiture and simony. These women opposed the emperor in a variety of ways, from their marriages, unauthorized by the emperor, to their open and strong support of the papacy and the policies of reform that were emerging at that time from Rome in direct conflict to the interests of the emperor.<sup>29</sup>

After her mother's death in 1076 and her estranged husband's assassination that same year, Matilda continued to work closely with the papacy; however, many in the territories she owned were hostile towards papal reform and Pope Gregory VII, and remained loyal to the emperor. It was to her fortress of Canossa that the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV came, in 1077, to ask Gregory VII for forgiveness and that he lift the excommunication that Henry had earned by continuing to invest priests and bishops. Matilda and, to a lesser degree her mother, were women central to the continent-wide reform that would prove to affect all tiers of society. Both reflect the importance of political and military authority to the reading of history. That Pope Gregory VII retreated to her residence at Canossa during this dispute indicates both the respect in which he held her abilities as a ruler of most of Northern Italy and that he was confident that he would be safe under her protection, even from the Holy Roman Emperor.<sup>30</sup>

David Hay argues that although Matilda was extremely successful as a female in the realm of politics and military endeavors, her gender continued to be a contentious point for many of her contemporaries, even among some of her staunchest supporters. She was said to have “overcome her sex,” a necessary component to working within a society that had long been

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<sup>28</sup> Skinner, *Women in Medieval Italian Society*, 136-37.

<sup>29</sup> Skinner, *Women in Medieval Italian Society*, 137.

<sup>30</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 70.

male-dominated, where women were considered weak.<sup>31</sup> Women of medieval Europe were also more susceptible to having their morals questioned than were their male counterparts: Matilda was accused by her second estranged husband, Welf of Bavaria, of being the paramour of Pope Gregory VII because she rejected him as her spouse as well as her great political influence.<sup>32</sup> The fact that social hierarchy was not challenged by her supporters made her rule less concerning to contemporary men. Her abilities as a commander of armies and as a political actor were often framed to have been made possible only by the Grace of God, for how else could a woman overcome a man such as the Holy Roman Emperor?<sup>33</sup> These two ideas worked together to make clear that Matilda was an anomaly and that she ruled with the intelligence of a man; she was not there to overthrow the social hierarchy. Perhaps Matilda was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time, but she also had the temerity and intelligence to work effectively as a woman in a man's political and military world. More socially acceptable roles for women existed within medieval religious life that caused much less controversy, through and reflect later centuries long after Matilda's passing the progressive decrease in the variety of roles in which women could wield authority.

Blessed Umiliana de' Cerci (1219-1246) was an elite widow who chose the religious life after the death of her husband. The religious path that she chose was one that would be cast by her hagiographers in the rhetoric of the desert and that of early sainted hermits.<sup>34</sup> She was a contemporary of Saints Francis and Clare, and she subscribed to their teachings of poverty. From an elite family, she actively worked against the wishes of her husband and his family by

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<sup>31</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 199-200.

<sup>32</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 77. See also: Patricia Skinner, "Gender and Memory in Medieval Italy" in *Medieval Memories: Men, Women and the Past, 700-1300*, Elisabeth van Houts ed., (Pearson Education Limited, New York), 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 213.

<sup>34</sup> Elisabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994), 114.

giving her wealth and other worldly goods to the poor. After her husband's death, when she returned to her father's home under the right of *tornata*, her natal family put pressure on her to remarry, but she "despise[d] their threats, and no matter how she [was] abused by them, her mind remain[ed] unmoved."<sup>35</sup> Like many female saints, she embraced mysticism as a way to authority, in this case spiritual authority, which would otherwise have been off-limits to her as a female.<sup>36</sup>

Umiliana's living authority was spiritual authority but after her death it became more political. Her hagiographer portrayed her as the ideal saintly woman who sought to deny herself all pleasures of the world and who protected herself against impropriety. Her religious re-conversion a month after her marriage suggests that she might have experienced some type of trauma during that short period that would have encouraged her to change the course of her life. Whether or not such a trauma occurred can only be speculated upon, but afterwards, and especially after the death of her husband, she became much more pious and is said to have lived chastely, resisting even the devil's temptations to cause her to concern herself with worldly things.

Much of her authority outside of her circle of friends, other tertiaries, and Franciscan monks did not exist until after her death. At that time Florence was being threatened and attacked by the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, and her *vita* was used as an example of saintliness which was used to promote political unity within the city and her life was displayed by the Church as an example to follow. Given the fact that Frederick II was besieging the city

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<sup>35</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 121. This return to the father's home, the right of *tornata*, was a right guaranteed to widowed women due to the fact that women were excluded from inheritance and so it becomes the males' responsibility to care for women of the family. However, when the women were led back to the home of their father was not a time of their choosing. When a widowed daughter had returned to her natal family, her father was able to reassert power over his daughter and control over her dowry. (Sandra Cavallo, *Widowhood*).

<sup>36</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 122.

when the devil was tempting her to leave her devotions by concerning herself with the worldly violent siege outside of her window, she may not have been pleased with the use of her model of sanctity to unify politically the city.

During her lifetime Umiliana was largely subject to the men in her life. After the death of her husband, who may have physically abused her because of her social transgressions, she was required to return to her father's home. Her father and his family pushed her to remarry; a widow of only 22 she was a prime candidate for remarriage and the forging of new alliances. Though she resisted remarriage, her hagiographer contends that she was deprived of her dowry for doing so and forced to live in abject poverty because she was subject economically to her father's will. She resisted in the only way she could, which was to turn to a religious life.

She resisted domination by the males in her family largely through subversive means. After her return to her father's home, she refused to move out of the tower when a male cousin wanted to move into the space with his new wife. In comparison with Matilda, Umiliana's actions did not become at all politically or militarily significant until *after* her death, at which point her life became a political tool used by male civil authorities. She gained her spiritual authority in part because of her subversive actions that rejected male authority over her. In contrast, Villana actively sought to influence Florentines during her lifetime through public preaching.

Villana dei Botti (1332-1360) was another woman who chose the religious life over the objections of her family. Her official hagiography was written a century after her death by a Dominican friar of Santa Maria Novella in Florence and based on earlier versions of *Life of the Blessed Villana Dei Botti of Florence*. In her hagiography she is described as a young child interested in the aesthetic life; she is said to have used a rock for her pillow until her parents

found the rock and removed it. After that she sprinkled sand in her bed, for the purpose of self-mortification and ascetic suffering, sweeping it up each morning to avoid detection. Much of this self-mortification was in keeping with ideal portrayals of saintly persons depicted in the highly stylized genre of hagiography, which probably reflects more an attitude towards actions considered pious and worthy of sainthood than it does the actions of the child Villana herself.<sup>37</sup> Such acts of piety by the child, who attempted to scorn the luxuries of this life, were used by her hagiographer to display and emphasize the piety that she possessed naturally from the time that she was able to think on her own.

Her parents were not pleased at all by any of her desires to live the life of piety and asceticism, and they married her off at a very young age. In fact, Villana found that she enjoyed being married: she enjoyed the luxury and the pretty things she was able to wear as well as her conjugal relationship with her husband. However, she realized the error of her ways when, while preparing for a party with her husband, she looked in a mirror to check her finery and saw a demon looking back at her – an indication, according to Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, that while she had followed the rules of her earthly father, she had disobeyed the divine law of her heavenly father.<sup>38</sup> After her return to the pious life she began prophesying in public squares, even though she feared being called insane and foolish. This social transgression might have been punished through the manifestation of physical suffering: after preaching she was often afflicted with bodily pain, a new manner in which she was willing to suffer for God.

Villana's suffering for Christ was, like the trope of her having been a pious child, was a stylized hagiographic device employed to indicate true devotion and to indicate the sacrifices that the truly saintly were willing to endure for divine rewards. She had tried to run away from

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<sup>37</sup>Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*, (Routledge, New York, 2005), 11.

<sup>38</sup>Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 174, 175.

her family as an adult but was prevented by her husband and her husband's family from doing so.<sup>39</sup> Even given the little evidence about what her husband and his family may have thought about her religious re-conversion, it appears that the issue continued to be contentious for years. Her life displays the conflict that contemporaries of Villana would have also had to contend with: interests of the Church versus interests of the lineage. These conflicts had begun even prior to the time of Matilda, centuries earlier, and continued into the lifetime of Alessandra, centuries later.

Like Umiliana, Villana's *vita* was an example of piety that was written as a guideline for others to follow. Unlike Umiliana, though, Villana was not a widow, and she was not, therefore, forced to give up her children. Florentine widows were faced with a variety of equally unfavorable choices because widows were often placed between conflicting desires of family and the Church. Her first option was to abandon her children, leaving them with their father's family. Between 1325 and 1415 Florence created rules that favored a widow's most recent husband and his heirs, whether such heirs were her children or not.<sup>40</sup> Her children from her first marriage belonged to the deceased husband's family, and the widow was required to abandon them when she returned to her father's home, at which point she was pushed by her natal family to remarry. Due to the often young age of widows, elite families put a great deal of pressure on young women to remarry, forcing them to leave behind their children and remarry for the benefit of the lineage.

A widow's second option was one provided by the Church, a religious life. In the late fifteenth century the hugely influential Fra Girolamo Savonarola preached that widows should

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<sup>39</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 187.

<sup>40</sup> Chabot, *Lineage Strategies*, 131.

not remarry but that they rather should want nothing more than to retire to the religious life.<sup>41</sup> Further, as widows they should not desire remarriage, and they should be considered lusty and uncontrolled if they were not forced into a cloister. Or, if they were not actually lustful, then they were at least gullible and likely to fall into sin and so ought to be protected – thus protecting the society – by being cloistered.<sup>42</sup> Although Savonarola was often not a voice for the majority, these ideas he preached were in keeping with contemporary Church ideas of sexuality.<sup>43</sup> These conflicting directives, one from natal families and the other from an influential religious cleric, placed Florentine widows in a difficult position.

Widowed at twenty-eight late in the fifteenth century, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi neither remarried nor joined the cloistered religious life. Alessandra was the wife of a man who was among the top two percent of the wealthiest members of Florentine society. Her husband, Matteo di Simone Strozzi, had been exiled from Florence by Cosimo de' Medici when he came to power, but after the deaths from plague of Matteo and three of their children, Alessandra returned to Florence with her five remaining children.<sup>44</sup> Most of Matteo's money was taxed away to pay old debts related to his exile from the city. Without a husband to keep income flowing into the house, Alessandra was forced to support herself and her children on her dowry, giving her a great deal of financial sway over her children because of the family's relative poverty, well into their adult lives. She was orthodox in her Catholicism and was advised by religious members to act as both father and mother to her children, which she certainly sought to

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<sup>41</sup> Konrad Eisenbichler, "At Marriage End: Girolamo Savonarola and the Question of Widows in Late fifteenth century Florence" in *The Medieval Marriage Scene*, (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 29. Savonarola was a radical who preached in Florence. Though his ideas were not mainstream they did influence elements of the city's population.

<sup>42</sup> Eisenbichler, "At Marriage End," 26.

<sup>43</sup> Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Ann Crabb, *The Strozzi of Florence: Widowhood and Family Solidarity in the Renaissance*, (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2000), 46.

do.<sup>45</sup> The main focus of her life was not the Church or religious life, although they certainly influenced many of her actions. Rather, she focused above all on the wellbeing of her sons. She advised them about economics, honor, politics, and family matters, and as well as more day-to-day concerns.

As Alessandra's sons grew to maturity, due to the rules of exile in Florence, the adult male offspring of exiles were themselves exiled, as well, and thus her sons successively had to leave Florence to pursue careers elsewhere with extended family.<sup>46</sup> Alessandra corresponded with her sons during their exile, and it is the letters so produced that record the authority and influence over her sons that she enjoyed. Alessandra often advised her sons as to how they should act, both morally and professionally in the traditional male realms of politics and business. She also asked for and, presumably, received advice from her sons about her actions, an indication that she expected to ask advice and obey her sons. However, Alessandra's movement within the public spaces of the city was limited due to her gender, because elite women were discouraged from entering public spaces in the city.

On the other hand, Alessandra could address the problems of her husband's taxes only in public,<sup>47</sup> and, much later, when petitioning for her sons' exile to be suspended, she had to meet with influential *vicini* and *amici* of the family – male family members and friends who had power to act within the government to attempt to have her sons' exile revoked.<sup>48</sup> Most of this she did through correspondence, although her meetings with extended family likely were conducted in person. She also found and arranged the marriages of her sons, which was normally something a father would have done and an activity in which a mother would have not

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<sup>45</sup> Crabb, *The Strozzi of Florence*, 50.

<sup>46</sup> Crabb, *The Strozzi of Florence*, 52.

<sup>47</sup> Crabb, *The Strozzi of Florence*, 57. See also: Mia Coco, "Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi" in *Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, Rinaldina Russell, ed. (Greenwood Press, Connecticut), 1994.

<sup>48</sup> Crabb, *The Strozzi of Florence*, 58.

been the final decision-maker because, as mentioned earlier, by the fifteenth century mothers had largely been excluded from this role in the better interest of the male lineage.<sup>49</sup> The exile of her sons from Florence, and the paucity of her husband's living relatives, placed her in these traditionally non-female roles, which gave her unprecedented influence over her sons, well beyond that of most contemporary Florentine mothers.

These four women serve as examples of exceptional female authority and its changing place within Florentine society. Their lives as lived within the political, military, religious, familial, and economic spheres provide historians with a variety of lenses through which to examine the roles and statuses of women in medieval Europe. The expanse of time in which these women lived provides a window through which to examine change over time; their lives were directly and intimately connected with changes in religious doctrine and secular Florentine laws. As these official circumstances became more entrenched within society, the acceptable roles that they allowed for women developed from guidelines into rigid rules for life within Florence. Attitudes towards women reflect this change, and extant sources show increasing rigidity towards, and restricted expectations, of females, which circumstances will be discussed in Chapter 2.

This essay does not investigate non-elite women for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the lack of available source material on middle- and lower-class women. This examination of the authority that a few women held, then, is not representative of female authority within Florence. Rather, these are examples of how these four women refused to accept the social limitations inflicted upon them by religious and secular laws and gender expectations. Through their exceptionality they inform our understanding of the roles and statuses of women in medieval Florence.

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<sup>49</sup> Coco, "Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi," 30.

These various types of authority, as seen through the lives of these four women in Florence, over the course of the central and late Middle Ages, also serve to demonstrate the increasing entrenchment of patrilineage and patriarchy within Florentine society. Matilda was able to wield infinitely more authority than any of the other women because, although primogeniture and patrilineage were becoming more common over these centuries' time, they still had not become solidified as the only means according to which families and inheritance could operate. Centuries later, Umiliana and Villana rejected male domination and authority over them by seizing upon the only avenue left open to them, that of religious and spiritual authority. Only through this type of authority could they act beyond the immediate scope of their family without incurring serious social sanction. Alessandra was in a singularly unique position that allowed her to act in ways that almost no other mothers would have been able to. At the same time, her reliance on her sons for advice and her repeated indications of subservience to them reflect contemporary fifteenth-century ideas about how females were subordinate to men, including mothers to their sons. Their lives are a way to track the course of changing attitudes about the role of women within medieval Florentine society.

## CHAPTER 2: CIRCUMSTANCES OF AUTHORITY

Authority in medieval Florence was not reserved for women because the medieval world did not look favorably on women, especially not as agents of authority and capability. Women were perceived as the weaker sex; a woman could not handle the rigors of leadership, warfare, or politics because she could hardly handle anything more than sitting quietly and caring for her husband's possessions. The subjects of this essay participated in these male spheres of authority and capability, yet they were not reprimanded by social or political voices for wielding authority or disgraced in contemporary sources. These women certainly had powerful personalities, but their social realities shaped their ability to use those personalities to influence people around them. By looking at their individual lives and the social and familial circumstances in which they lived, it is possible to see both the continuity of female political and social repression, but also some women's ability to exceed such restrictions, in Florence.

Inheritance practices shifted dramatically in the eleventh century from partible inheritance to that of primogeniture. This was, in part, a result of the Church's greater enforcement of monogamy and the indissolubility of marriage and the Church's forbidding and enforcement of the removal of Church lands by laity. In response great families began to exclude children from inheriting the family resources – both younger sons and, particularly important in the context of this paper, daughters.<sup>50</sup> This began roughly during Matilda's lifetime but over the centuries became increasingly solidified so that by the time of Alessandra's lifetime there was no question that the eldest son should inherit while his sisters were married out of the family and out of any possibility of inheritance.

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<sup>50</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 87.

The exclusion of daughters from inheriting reduced their potential personal wealth. The use of primogeniture also deprived them of status within the family as the gender through which line of descent was traced. This exclusion of daughters from belonging to their natal family after their marriages became increasingly rigid in northern Italy, and especially in Florence, over the period of the central Middle Ages. The lives of the women studied here demonstrate that change over time; Matilda of Tuscany, in the eleventh century, inherited regardless of the fact that patrilineal lines of descent and primogeniture were becoming mainstream whereas Alessandra Strozzi, in the fifteenth century, influenced her sons during a time when the same ideas of primogeniture and patrilineage had been solidified and that the authority of women was increasingly limited and subordinate to that of men.

Matilda serves as our starting point not only because of her temporal location but also because she presents the ways in which in the eleventh century a woman was still able to wield power as the sole inheritor from her natal family. She inherited through her parents rather than through a husband or a son, increasing the amount of political and military authority that she embodied. That she lived during the eleventh century is significant; communes were not largely established yet, and power still resided within a particular family or individual. This provided the opportunity for a woman, such as Matilda, to hold power in her own right because of the lack of secular political structures that in later centuries would have made her military and political actions impossible for a woman.

Two and three centuries after Matilda, the examples of Umiliana and Villana present the religious lifestyle that some women chose to adopt, perhaps as a method to avoid the domination

of a husband.<sup>51</sup> Their lives provide two different exemplars of religious and spiritual authority, both of which were used as examples to be followed by laity. Umiliana's political authority did not begin until after her death when her hagiographer and the commune of Florence used her life as a method to stop factional fighting within the city. By contrast, Villana was active publicly through her preaching, which provided a very different example of piety and which challenged rules about females in public spaces within the city. Both women were influential to Florentine citizens through their spiritual authority, though in very different manners.

Alessandra's life displays her internalization of the submissive place of women while at the same time she asserted considerable authority over her sons' business and political lives. Her actions and written words appear to conflict with a modern perspective but may not have been interpreted by her or her contemporaries as such. Her familial authority was used to promote the security of her sons both economically and politically, which would have been considered acceptable; her internalization of the patriarchal and patrilineal systems is obvious.

These women lead us through changing patrilineal and patriarchal power structures over the centuries through the descriptions of their lives and their actions. In the eleventh century a greater amount of autonomy was possible for a female than would have ever been achievable in the fifteenth century. Politics and religion shaped the ways in which women interacted with others in their societies, actions that were increasingly circumscribed and limited.

### Matilda of Tuscany

Matilda of Tuscany was the daughter of Boniface, Margrave of Tuscany and Beatrice of Lorraine. Her ancestors were preeminent among the nobility in Northern Italy with a patrimonial

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<sup>51</sup> Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 32.

lordship second to none in the region. Boniface had expanded the patrimonial lordship to include Emilia, Lombardy, and Tuscany, and, due to all of his influence in the region, his military prowess, and his loyalty and faithfulness to the emperor he was granted the title of Margrave or protector of Tuscany by the Holy Roman Emperor, Conrad II.<sup>52</sup> This title and the authority that it conferred would become problematic under Conrad's successor, Henry III, who supported a rival candidate for the papacy than did the margrave and who had every intention of sustaining the imperial prerogative of investing clergy. This conflict continued and expanded with Henry IV. As the heiress to the title of margrave and all of the lands that were a part of that territory, Matilda succeeded to a singularly powerful position both politically and militarily.

When Boniface was assassinated in 1052, Beatrice inherited her husband's political authority in the region, and served as regent for her minor son, and Matilda's brother, Frederick. However, she also inherited Boniface's feud with Henry III. Her independent rule over Tuscany certainly served as an example to Matilda, who would later rule the patrimony on her own. After two years of ruling on her own, Beatrice married an enemy of the emperor, Godfrey of Lorraine, without the new emperor's, Henry VI's, permission. As Beatrice was a vassal to the emperor this caused Henry to storm across the Alps in an attempt to apprehend Godfrey, who fled. Henry settled for capturing Beatrice and Matilda. These, relatively early episodes in her life, taught Matilda a very important lesson that political authority without military strength was worth very little.<sup>53</sup>

When Matilda returned from captivity in Germany after her brother, Frederick's death, in 1055 under mysterious circumstances, she was formally recognized as the heir to her father's

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<sup>52</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 34.

enormous lordship in northern Italy. Her education, directed by her mother, was designed to prepare her for her role as political and military leader of this lordship. She received training in French and German, and perhaps also some Latin, as well as the art of military command, even though she almost certainly never received physical military training.<sup>54</sup> It seems that in the scheme of things at the time the art of military command and strategy was a much higher level order of thinking than being trained in actual combat. While both roles were and are necessary for success in war, medieval warfare was not largely based upon open battle between two sides, as I will discuss later, but, instead, was a question of tactics and strategy. Matilda showed herself to be a match for the Holy Roman Emperor in military strategy, due in part to her early education.

When Matilda's stepfather Godfrey died in 1069, both Beatrice and Matilda traveled to his deathbed in Lorraine. Matilda's right to Tuscany was so firmly established that, even at this early date, there were no serious rivals to her succession. Soon after her stepfather's death, Matilda married his son, Godfrey III, the Hunchback of Lorraine, which secured his succession in Lorraine through Matilda and her mother, while at the same time it granted to him Matilda's patrimony, as well. When Matilda married she passed into the legal authority of her husband which, apparently, became problematic for her very quickly, for in 1071 she left her husband and returned to Tuscany in spite of his protestations. In attempts to get her to return to him, Godfrey pleaded with both her mother, Beatrice, and with the pope, hoping for their support in forcing her to return to him. He went to the pope not only as the head of the church but also because Beatrice and Matilda already had an established relationship with him. While the act of leaving her husband was politically very costly and contemporaries went so far as to accuse her of being

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<sup>54</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 34, 35, 37.

the pope's lover, her ability to remain independent was remarkable. She delayed thirteen years before taking a second husband, after the assassination of her estranged husband Godfrey, during which time she ruled Tuscany, from Canossa, on her own.<sup>55</sup> This was really the only way in which she could rule, in her own right, without the oversight of a male who would, legally, be able to usurp her authority.

When Matilda left Godfrey she returned to Tuscany and for seven years ruled with her mother, Beatrice. They held court jointly and Matilda was fully integrated into the ducal regime by their granting charters both together and in Matilda's name alone.<sup>56</sup> This reinforced Matilda's already strong claim to her patrimony, for the charters of themselves stated her legitimacy.

Rosalind Jaeger Reynolds thoroughly explores how Matilda was able to succeed as a female duke. Unlike most women who ruled during the early and middle medieval period, Matilda ruled in her own right. "Very few women up through the twelfth century actually exercised official authority over royal, comital, or ducal lands inherited in their own right."<sup>57</sup> Matilda ruled through the authority of her natal family, unlike other near-contemporary authoritative women who ruled as regents for a husband or a son, and this fact significantly changed the nature of her rule.<sup>58</sup> Ruling in her own right, not as a regent, increased Matilda's ability to be an effective ruler because she was not responsible to another party, while at the same time it reinforced her legitimacy as heir to her father. However, it did not completely stop rebellion to her rule. When Henry IV entered Italy, "almost all of the cities of Tuscany

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<sup>55</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 43, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 8.

<sup>57</sup> Rosalind Jaeger-Reynolds, "*Nobilissima Dux: Matilda of Tuscany and the Construction of Female Authority*" (PhD diss University of California, Berkeley, 2005), 34.

<sup>58</sup> Jaeger-Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 36.

supported, or at least did not actively oppose the king.”<sup>59</sup> Still this seems to have been related more to the fact that she was opposing the emperor than with her gender specifically.<sup>60</sup> Her family had been involved in nearly every conflict in northern Italy for the prior half century, and Henry knew that she had a great many resources at her disposal.<sup>61</sup> Even though Matilda was not alive for much of the prior warfare, she came from a family that was focused intently on military matters, and, during her childhood and youth she grew up with warfare, which gave her first-hand experience that other women in authority may not have had.

Even considering that Henry VI refused to invest her as Margrave of Tuscany, her power was considerable, even after 1081 A.D. when he revoked her other titles.<sup>62</sup> D.O. Hughes argues that after 1000 A.D. “the more clearly defined affirmation of the rights of male heirs to their fathers’ real property, to the exclusion of their sisters,” was firmly entrenched in aristocratic circles.<sup>63</sup> However, Matilda managed to circumvent the laws in place and inherited all of her father’s and all of her mother’s rights to land and property.

Records of Matilda’s rule can be found in letters and decrees to the public, her subjects. One such letter, of February 8, 1073 describes her as having “sat in judgment in God’s name outside the walls of the city of Lucca...to hear and decide cases.”<sup>64</sup> Sitting in judgment indicates that she possessed real authority within her lands as judge and jury. In this same letter it is she and the emperor’s ambassador, sitting in judgment with her, who establish protection for a

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<sup>59</sup> Valerie Eads, *Mighty in War: “The role of Matilda of Tuscany in the War Between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV”*, (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2000), 141.

<sup>60</sup> Eads, *Mighty in War*, 120, 123.

<sup>61</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 8. Eads, *Mighty in War*, 120-21

<sup>62</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 67.

<sup>63</sup> Diane Owen Hughes, “Invisible Madonnas? The Italian Historiographical Tradition and the Women of Medieval Italy,” in *Women in Medieval History and Historiography*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard, (Philadelphia, 1987), 213.

<sup>64</sup> Elke Goetz and Werner eds. *Die Urkunden und Briefe der Markgräfin Matilde von Tuszien*, (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1998), ep. 7, 49-52 Accessed in translation at <http://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/woman/29.html#letterslist>, “Matilda of Tuscany to Public, 1073”.

particular property and its abbess.<sup>65</sup> That the emperor's ambassador is there sitting in judgment with her does not indicate a reduced level of authority but instead suggests that, in 1073, at least, the emperor saw her as his legitimate vassal who held authority sufficient to warrant the dispatch to her of an ambassador. In so doing he proclaimed his understanding of her legitimacy as ruler.

Another similar public letter from March 1100 shows Matilda judging together with Count Guido and his son adjudicating over the matter of a monastery that has asked for protection. The enforcement of this particular letter relies on Matilda. It states that the men of the monastery had "requested that a document of establishment be made by us [Matilda and those signing the charter with her] concerning this matter, supported by our authority."<sup>66</sup> A count's position was not as prestigious in the feudal hierarchy as that of a duke or margrave, and it is therefore likely that Guido, count, was a vassal of hers. The reference to support by "our authority" suggests that Guido may have been the count in the immediate vicinity, but to lend him legitimacy the letter was written through the authority of Matilda. It is also possible that this charter utilizes the pronoun "we" to indicate Matilda alone. This reading is supported by the fact that on this decree, like most others, Matilda was the first to sign, followed by the cardinal, the bishop, and then the count and his son, and so on down the hierarchy of authority. If these decrees indicate actual authority, and their issuance suggests that it was fully expected that they would be followed because they were issued by Matilda, her authority in northern Italy can be assumed to have been significant and as real as that of any male.

That her authority extended beyond the issuance of public charters can be seen in others of her well-documented actions. Matilda's control of fortresses around Tuscany gave her the

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<sup>65</sup> Goetz, "Matilda of Tuscany to Public, 1073."

<sup>66</sup> Goetz, "Matilda of Tuscany to Public, 1100."

ability to protect the pope, the great reformer, Gregory VII. It was she who escorted him safely from Rome to her fortress at Canossa in Tuscany, her military and political center. One can safely assume that had Gregory VII not been confident in her military ability he would not have allowed her to escort him.<sup>67</sup> Matilda and Gregory VII relied heavily upon one another – he for her military power and political control over northern Italy, and she for his spiritual guidance, especially over the failure of her marriages and to support her as she shouldered the enormous responsibilities of serving as the Margrave of Tuscany. She also firmly believed in and supported his reforms.<sup>68</sup>

Among those reforms were assertions about the importance of clerical celibacy, which was used as a way to prove difference between the clergy and the laity. Clerical celibacy related to ritual purity, which distinguished clergy from the laity in general but from females more specifically. A female's, rather than a male's, lust was considered much harder to control because of innate female weakness.<sup>69</sup> Matilda did not write letters specifically on these reforms or on her views about female subordination; however, her letters to the pope suggest at least a subordination of herself to the highest religious authorities. Hay argues that though later in life she would come to be known as the "*gran Contessa*" (Great Countess), Matilda was not interested in gender equality.<sup>70</sup> This allowed her contemporaries to be more at ease with her rule; as an exception to the norm she was much less threatening, although even her most enthusiastic

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<sup>67</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 49.

<sup>68</sup> Gregory was a reformist pope, attempting to reform the Church from within itself. He stood firmly against lay investiture, insisting that that was a right solely of the Church, and not the emperor. Lay investiture, most especially, brought Gregory VII and Henry III, and later Henry IV, into direct conflict over political influence. The well documented "Investiture Controversy" would play a central role in Matilda's life as she defended and supported the pope and his reforms.

<sup>69</sup> Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 39.

<sup>70</sup> The term "gender equality" did not exist in medieval Florence, and the very idea would have been incomprehensible to contemporaries. I use the term here to indicate that such modern ideas as gender equality would never have crossed Matilda's, or anyone's, mind because it was so far from their reality.

supporters were suspicious of female agency.<sup>71</sup> Her enemies did use her gender against her by implying that she was guilty of sexual impropriety, suggesting that she cohabited with a man who was not her husband (the pope), which was assumed to denote that a sexual relationship existed between them. Partially reflected in such a suggestion are prejudices about a woman's fragility and inability to function properly without a male to instruct her, and quite obviously they were used as a tool against her rule.<sup>72</sup>

Many of the accusations related to her supposed sexual impropriety point to much larger themes of medieval European sexuality than simply Matilda's reign over Tuscany. The argument that Matilda, a woman whose authority stretched over all of northern Italy, could not control her lusts even with the pope, would have carried weight with many who, as mentioned above, viewed women's lust as being more difficult to control than a man's. Although this particular accusation was made for political reasons, this type of accusation evinces the persistence of the period's prevalent ideas regarding sexuality. Similarly resorting to this kind of gender-based criticism, the anonymously written *Vita Heinrici* (Life of Henry) mentions Matilda and asks, "for whom may not womanly guile corrupt or deceive?"<sup>73</sup> Misogyny was a method used by contemporaries to undermine female rule and question her morality but did not question her legitimacy.

Matilda's authority, then, came from a wide variety of sources – her inheritance from both parents, her education and the early acknowledgement of being heiress, her political alliance with Pope Gregory VII whom she supported militarily and who lent her legitimacy, her status as a widow, her lack of interest in pressing for gender equality or questioning male-

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<sup>71</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 62-64.

<sup>73</sup> Jaeger-Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 87.

dominated hierarchies, as well as her intelligence would, eventually, allow her to become an exceptional political and military commander.

Matilda was an excellent commander, in part because she was always a reluctant warrior and she very much paid attention to the political context of any warfare. When she did enter into battle, she excelled at maneuver and surprise. Most of her military operations were low intensity and slow, and, for that, more effective, as she focused on the grand scheme rather than the winning of individual battles.<sup>74</sup>

As our starting place, then, Matilda is exceptional, even among exceptional women. Her rule was considered to be an anomaly, but her actual political and military authority was not diminished by the ambiguous position she held because of her gender. Gregory VII, one of the most powerful men in Europe at the time, certainly used her authority to his own ends but his acknowledgement of her as his staunchest ally reinforced her already strong claim to authority. Similarly, that Henry saw her as a great military threat lends credence to the claim that she held a great deal of political and military authority.

To recount, early in her career Henry IV sent an ambassador to sit in judgment with her, a clear indication that he saw her as a legitimate ruler. To challenge the Holy Roman Emperor, as Matilda did, was no small feat, and could not have been undertaken by a ruler, of either gender, who was not considered legitimate and possessing real political authority and military power. Henry, in 1081, attempted to reduce her authority by revoking the titles she held in vassalage from him.

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<sup>74</sup> Hay, *Matilda of Canossa*, 13.

But military and political authority are not the only forms of legitimate authority. Gregory VII himself was the embodiment, as pope, of spiritual authority. Like political leaders, though, neither he nor male clergy could claim a monopoly on spiritual authority as increasingly more and more women became holy, pious, and spiritually influential women. It is to spiritual authority that we now turn.

### Umiliana de' Cerchi

Umiliana de' Cerchi (1219-1246) came from one of the most elite of Florentine families. She was bound to the social and patriarchal structures that governed all of Florence, especially its women. The various episodes of her life, from her marriage, to her return to her father's home, to her refusal to marry again are all elements that contributed to her spiritual authority. This particular type of authority was likely the only available avenue open to Umiliana that would have allowed her to reject the wishes of her father. Her life informs our understanding of women during the thirteenth century in the ways in which her actions were limited by the men around her. That she was able to resist their wishes through the vehicle of spiritual authority is what makes her unique.

Between the lifetimes of Matilda and Umiliana the city of Florence had become much more prosperous and the commune had grown tremendously. Umiliana came from a family that would eventually become a major political faction in the city of Florence and was certainly involved in politics while she was alive.<sup>75</sup> Her hagiographer may have even used her *vita* in part as a political commentary and mobilization around the anti-Ghibelline (anti-imperial) faction,

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<sup>75</sup> Diana Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi of Florence (d.1246)" in *Saints and Cities in Medieval Italy: Selected Sources translated and annotated by Diana Webb*, (Manchester University Press, New York), 2007, 94.

rather than strictly as a necessary element of the canonization process.<sup>76</sup> As a member of the elite Cerchi family, she had access to finances and influence that most of the other women in the city did not; nor did most other women have family names that were known throughout the city.

The major source of knowledge about Umiliana's life comes from her hagiography which was written by a monk named Vito of Cortona. The purpose of such texts was to prove the saintliness of a particular person in the attempt to get them canonized by the Church. These stylized writings making the case for canonization were not intended to provide "an objective account of the individual's life," but, rather, "to edify readers and provide them with an example to follow."<sup>77</sup> For this reason hagiographies are especially difficult to use as accurate depictions of a person's life, and this is certainly true for both Umiliana and Villana. The dearth of sources leaves us attempting to sort fact from stylized conventions to which saintly men and women had to appear to adhere.<sup>78</sup> The purpose of hagiographies was to provide examples of saintly lives that others could follow; Vito of Cortona was attempting to bolster Umiliana's chance of being formally canonized and a hagiography of her life was necessary for that purpose.

Umiliana, like most of those born to elite families in Florence in the medieval period, was married young, at the age of 15, to a much older man.<sup>79</sup> Almost immediately after her marriage she had a re-conversion to a more intense religious devotion, when she became aware that she

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<sup>76</sup> Anna Benvenuti-Papi, "Mendicant Friars and Female Pinzochere in Tuscany: From Social Marginality to Models of Sanctity" in *Women and Religion in Medieval Renaissance Italy*, Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi eds., Margery J. Schneider trans., (University of Chicago Press, Chicago), 94.

<sup>77</sup> Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 41.

<sup>78</sup> Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 41.

<sup>79</sup> Hayden BJ Maginnis, "Images, Devotion and the Beata Umiliana de' Cerchi" in *Visions of Holiness: Art and Devotion in Renaissance Italy*, Andrew Ladis and Shelley E. Zuraw eds. (Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia), 2001, 14.

wanted to spend her life aiding the poor and caring for the sick.<sup>80</sup> This was problematic for her husband and his family, who did not appreciate her spending wealth in this manner.<sup>81</sup> Her husband treated her very well, with magnanimous gifts of material finery, just as other magnate husbands would their wives, but she rejected his gifts. If other magnate families had known that she was doing this it is possible that her husband's family would have lost honor in part because they were unable to control a woman married into the family or because the shabby clothing that she wore would have suggested poverty or spousal mistreatment bringing into question the honor of the family.

Like many other women, she was widowed early, at the age of 22. She had had children but "chose" to leave them with her husband's family, to whom they belonged, and she returned to her father's home.<sup>82</sup> Realistically, due to the fact that she was such a young widow, her family expected her to return to the family home so that she could then be remarried and she had no real option to stay with her children with her deceased husband's family. The abandonment of her children would become essential later on in her road to sanctity as many, including Vito of Cortona, believed that one could not be a saint while caring for things of the world, such as children.<sup>83</sup> After the death of her husband, she returned to her father's home under the right of *tornata*, at which point she chose to become a Franciscan tertiary which allowed her to live a pious, but non-cloistered life.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Maginnis, "Images, Devotion" 14. Anne M. Schuchman, "'Within the Walls of Paradise: Space and Community in the Vita of Umiliana de' Cerchi'" in *Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe*, Katherine Allen Smith and Scott Wells, eds., (Boston: Brill, 2009), 50.

<sup>81</sup> Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 51.

<sup>82</sup> Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 51.

<sup>83</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, "Mendicant Friars," 89.

<sup>84</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 95.

Umiliana's age made her a prime candidate for remarriage by elite Florentine social standards; however, she was determined not to remarry.<sup>85</sup> According to her hagiographer her religious devotion gave her the resolve to resist a second marriage after she had prayed to an image of the Virgin painted on parchment.<sup>86</sup> When she refused to remarry, her father stripped her of her dowry because, as Benvenuti-Papi argues, she occupied more "space in the paternal household than her domestic and social 'passivity' merited," causing her to live in what her hagiographer said was abject poverty in the midst of her rich family.<sup>87</sup> The rejection of a second marriage in favor of living a chaste life, portrayed in stylized hagiography, does have some basis in truth, but her reasons for insisting on remaining unmarried a second time were likely not as simple as Vito of Cortona suggests.

The other option for those wishing to live a pious life was, of course, the cloister. Umiliana did attempt to join a convent after her husband died but she was denied entry to the Franciscan convent of Santa Maria de' Monticelli due, in large part, to the fact that her father had stripped her of her dowry.<sup>88</sup> This option having been denied her makes her resistance to her father's and her family's insistence that she remarry even more noteworthy; her refusal is portrayed as the suffering of a saint.

After her denial of acceptance in the convent, Umiliana needed an alternative to the cloister that would allow her to remain unmarried. Her resistance to a second marriage and the patriarchal structure that she rejected would eventually be the method by which she created a life

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<sup>85</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, "Mendicant Friars," 88.

<sup>86</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 102. The fact that the image was painted on parchment was significant. Painted parchments rare objects for home use. It was a second painting of the Virgin, on a wood panel, that was the focus of miraculous visions later in her life. The painting referred to here, then, was not the one through which miraculous visions came to her.

<sup>87</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, "Mendicant Friars" 88.

<sup>88</sup> Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 51.

for herself as a Franciscan tertiary and which would be emphasized persistently in her hagiography.

Umilian's hagiographer presents her denial by the convent, and therefore her inability to access the cloistered life, as "a greater hardship than life in the convent."<sup>89</sup> This, the hagiography suggested, was God's way of asking much greater things of her, indicating that she was favored by him. In turn, God's favor increased her spiritual authority among her contemporaries.

Although she had been denied entry into the convent, she still claimed for herself a holy status. According to her view of the matter, as portrayed by Vito of Cortona, God denied her the convent because the convent was the easier option, whereas forcing her to live a pious and chaste life was the greater hardship. "What did she lack of the monastic life, who lived in such continuous silence and observance? What less did she possess than the holy hermits...?"<sup>90</sup> Umiliana, and later her hagiographer, used this to increase her status among the religious; her denial from the cloister was portrayed as and argued to be a greater sacrifice to God and it displayed her devotion to the religious life. By comparing her to the holy hermits of early Christianity, Umiliana's hagiographer helped to make her a more likely candidate for canonization due to her great sacrifice and devotion in imitation of the earliest saints. Her hagiography makes claims that are stylized to elucidate her sanctity and the exceptional suffering that she had to endure by living in the material world rather than in a cloister.

Umiliana voluntarily sequestered herself in her family's tower. The tower was attached to the family palace, but it is important to note that her hagiographer stressed that she kept

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<sup>89</sup> Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 51.

<sup>90</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 106.

herself in the tower, separate from the rest of her family. Towers in Florence were significant because they represented the magnates of the city and the military power and prestige that went along with them.<sup>91</sup> For this reason, Umiliana's living within her family tower is often described in militaristic terms.<sup>92</sup> Umiliana and her earliest *vita* used her family's tower as a substitute for the cloister framing it as a place cut off from typical social interaction and concerns.<sup>93</sup> Her hagiographer went so far as to malign her entire family such that it appeared that she was fighting the devil himself through her insistence upon not remarrying and remaining in the family tower.<sup>94</sup>

Although that is how she viewed her position and her life in the family tower, the reality was that as a widowed and holy woman, she was able to, and did, travel in the city, a right denied most elite Florentine women. "She reportedly used a different name when outside the tower, thus aligning the tower with her identity as one of the 'Cerchi' and her movement in the world with an unmentioned alias."<sup>95</sup> If we take this as an accurate account, her movement in the outside and public world was likely presented as the movement of a holy woman, rather than as an elite woman of the Cerchi lineage. This is important, again, because elite women were, by contemporary social standards and some Florentine laws, to not be out in public.<sup>96</sup> Being outside could call into question her honor if her actions were perceived by men in the city to be less than honorable and chaste. Contemporary laws, discussed in the preceding chapter, strictly forbade women from entering public spaces. However, by using a different name, presumably one that conveyed her status as a religious woman, she was able to move more freely than she would have

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<sup>91</sup> Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 54.

<sup>92</sup> Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 54.

<sup>93</sup> Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 50.

<sup>94</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, "Mendicant Friars" 88.

<sup>95</sup> Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 52.

<sup>96</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 16.

been allowed as a female of the Cerchi family. As a religious woman, recognized as such when she went into public spaces, it was her spiritual authority and difference from the norm of female status and behavior that gave her the freedom that she would not have enjoyed had she entered the public world as an elite woman.

Her movement within the city generally involved visits to other tertiary women and Franciscans who sometimes used her tower as a meeting place for prayer. Pious networks were often utilized in urban centers by laywomen and Umiliana herself was nearly always accompanied by other women when she left her tower.<sup>97</sup> This likely speaks to the fact that going out with other women, especially other holy women, was bound to stir fewer questions about her activities in public spaces; Umiliana was aware of the dishonor that she could potentially bring to herself and her family by not acting in acceptable fashions and so she avoided transgressing those roles, even as a holy woman.

According to Benvenuti-Papi, lay pious networks were organized by Franciscans who “formed cooperatives that allowed them to combine the incomes of poor and middle-class widows and, by living together, to resolve their problems of lodging and lead decorous lives, measured by communal rhythms and collective devotional practices.”<sup>98</sup> Umiliana had a pious network that was similar to this, though she lived with no other laywomen.<sup>99</sup> That she was allowed to live in her family’s tower and was never put out onto the street, no matter how upset her family was, suggests that she was not in such abject poverty as Vito of Cortona would have his readers believe. Although she rejected food, there was always food available to her, and she did not move in with other women of lesser classes to combine the small incomes that they may

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<sup>97</sup> Schuchman, “Within the Walls,” 57.

<sup>98</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, “Mendicant Friars,” 92.

<sup>99</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, “Mendicant Friars,” 88.

have shared, both of which circumstances were almost certainly a result of her family's elite and wealthy status. Clearly, although her dowry had been revoked, she lived better than many others in the city because she was still sheltered and did not have to worry about paying for the basic necessities of life.

Vito of Cortona certainly had his own interests when he wrote Umiliana's *vita*. In the world-view of female tertiaries and Franciscans they were fighting together against the world.<sup>100</sup> He describes scenes of her life where she fights against the devil himself, who encourages her to give up her devotions to return to a more worldly existence. In such encounters, she guards herself against his sexual advances, as well, something that would become vital to the rewards she would gain in heaven. Umiliana's own final requests reflect these ideas – her dying wish was that no member of her family be present at her death, and none were.<sup>101</sup> Her body was quickly collected by the Franciscans, and three months later she was re-interred, this time under the pulpit of Santa Croce.<sup>102</sup> Umiliana was used by the Franciscans to increase the pilgrimages and donations made to that church by the pious, not least of which were from her own descendents.

Umiliana's status as a saintly and influential tertiary can be attributed to a number of factors from her original status as an elite Cerchi to her later refusal to re-marry and live, supposedly destitute, in her family's tower. Her ability to reach sanctity was related to her laborious recovery of her purity which is represented in posthumous visions that her friends had of her as enthroned with a crown of virginity. According to Vito of Cortona it was impossible

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<sup>100</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 94.

<sup>101</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 95. Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 59.

<sup>102</sup> Schuchman, "Within the Walls," 59.

for wives and mothers to truly be saintly – those destined for saintly success were not burdened by domestic or conjugal duties.

Part of the purpose of her *vita* was also as a political commentary about the anti-Imperial factions within the city. Vito of Cortona was interested in displaying, through Umiliana, that penitents and regulars (cloistered monks and nuns who adhered to a religious Rule) could coexist and flourish together.<sup>103</sup> This additional reason for that Vito of Cortona's writing of Umiliana's hagiographical *vita*, outside of purely wishing to tell of her sanctity, helped to emphasize the localized cult that had established around her and expand it beyond the city of Florence. Expansion of a cult beyond a certain location or city was vital in attempting to get someone elevated to sainthood; the more followers one had in a variety of places, the more difficult it was for the Church to resist the call for canonization. Beyond that, money was needed for the upkeep of tombs and relics and so donations were vital, as well. Coming from a magnate family meant that her descendents had the money to donate to Santa Croce for continuing prayers and masses in Umiliana's name.

Umiliana's spiritual authority was augmented by the eliteness of the family from which she came; at no point was she starving for food because her family refused to feed her, and she always had her room in the tower to serve as her shelter. She did use her status as a holy woman to walk in the public places in the city, especially going to and from the homes of friends. She did not have political power through her lifetime, but in Chapter 3 we will explore the ways in which her hagiography was used by secular authorities to help quell political strife within the city. Perhaps her elite magnate status made her more effective as a religious intermediary in the public life whereas our next woman who used also spiritual authority did not have such a family

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<sup>103</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, "Mendicant Friars," 89, 94.

name to rely on. In comparison to Umiliana, Villana dei Botti influenced the Florentine public during her lifetime through her own actions.

### Villana dei Botti

Unlike any of the other subjects of this study, who all came from the very elite of society, Villana dei Botti (1332-1360) came from a rich middle class merchant family. She helps us to view other elements of society, outside of the magnate families. Her status among the upper-middle-class families means that she enjoyed the economic position and leisure, similar to that of the other women of this study, which enabled her to spend her time preaching in public after her re-conversion. That she did preach in public is significant because it contravened the contemporary rule, established before and during her lifetime, that forbade females from appearing in public spaces. Her social transgressions committed by appearing in public spaces were not questioned by civic authorities, although her husband's family did not appreciate her appearing in those spaces. It is likely that she was not punished by the commune in part because of her spiritual authority through which she preached.

Villana's pious life, according to her hagiography written by the Dominican monk, Girolamo di Giovanni, began prior to her marriage and may have contributed to an early marriage for her after she attempted to run away from home. As a young girl, her *vita* states, she scorned the world, self-flagellated, that she would put sand in her bed at night and placed a rock beneath her head to serve as her pillow until her parents discovered this and forbade her from doing so.<sup>104</sup> By forbidding her from continuing in her ascetic practices they were likely trying to protect their daughter; in so doing, however, they insisted upon her being concerned more with

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<sup>104</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 174.

worldly things, which she is said to have explicitly rejected. Much of this rhetoric is, as in Umiliana's *vita*, stylized in the hagiographic style. Whether she led a very pious life as a child or not is somewhat irrelevant to her hagiographer; by portraying her as pious early on in her life he is setting her life up as evidence to prove her piety and saintliness. This would have helped to make her life appear more saintly, but it also set up a situation where she could turn from this good and pious life to one concerned with more worldly things. These elements served to give evidence to her piety and to promote her as someone deserving canonization.

According to her hagiography, Villana's father, Andreas, is portrayed as being only concerned with worldly goods; part of this worldly wealth was a daughter named Villana.<sup>105</sup> By counting her among his wealth he displayed too much attachment to worldly things, which included loved ones. Although she was loved and cared for by her family, nevertheless she ran away from her parents' home because they were proposing a marriage for her while she supposedly desired the life of a nun. Whatever her reasons for wanting to be a nun rather than a wife, her actions would have directly affected her family; by rejecting marriage, through her her family could not make political or economic alliances. Given that her father seemed to have a young man in mind for her, allowing her to reject the needs of her lineage would have proven to the family to be problematic. Her father went searching for her after she ran away and found her near a trash receptacle. Then, in the interest of keeping his daughter from running away again at the prospect of marriage, he immediately married her to a noble young man in the city.<sup>106</sup> This forced her into a more worldly life in the arms of another human, her husband, and away from the sacred. Later this would be framed in a reflection of Saint Peter, who turned, temporarily,

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<sup>105</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 174.

<sup>106</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 174.

away from Jesus and the sacred. This comparison suggested a role for Villana that perhaps was to be viewed as being as important as that of Peter.

Her marriage is portrayed in her *vita* as having led her to what was for her an overly-worldly life. She was apparently very reluctant to marry but soon found that she enjoyed her conjugal relationship, as well as the jewels and fine clothing that her husband showered upon her. Girolamo di Giovanni used this to show her initial fall from grace, and it harkens back to the description of her father who was overly concerned with things of this world.

The hagiography continues by explaining that, while preparing for a festival in the city a few years after her marriage, Villana passed by a mirror in her home and, looking at herself in the mirror, she saw reflected therein a demonic non-human creature. She is said to have run around the house looking into other mirrors, all with the same result. She immediately took this to mean that her inner soul had become corrupted by worldly concerns and vanity, and, her hagiography explains, thereafter she discarded her fine clothes and ran to Santa Maria Novella, her local Dominican church, to receive absolution.<sup>107</sup> All of this sets the stage for a case for canonization: although she fell from grace, she returned to it, indicating that God can forgive all as long as they turn back to Him. Through God's forgiveness she gained a renewed religious fervor and a spiritual authority among humans as an example to follow. This episode of the fall might be related to the medieval belief that a female's lust was much harder to control than a man's, and, so, that she did give in would have been in no way surprising to her contemporaries. By having given in to her lust with her husband she had not so seriously transgressed that she could not be redeemed.

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<sup>107</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 175.

Her *vita* portrays this time in her life, when she married and during which she gave in to worldly pleasures, as the period of her fall. Her hagiography suggests that even God's elect fail, and goes so far as to compare her to St. Peter, who also had a lapse in his belief and faith in God when he denied that he was one of Christ's disciples or that he even knew him (Matthew 26: 73-75).<sup>108</sup> What we are to understand of the remainder of her life is that her female weakness and lust had been redeemed by the Grace of God alone. After her reconversion, she chose a life of charity and self-punishment. She is said to have worn a hair shirt, rough clothing, and an iron chain around her breasts that was so imbedded in her skin at the time of her death that it tore away chunks of her flesh when it was removed as her body was prepared for burial.<sup>109</sup>

It is during this period, of her reconversion, that she began to preach in public squares within the city, even as she is said to have feared being called foolish and raving. By preaching in public she was able to create a following that saw her as a prophetess and spiritual authority. Her hagiography tells us that after her public preaching episodes, she often became sickly and suffered physically.<sup>110</sup> What we must realize is that physical torments are used in the hagiographic genre to display a potential saint's devotion to God and his or her willingness to suffer horribly so that s/he might still serve Him. She is said to have accepted this pain eagerly as a way to reflect her re-found piety and devotion.

Her preaching in public opened her exposure to being labeled as foolish and raving.<sup>111</sup> However, it seems that after her first successful prophecy this was never a problem for her.

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<sup>108</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 175.

<sup>109</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 175. Stephano Orlandi, *La Beata Villana terziaria domenicana fiorentina del sec. XIV*, Edizioni «Il Rosario», Firenze, 1955.

<sup>110</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 175. Orlandi, *La Beata Villana*, 63-64.

<sup>111</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 175.

Allegedly, this very public aspect of her life made her popular within the city during her lifetime – reportedly many of the things that she preached came to pass within days.<sup>112</sup>

Aside from preaching and prophesying, she spent a great deal of her time publicly distributing food and clothing; she also volunteered at a hospital run by Franciscan sisters.<sup>113</sup> All of these various pious acts were performed in public, creating a following that sought to learn from her. Her public popularity and her accuracy in prophesying helped to establish her cult within the city after her death and. When, eventually, her cult began to wane, her grandson revitalized it by asking a fellow Dominican to write her *vita* to provide an example of piety and holiness that others could follow.<sup>114</sup>

It is said that, at the time of her death, a large crowd of citizens gathered and for thirty days afterwards came to pay respects, during which time her body did not become corrupted.<sup>115</sup> The hyperbolic nature of hagiographies is evident in this report: the proof of divine intervention was necessary for her canonization, and episodes like this helped to provide evidence of such intervention for religious, rather than purely factual, purposes. The episode of her preservation after death suggests divine intervention that indicates spiritual favor extended directly from God, and it supports the interpretation of her prophesying in public as a positive influence on the world rather than as a social transgression. The lack of post-mortem corruption of her body would have been evidence of the grace that God bestowed upon her and would have confirmed to believers her sanctity.

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<sup>112</sup> André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, Jean Birrell trans., (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 1997, 241.

<sup>113</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 176.

<sup>114</sup> Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 242.

<sup>115</sup> Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 242.

Villana was a Dominican tertiary, unlike Umiliana who followed the Franciscan model. This was partially due to their respective locations within the city – women often chose churches closest to home because they were familiar with them, and presumably, because it meant that women would be in public less. That being said, Dominicans had not formally established a Tertiary Rule until around 1380, and it was not formally approved by the pope until 1405– well after the lives of both Umiliana and Villana.<sup>116</sup> Prior to the passage of the official rule there were already in place rudimentary guidelines that had been established around 1280, which many women, wishing to profess themselves as tertiary Dominicans, followed. This profession of tertiary status, even prior to the establishment of an official rule, reinforces the idea posited in Chapter 1 that there were at this time an “excess” of females who could be placed in marriage and so alternatives for them needed to be found. Religious orders such as the Dominicans and the Franciscans, after initial resistance, began creating convents for these females which alleviated social problems and increased the Church’s authority over these groups of women.

The Franciscans, on the other hand, had established a formal tertiary rule nearly 100 years earlier. Like Franciscans, Dominican tertiaries often created pious networks of women who gathered for prayer and discussion. In large part these women followed contemporary pious currents, with a combination of private devotions with collective worship.<sup>117</sup> During collective worship some of the laywomen would have mystical experiences which often became public spectacles and turned these women into local celebrities, as it appears happened with Villana and her preaching in public squares, through which she gave her audience public examples of divine

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<sup>116</sup> Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, ed. and trans. *Dominican Penitent Women*, (Paulist Press, New York), 2005, 6. The establishment of a formal rule was largely related to the life of Catherine of Siena. Her relationship with Raymond of Capua and his support of her model of sanctity led Raymond to claim that there was already established a formal bond between penitents and their confessors in an effort to help legitimize her claim to sanctity. This claim by Raymond, argues Lehmijoki-Gardner, has long been taken to mean that there was a formal tertiary rule prior to this but all other evidence suggests that this is not true. Lehmijoki-Gardner, 7-8.

<sup>117</sup> Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Dominican Penitent Women*, 7, 8, 13.

favor.<sup>118</sup> One of the largest differences between Dominican and Franciscan mendicants was their focus on an active versus a contemplative life. While Franciscans emphasized actions in the community, Dominicans believed that the active life should be subservient to the contemplative life.<sup>119</sup>

Umiliana's and Villana's lives display that these ideals did not always translate directly into the lives of tertiaries. Umiliana participated in public charity early in her life, she devoted herself largely to prayer both on her own as well as communal prayer within her small pious network. Villana, on the other hand, was very active publicly, from preaching in the squares to volunteering at a hospital run by Franciscan nuns.<sup>120</sup> This phenomenon of Villana's public popularity is a large part of the way in which she built up her spiritual authority. Because she was not from a magnate family she needed to make herself visible to others and she did this by preaching in public. This relationship between public preaching and her spiritual authority will be explored further in Chapter 3, but her active life and public teaching were also requirements for canonization. Her public preaching and prophesying was problematic to her status as an elite female, especially to her family and their honor, because women were discouraged from being out in the public streets and squares creating conflict between religious and secular ideals.<sup>121</sup> Women had long been excluded from those spaces, yet Villana was preaching and teaching there.

Villana's public actions and popular following during her life were a driving factor in promoting her cult. Her popularity declined until her grandson asked a fellow Dominican, Girolamo di Giovanni, to write her *vita* in 1420. He also had her relics covered in silver to

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<sup>118</sup> Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Dominican Penitent Women*, 16.

<sup>119</sup> Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Dominican Penitent Women*, 19.

<sup>120</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 175.

<sup>121</sup> Elet, *Seats of Power*, 451.

preserve them, in order to increase and reinforce ideas that these items were relics and important enough to be preserved in precious metal. Her cult had revived by 1436 when the famous Dominican friar and painter, Fra Angelico, painted her in one of the many frescos at the monastery at San Marco. From 1441-1445 multiple confraternities within the city of Florence placed themselves under her protection, another indication that her grandson's efforts to revive and promote her cult were successful.<sup>122</sup> Her life as depicted in her hagiography as well as her public preaching suggest a spiritual influence and authority over a relatively wide audience that most women in the elite social classes of Florence in the fourteenth century would not have been able to obtain. Her position as a non-magnate woman but one who still had a considerable amount of wealth, as well as her status as a holy woman, may have contributed to her ability to act in those public spaces.

In the case of Villana, then, it was a combination of her public preaching, the actions of mendicant friars, but also family members encouraging devotions to her, that promoted and reaffirmed her cult such that it could last over time. Hers was a rich merchant-class family; she was not of the magnate class, making her relatively unknown compared to Umiliana whose Cerchi family alone made her famous. Without that elite status behind her something more was needed for her cult to flourish. The lack of magnate status may have, in fact, allowed her more freedom to transgress into the public spaces in the city. This would have been vital for the life that she lived and for her cult. Her public words and her popularity in the city, being elements of a successful prophetess, then, were noteworthy because they display a level of spiritual authority that only other religious preachers would have had, and those others were almost exclusively male.

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<sup>122</sup> Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 242.

## Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi

Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi was born into a relatively new elite family, the Macinghi, and married, in 1422, into one of the wealthiest and most prestigious lineages in the city of Florence, the Strozzi. Though her husband was only of “modest” wealth for a magnate, he was still in the top two percent of wealthy Florentines.<sup>123</sup> Alessandra was 14 or 16 when she married and was given the extraordinarily large dowry of 1600 florins.<sup>124</sup> Alessandra was around 28 at the time of her widowhood – relatively old to be considered for remarriage, especially considering that she had five surviving children at the time. As a woman born into and married into elite families she was severely restricted; first she was governed by her father and then by her husband, with very little autonomy.<sup>125</sup> Even though she had a great deal of autonomy because of her circumstances, her letters indicate that she experienced an increased level, compared to previous centuries, of the entrenchment of patrilineal and patriarchal social structures. Alessandra looked to her sons to inform her actions because she has internalized social norms that dictated that a mother be deferential to her adult sons along with all other males. The rise of Cosimo de’ Medici led to many of the circumstances, including the exile of her husband, which allowed her to become so autonomous.

In 1433 Matteo di Simone Strozzi, Alessandra’s husband, was exiled from the city of Florence, along with all other adult Strozzi males, by Cosimo de’ Medici in the latter’s attempt to prevent his own usurpation. Alessandra, not required by law to do so, chose to join her husband

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<sup>123</sup> Heather Gregory, *Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi*, bilingual edition: Translated with an introduction and notes by Heather Gregory, (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 1997, 2. Ann Crabb, *A Patrician Family in Renaissance Florence: Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi and her Sons, 1440-1491*, (PhD Dissertation, Washington University), 1980, 29.

<sup>124</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 17 – Ann Crabb gives the date of 1406 for her birth, while Heather Gregory gives 1408. For the purposes of this essay it is not overly critical which date we accept.

<sup>125</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 19, 51.

in exile, where along with three of their eight children, he died of the plague in 1435 or early in 1436. As a widow in her late twenties, she enjoyed more autonomy than she ever could have had as a married woman. Her father-in-law and her brothers-in-law had all predeceased her husband, so, while she had become part of the Strozzi lineage, and her children were of that lineage, there were no strong males in her immediate family to either decide how she would live or support her children.<sup>126</sup>

Her husband's will gave her guardianship of the children, and although not unusual, it was this which gave her more authority due to the lack of living males of their lineage. The political upheavals of 1434 also gave her more independence because the city was focused on things other than keeping mothers and widows from behaving in certain manners. Her unusually large dowry also allowed her to support herself and her children, keeping her from relying on male extended family members to support and therefore interfere with them.<sup>127</sup> She and her children were unable to live in the splendor expected of most magnate families; until the boys were able to make their own fortunes, the fact that they all had to live on her dowry money gave her extensive authority over her sons' economic lives. Alessandra had to work outside of the traditional female roles in order to allow for the possibility of her sons' return to Florence, including making decisions about money until her sons were grown.

The city of Florence taxed her and her children punitively for the debts that her husband, Matteo di Simone Strozzi, had incurred because of his exile. This deprived the children of their entire patrimony.<sup>128</sup> The city, however, was not able to use her dowry against those debts, due to a system that maintained separate marital property; it was therefore possible for the family to live

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<sup>126</sup> Gregory, *Selected Letters*, 5.

<sup>127</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 58, 64.

<sup>128</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 21, 60, 313.

on her dowry by which she supported herself and her five children. This situation would continue until at least 1450, when her sons had begun to build their business interests elsewhere in Europe.<sup>129</sup> This gave her a very strong financial position over her sons because even after the age of 18 they were all still dependent on her dowry to live.<sup>130</sup> After they had grown to adulthood she did consult her sons, especially her eldest, Filippo, on how she was spending money, both her own and that of her sons. Her influence over her sons is evident in her letters; also evident are the skills she gained by functioning in traditionally male roles in the city, from attempting to influence politics to deciding how money would be spent.

Alessandra was a very good judge of character and motive. She was fairly cynical, especially when it came to Florentine politics. It is unclear how much political knowledge or expertise she had been exposed to prior to her husband's sudden death but either she had been educated in the public realm of male politics, which seems unlikely, or she learned quickly and used other skills and knowledge that she possessed or had gained in order to interpret political dealings. She had been taught to read and to write, in the vernacular, and also to keep account books, both of which were vital as she raised five children relatively on her own.<sup>131</sup> Her ability to read and to write during the period in which her sons were in exile would prove to be invaluable to historians as her letters are the only extant source through which we can construct her life – Filippo, her eldest son, kept his mother's letters that she had written to him, which is where a great deal of our knowledge of Alessandra comes.<sup>132</sup> Her letters discuss a wide variety

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<sup>129</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 6, 21. When her sons, Filippo, Lorenzo and Matteo grew of age they inherited their father's exile. Alessandra, therefore, sent them to study business with their paternal uncles Jacopo, Filippo, and Niccolo di Leonardo Strozzi. Alessandra's sons learned the banking business from these men and, after a period of apprenticeship for each they built a large banking empire outside of Florence – focused mostly in Bruges and later in Naples.

<sup>130</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 60.

<sup>131</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 22, 24.

<sup>132</sup> Gregory, *Selected Letters*, 8.

of things, the most important for our purposes being her correspondence with her sons about the political life, economic position, and happenings in Florence. She needed to keep her sons informed of the various developments that might have affected their lives, including information about how she was spending money, to whom she was marrying her daughters, and the political situation in the city that may have affected their exile in a variety of manners.

Due to their exile, Alessandra's sons were heavily reliant upon her financially; they also relied on her to address their political and personal business in Florence. She worked diligently for years to get her sons' exile repealed. Alessandra's comments in her letters indicate that she noticed subtleties in politics. More than once advised her sons against their taking certain actions based upon her judgment of a particular situation.<sup>133</sup> She did not have power to change things in politics that she did not like, but she accepted the circumstances for what they were and maneuvered within the system to the benefit of her sons.<sup>134</sup> Her sons trusted her more than any male within the city to look to their affairs and keep them abreast of political shifts and movement within the city. She often gave her sons political advice, at which her sons showed no surprise and generally accepted; they had surely realized that her view of politics was generally realistic.<sup>135</sup> Normally a mother would have no political influence or sway over her sons; the circumstances being what they were allowed her to discuss politics and economics with them, which normally they would have discussed with a male family member.

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<sup>133</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 74, 80, 82.

<sup>134</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 82. Alessandra also had two daughters who survived into adulthood. Because of their gender they were not forced into exile. Alessandra was also a firm believer in the patrilineal principle and excluded her married daughters from inheriting. Although she periodically mentions her daughters in letters to her sons, it is usually in relation to asking for their opinions in regards to finding suitable marriage partners for her daughters – traditionally a male prerogative. Daughters were considered to be part of the natal family only until their marriage and after marriage their interests would be separate (Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 22, 80, 156-57).

<sup>135</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 82, 88.

As the representative of her sons in Florence, Alessandra did her utmost not to upset any of the factions within the city. If she had done so, she could have directly threatened the ability of her sons to have their exile revoked. In a similar vein, she tolerated erosion of her capital through taxes in order to maintain good relations with the authorities, she made politically neutral marriages for her children, and wrote letters to the Signoria, the governing body in Florence, all of which kept her from overstepping both her advisable political pose and the expected non-political role of the female. She advised her sons against joining outspoken factions, such as the Pazzi, even though the Strozzi and Pazzi were both enemies of the Medici. She gave her sons this advice fifteen years prior to the Pazzi Conspiracy, when their involvement in that faction certainly would have sealed their fates as permanent exiles.

Alessandra's attempts to stay politically neutral while doing all that she could to have her sons' exile revoked eventually paid off. Her eldest son, Filippo, was around 40 years old when in 1467 he was allowed to return to the city.<sup>136</sup> How much this was directly related to Alessandra's written petitions to the commune is unclear, but, being part of the Strozzi family probably held sway among at least some of the *signoria*. What also influenced the eventual revocation of their exile was the fact that Piero de' Medici was interested in making an alliance with the King of Naples to solidify his rule. At the time the largest bankers for the king were Alessandra's sons.

Alessandra was in a unique position, not only as a widow and a mother of sons, but also as a woman whose father-in-law and brothers-in-law had predeceased her husband, leaving her with a great deal of autonomy. The fact that her husband's wealth had been taxed away by the city of Florence left her sons to rely heavily on her dowry for their economic wellbeing, and this

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<sup>136</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 79, 83, 85

increased her influence over them, as their exile forced them to rely on someone within the city to look out for their interests, and for that they trusted no one more than their mother. All of these factors gave Alessandra a great deal of influence over her sons.

Circumstances were not the only factor. Alessandra was knowledgeable in politics within the city, she was capable of keeping account books, and she was a good manager of money. Her personality was such that she was often able to cause people to help her when she was incapable, largely because of her gender, of dealing with the situation.<sup>137</sup> All of this came with a cost. Alessandra deeply felt her relative poverty. “In the lay world, opportunities for independent action usually came to patrician women out of the loss or failure of a husband or close adult male relative, and were often accompanied by financial difficulties.”<sup>138</sup> This was true for Alessandra. Financial difficulties certainly existed for Alessandra until her sons were able to establish their fortunes after they had completed their apprenticeships. Until that time, and well beyond, Alessandra continued to have a great deal of influence over her sons’, financial, political, and personal lives.

Her influence as a mother was greatly expanded beyond contemporary roles for mothers. She exercised authority over her sons in all of their economic, political, and personal lives. As they grew older she did defer to them, but her sons continued to require and seek her knowledge and advice regarding issues within the city of Florence that they were unable to attend to. That she did defer to her sons, even though there was no logical reason to do so, strongly suggests that it was due to social norms that she did so. There were no family members present and alive who could have seriously reprimanded or restricted her had she transgressed, but the fact that she

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<sup>137</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 24, 64, 73, 80, 82.

<sup>138</sup> Crabb, *Patrician Family*, 315.

never attempted to transgress the normal gender bounds of the time and place suggests that she was a firm believer in the contemporary patrilineal and patriarchal power structures.

### Conclusion

Matilda, Umiliana, Villana, and Alessandra, whose lives span four centuries, display ways in which some women were able to resist or exceed patriarchal power structures. All acted outside traditional roles for females, although some conformed more than others. Their personalities allowed each of them to resist the authority and law that restricted women in Florence, though their circumstances were not identical. By observing in the macro scale the large span of time, in the same general location, it is also possible to see how elite women's lives had changed during this period and the ways in which they were able to work outside of the accepted traditional female realm. Matilda was able to exercise military and political authority that was well and above that which her contemporary women could access, let alone the other subjects of this study. Umiliana and Villana, working within much tighter social constraints for women turned to religion as a method through which to obtain authority. Alessandra influenced her sons lives very significantly, but her deference to their decisions, especially those of Filippo, indicate that social structures and power hierarchies were not open to question even for a woman who exercised such influence over her sons.

Matilda of Tuscany lived before the rise of the commune of Florence; at the time Florence was fairly insignificant in comparison to other cities within her realm. She was, therefore, not living under the system that privileged men over women because of their political influence within the city. She was confronted with Europe-wide gender biases that were often similar but which were much more difficult to enforce because of the vastness of the continent

and the lack of a single powerful ruler who could enforce them. By the mid-fifteenth century, during Alessandra's lifetime, the communal political situation in Florence was well established as the realm of males. Since those politics took place in the city streets, an elite female's access to political power and the streets was severely limited. This changed the way in which a woman, even from the most powerful of the city's families, was able to influence politics. In order to leverage control of her family's circumstances, Alessandra had to work through family members and family friends or write letters to those in power in the city. During the entire time that she attempted to reverse her sons' exile, she could not attend political meetings, making her ability to influence the decisions being made by politicians, and by this time by particularly the Medici family, severely limited.

Umiliana and Villana display the ways in which women sought alternative means of influence and authority within the city. They used spiritual authority to reject traditional female roles including those of mother, daughter, and wife, in order to resist male authority and male dominance over them. Mazo Karras argues that chastity was an active choice and that they took it as part of their identity. She also discusses how, to avoid accusations of heresy, the Church hierarchy was determined "that lay people who chose sexual abstinence should do so with the sanction of the church."<sup>139</sup> Both Umiliana and Villana through their respective tertiary orders and thereby creating roles of holy women instead of elite women, placed themselves under the authority of male clerics, that provided them with a great deal more freedom than would have been possible for them had they chosen more traditional female roles. Both were able to be in public places normally off limits to elite women because they portrayed themselves as holy

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<sup>139</sup> Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 45, 47.

women rather than as elite women, using spiritual authority to reject traditional roles and regulations that governed the actions of elite women.

Alessandra used her authority over her dowry to influence her sons economically from an early age. Her political perception and understanding served both her and them well and she continued to advise them well into adulthood; her eldest was forty years old when he returned to Florence and took control of the family's business and political interests. Until that time she had internalized ideas of female subordination as I will discuss in Chapter 3, and her letters reflect the unimportance she placed upon her daughters, but her continued influence over her sons and within the realm of Florentine politics belies this on a more personal level. Her internalization of the importance of sons reflects larger currents within Florentine society that had been becoming more rigid since Matilda's life during the eleventh century. There was no question in Alessandra's mind as to who would inherit when she died; the only option was the eldest male son, and this is borne out in her letters which were most often written directly to him.

### CHAPTER 3: USE AND DISPLAY OF AUTHORITY

The previous chapter discussed the respective familial and social situations that placed the four subject women of this study in the circumstances in which they flourished. This chapter will explore the ways in which these women exploited their situations to their benefit. The manner in which they lived their lives as well as the restrictions that they overcame demonstrate the increased legal restrictions placed upon women in Florence over the course of four centuries. As discussed in Chapter 1, more than one type of authority will be reviewed, because these various types of authority reflect the dynamics of the society in which they lived.

In this chapter I will focus on actual uses and displays of each woman's authority; I will argue that various actions that these women took, which in Florence and Northern Italy were often seen as socially unacceptable for females, or, at the very least, questionable, were accepted and even praised by secular and religious authorities, rather than condemned, *because* of the authority that each woman possessed. If all women had held as much authority as these women did, something much closer to gender equality would have existed in medieval Florence. It is notable that each woman held different types of authority, which fact reflects gender roles and social statuses that were shaped by religious and cultural norms beginning in the eleventh century.

#### Matilda: *Nobilissima Dux*

This discussion of Matilda will cover both how she was viewed by her contemporaries who wrote about her in their chronicles and some reflections on how she viewed her own position. A discussion of her military actions in defense of Pope Gregory VII, and later his successors to the papacy, will demonstrate the amount of influence she wielded within the

international politics of the day. The contemporary sources that address her actions confirmed and reinforced her position of authority.

As the sole inheritor of her paternal lands, Matilda “was the ruler of a patchwork of territories spread throughout northern Italy,”<sup>140</sup> making her exceptionally well placed to impede the emperor from asserting control in Italy and overthrowing Gregory VII. Matilda’s inheritance of such a wide swath of land in Northern Italy came at the same general time as primogeniture, which, as discussed above, was becoming more common place during the eleventh century. Had her brother Frederick survived, he would have inherited instead of her. After his death the rules were still flexible enough that very distant male relatives did not come to claim her inheritance as might have happened in later centuries.<sup>141</sup> By the time she began her sole rule there were no questions asked among contemporaries about her legitimacy as heir, or as a female heir, to her patrimony.

Rosalind Jaeger Reynolds discusses extensively the variety of titles given to Matilda and her mother Beatrice, and their meaning. Much of the discussion below is informed by Jaeger Reynolds and by the work of Valerie Eads.<sup>142</sup> Jaeger Reynolds argues that “Matilda filled a role that some authors could only describe in masculine terminology... [and that] their use of the masculine title for Matilda highlights the unusualness of a woman occupying such a position.”<sup>143</sup> This does suggest a fair amount of discomfort with a female as sole ruler without a husband or a

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<sup>140</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 38.

<sup>141</sup> The bias against female inheritance grew much greater in later centuries to the point where distant uncles and cousins had a greater claim to an inheritance than a daughter would have. In Matilda’s case, no such distant claimants appeared largely because the idea of primogeniture was still not fully established across the continent.

<sup>142</sup> Jaeger Reynolds uses sources both pro- and anti-matildine in nature. She explores in depth the view of females in general as well as looking at their possible, and likely, political agendas. The pro-matildine faction included the authors Pseudo-Bardo, Bernold of Constance, her biographer writing around 1113 named Donizo, Ranger of Lucca, Berthold, Hugh of Flavigny, Paul of Bernried, Cardinal Deusdedit, and Bonizo of Sutri.

<sup>143</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 55.

male heir. By using masculine terms, her contemporaries were trying to reconcile a female ruler, in her own right, with titles and authority that throughout Europe were almost exclusively the provenance of males.<sup>144</sup> Sources do not, however, question her actual and perceived authority, even when they question her gender's ability to rule, or her politics.

Even those writing for anti-matildine purposes did not necessarily adopt a stance opposed to female rule, as long as female rulers displayed manly spirits. Instead, they accused Matilda of giving in to the natural faults of her sex. As discussed in Chapter 1, women were considered to be ruled by a lust that was more difficult to control than a man's. By the time that Matilda came to power the beliefs in the natural faults and weaknesses of the female sex were well entrenched through cultural and religious norms. Such beliefs, in conjunction with powerful men wanting to jealously guard their authority, led many to question, at least in writing, the ability of a female to rule. Hence, a woman was considered and portrayed fit to rule only if she displayed manly strength and cognitive ability.

It is significant, then, that even among supporters of Henry IV contemporary authors did not accuse Matilda of political or military weakness. Nor did they suggest in their works that Matilda had become something other than a female or partially a man. Rather, they accused her of more typically ascribed female faults and failings, such as guile and treachery. Those who wrote against her politics cast her as a military and political opponent of the emperor worthy of consideration. This would be necessary for Henry's supporters in order not to make Henry appear weak. If they had cast Matilda as neither female nor male, if they had made her a third gender, it would have suggested weakness in the emperor's opponent and made his defeat even

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<sup>144</sup> There were certainly other exceptions to this rule. Jaeger Reynolds discusses women such as Emma and Edith of England, Adela of Blois and Sybil of Flanders; all of these women, though, they were acting as regents for their husbands or minor sons, not from ruling in their own right. Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 34.

more humiliating. After all, the Holy Roman Emperor did turn back from his siege of Rome to deal with the problems he and his troops saw in Tuscany, namely Matilda. Henry's biographers had to cast her as an opponent worthy of causing the emperor to change his military strategy. Female or not, Henry saw Matilda as a very real threat to his authority in Italy, and his biographers had to portray her that way, too. To undermine her they turned to those entrenched ideas of female faults to discredit her success. By making Matilda's faults the faults of a typical female, those writing polemics against her accused her of using female treachery to undermine the emperor, not that she had become male. "The fact that both [contemporary] authors use the masculine *dux* alongside the feminine *marchionissa* suggests that neither is troubled by the grammatical incongruence."<sup>145</sup> Her political and military authority was not questioned. If anything, her authority was acknowledged as significant enough to be challenged directly by the emperor and his armies, as well as by anti-matildine writers. Both facts reinforced her legitimacy and authority in Tuscany.

Although the idea of a female *dux* may have been acceptable to her and her contemporaries, there are indications that her sex did play a role in her political and military affairs. On her official charters Matilda wrote in her own hand a subscription that used no titles, a departure from the practices of her father and grandfather. In the only extant charter in which she did use a title for herself, she uses the male *dux*.<sup>146</sup> Her most common subscription, *Matilda dei gratia si quid est*, avoids any question of grammatical gender. Never did Matilda use the female *ducatrrix* in her charters, which leads us to believe that Matilda felt it necessary to avoid associating herself with the grammatically female role. Jaeger Reynolds' suggestion that, even if *dux* and *ducatrrix* had been largely interchangeable, they were not identical, seems reasonable

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<sup>145</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 46.

<sup>146</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 214.

because of the fact that, when Matilda did write a title for herself, she used the masculine form of the title.<sup>147</sup> Matilda and her contemporaries perceived a difference in the authority that the male and female versions of a title expressed.<sup>148</sup> Using the masculine term *dux* was more than just a title; it was a statement of authority. Matilda's use of the term was not questioned by her contemporaries as it would have been if she were grasping and not perceived to warrant such a title and claim to authority. The term both reflected her already established authority and it also reinforced the idea that she ruled in her own right, as would have a man.

Also significant in her intitulation is the fact that in 134 charters she is often referred to as the daughter of Boniface, but never as the wife of either of her two husbands, Godfrey and Welf, and as the widow of Godfrey only twice. This helped to emphasize her patrilineage and patrimony, the source of her lands and her right to rule. She did not rule as the wife or mother of another but rather as the sole heir to her father.<sup>149</sup> When her charters do mention Welf as her husband they attest to Welf's "formal outranking of his 'venerable' wife."<sup>150</sup> Welf was only able to gain the title and lands of the Margrave of Tuscany through his marriage to Matilda; he adopted the role of *dux*, supplanting her right to that title based on the fact that his sex was male. Nevertheless, his right to rule over Tuscany was only through his marriage to her. The charters reflect Welf's official outranking of Matilda, but she was still able to "make sizable donations without even the pretense of her husband's consent, suggesting that she enjoyed at least a high level of personal autonomy after her marriage, if not formal authority."<sup>151</sup> In her personal life

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<sup>147</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 216.

<sup>148</sup> This is contrary to intitulation today, at least in the United Kingdom. In the UK, for instance, Queen Elizabeth II is not referred to as king, though she holds the power of one. Prior to taking the throne she was referred to as Princess Elizabeth; though even then it was clear that she would inherit her father's role. Her husband, likewise, is referred to as the Duke of Edinburgh and not the King of England.

<sup>149</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 221.

<sup>150</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 227.

<sup>151</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 228.

and in her donations to the Church, then, Matilda was able to reject the ideal of a male head of the family. What she was not able to overcome were the larger cultural norms of the male ruler supplanting a female ruler, no matter the strength of her claim. Her resistance and continued donations to the Church, even without her husband's consent, do suggest that she did not hand over her real authority even as those writing her charters easily placed her husband at a rank above her. This was in part due to *how* she had inherited her lands – through her natal family rather than through marriage or as a mother; she was able to keep some of her real authority because she was still in some manner seen as the heir of her father. The other reason may have had to do with her relationships with various popes and Anselm of Lucca.

The idea of a spiritual family was also important in Matilda's use of authority. Her biographer, Donizo, as well as the biographers of Anselm of Lucca, portray "her as the spiritual daughter of Gregory VII and Anselm of Lucca, and even as Anselm's spiritual 'wife.'"<sup>152</sup> Anselm's hagiographers placed Matilda into a subservient role to the man they were attempting to get canonized, but they did not question her real authority.<sup>153</sup> One of the biographers actually argued for the naturalness of female rule by placing her in the role of daughter and wife.<sup>154</sup> They fully accepted her role as ruler of Tuscany and her ability to enforce her rule through military means.

It is also possible, given the context of the Investiture Controversy<sup>155</sup> that "a partisan of the Gregorian faction arguing for the independence of the Church from imperial infringement

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<sup>152</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 66.

<sup>153</sup> Most notably Ranger of Lucca and Pseudo-Bardo both of whom were writing on behalf of Anselm as a candidate for canonization and not on behalf of Matilda.

<sup>154</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 70.

<sup>155</sup> The Investiture Controversy was a conflict between various Holy Roman Emperors and Popes. In earlier centuries, when the papacy had considerably less power, emperors had assumed the role of investing various clergy within their realm. Henry IV continued this tradition as his ancestors had. However, beginning with Gregory

may well have been attracted to the idea of a secular prince – male or female – acting at the behest of a reform-minded bishop.”<sup>156</sup> This, again, reflects her right to rule and her authority in Tuscany in part because Anselm’s hagiographer would not have focused so much on Matilda if she had been merely an insignificant female ruler. Anselm’s influence over Matilda is almost certainly exaggerated in the *Life of Anselm*, similar to what we can see in later centuries with Umiliana and Villana’s respective *vitae*. Overall, however, as Jaeger-Reynolds argues:

Even those authors who appear unsure as to whether or not Matilda officially possessed the same status as her male ancestors betray little doubt that she ruled in her own right over her family’s domains – and that she ‘administered the office of the dukes.’ Even her enemies – especially her enemies – claimed that she controlled vast domains and influenced the decisive events of her day. That she did so on her own, rather than as a wife, widow, or mother to a ruler of Tuscany, does not appear to have scandalized those contemporaries who wrote about her.<sup>157</sup>

Certainly Matilda’s relationships with Anselm of Lucca and various popes should not be downplayed too much. She looked to these men as spiritual fathers. She subjected herself spiritually to them at the same time that she loyally protected them through her military action.

In 1074 Matilda wrote to Gregory explaining her desire to remove herself from the world in the interest of the salvation of her soul. Her relationship with her husband Godfrey was very strained and she wanted to remove herself from the obligations of her marriage and of her public life. Perhaps for self-preservation reasons Gregory replied to her that “you should not abandon those [to whom you belong] in order that you may devote yourself solely to the salvation of your own soul.”<sup>158</sup> He did advise her on how to accept this public role – through prayer to the Virgin

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VII the Church had enough authority to begin questioning this practice and putting sanctions on those who broke it. There was no long drawn-out warfare, but there were intervals where military action was used. The Controversy continued well past the lifetimes of both Gregory VII and Henry IV.

<sup>156</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 70.

<sup>157</sup> Jaeger Reynolds, *Nobilissima Dux*, 73.

<sup>158</sup> Cowdrey, H.E.J., *The Register of Pope Gregory VII 1073-1085: An English Translation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.

and partaking of daily communion basis – however, in Gregory’s view, her control of Northern Italy was too important for her to abandon.

In 1075 Matilda wrote again to Gregory VII about her strained relationship with Godfrey and asked for help in extricating herself from the marriage. Gregory VII replied, “Truly if you could enter some pact with him which did not depart from the sanction of holy fathers, that seems praiseworthy to us; if not, we desire to make clear to you that the charity by which God joined us can in no way be dissolved or diminished.”<sup>159</sup> In a very paternal manner, Gregory VII explained to Matilda that he would like to see her happily settled, but that there was nothing that he or she could do to dissolve the marriage. This reflects the reforms of the Church that Gregory VII had been establishing and the Church’s consequent control over marriage. After Gregory VII’s death Matilda continued to seek the guidance of successive popes in matters that ranged from the spiritual to the very practical.

In a personal letter to Pope Paschal, Gregory’s successor, Matilda wrote, “To the most holy and venerable father and lord in Christ, Paschal, Bishop of the prime see: from Matilda, by the grace of God marchioness, sending if it is worth anything, the allegiance of total subjection.”<sup>160</sup> In these personal letters she wrote in support of Anselm of Canterbury, but her opinion of herself as, at least, spiritually subject to the pope, is obvious. She asks, “of your paternity we particularly entreat your clemency...”<sup>161</sup> This letter certainly exhibits the approach of a supplicant, but on some level Matilda appears to have seen Paschal as a father. This was not unusual in religious circles, but it does serve to reinforce the idea that Matilda viewed Paschal

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<sup>159</sup> *Register Gregors VII, MGH, EpSel*, ed. Erich Caspar, ep.3.5 Accessed in translation at <http://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/woman/29.html#letterslist>

<sup>160</sup> *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi, Opera Omnia*, ed. F.S. Schmitt (Edinburg: T. Nelson, 1946-63), ep. 35, 5.289-90; translation and annotation from *The Letters of Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, trans. Walter Fröhlich, *Cistercian Studies* 142, 3v (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990-94), 3.83-84. Accessed in translation at <http://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/woman/29.html#letterslist>

<sup>161</sup> *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi*

and, prior to him, Gregory, as a spiritual father. She received praise in return, showing Paschal's belief, like Gregory VII's before him, in her status and authority.

The claims of various contemporary authors that Matilda looked to Gregory as a father, both spiritually and otherwise, then, certainly appear to be reasonable. This paternal relationship continued between Matilda and Gregory's successors, as well, perhaps indicating her own reservations about being a female ruler. If she had hesitations about being a female ruler she could not turn to the emperor, the only secular ruler who exceeded her in authority, for reassurance. At the same time that she wielded such considerable authority she was still a female subject to males. For her the only alternative source of support was her allies, the popes, who could help to resolve some of the reservations she might have had about her role as ruler of Tuscany.

In turn, the popes also relied heavily on Matilda because of the authority, both political and military, that she wielded on the peninsula. They encouraged and guided her in their responses to her more existential questions, and they turned to her for military might, using her loyalty to the Church to defend the papacy's right to rule over Christendom. By turning to her as the military arm of their various religious reforms, they put the safety of the papacy in her hands and authority.

Matilda was certainly an anomaly. Her intitulation using the masculine form of the title *dux* shows this ambiguity in regards to her title and where she was perceived to belong among the landed lords of Europe. However, the real power that she held over her lands and castles was not questioned, by supporters or detractors, and this was to be vitally important as she became the military arm, and sometimes sole supporter, of the popes in Rome. While Anselm's biographers insisted that she was acting under his direction, the reality was that it was not

Anselm listed on official charters of Tuscany. She may very well have been accepting his guidance, but all official power still resided within Matilda alone. The control that Matilda held in the Tuscan margrivate is displayed through her military exploits against the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV.

Valerie Eads argues that “medieval warfare is now understood [by historians] as a warfare of position ... based on the possession of fortified positions on which operations in the surrounding countryside can be based.”<sup>162</sup> Assuming that both of these statements are true, Matilda was in a singularly unique position. Matilda most likely used mercenaries as troops because most of Tuscany, with the exception of the city of Florence, supported the emperor, forcing her to find others who would fight against the emperor. Her use of mercenaries reflects the common medieval practice of buying forces, but it also indicates her firm control, economically and politically, over her revenue producing castles.<sup>163</sup> Her position allowed her to overcome Henry mostly by using tactics that did not involve much direct battle.

There was no need for her to engage in battle, risking the lives of her soldiers and incurring other casualties of war, when other effective tactics were available. Subterfuge tactics such as interrupting supply and communication lines likely were more effective than open battle because the emperor’s forces greatly outnumbered her own. Although Matilda possessed revenue enough to hire troops, it would have required a significantly greater expenditure to attempt to outmatch the emperor in numbers than it did to employ more subtle tactics, and it appears that she never intended to attempt to amass troops sufficient to meet Henry VI’s military in the open field. Matilda used the revenue of her fortresses to pay for mercenary troops who

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<sup>162</sup> Eads, *Mighty in War*, 208.

<sup>163</sup> Eads, *Mighty in War*, 123-126.

harried the emperor's forces and blocked them from enjoying easy access between Germany and Italy. She cut his lines of communication, purposefully making herself his main threat and target. Her lack of engagement in open battles is not an indication of her inability to make war on a military opponent, as some military historians might suggest. Rather, it shows that Matilda had training in military tactics and used those tactics to her advantage.

“Matilda of Tuscany is one of the very few women whose place in history is that of a military power.”<sup>164</sup> This “warfare of position” allowed her to provide protection to Gregorian supporters by channeling money and information to the pope. She was also able to conduct offensive activities, from a militarily disadvantaged position, against Henry VI, forcing him to lift his siege of Rome to deal with her.<sup>165</sup> Positioning herself as Henry IV's target was no accident. By distracting him from his siege of Rome she was splitting his attention and forces, keeping him unsettled. This reinforces the idea posited earlier that contemporaries saw her as a legitimate and authoritative ruler. The emperor's troops even urged him to turn back to deal with her; it was not just chroniclers who perceived that she really did solidly control Northern Italy; Henry's troops did, as well. By turning away from his siege of Rome, Henry confirmed the authority and threat, political and military, that Matilda posed.

Even after Henry officially divested Matilda of her titles and lands in 1081 he was not able to remove her ability to oppose him.<sup>166</sup> She had been stripped of her titles by the emperor, but she fought his every attempt to remove her lands and castles from her because he realized that her continued stream of revenue was what made her such a threat to his activities in Italy. The emperor had revoked her titles to reduce her authority in Northern Italy, and he had taken

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<sup>164</sup> Eads, *Mighty in War*, 204.

<sup>165</sup> Eads, *Mighty in War*, 25.

<sup>166</sup> Eads, *Mighty in War*, 123.

cities and castles from her. However, the failure of his attempt to weaken her is evidenced by the fact that she still controlled enough to pay for mercenary troops, and Henry realized that to really cripple her ability to oppose him he would have to forcibly take her castles from her.

The second wave of fighting between Matilda and the emperor, after the death of Gregory VII, was directly aimed at Matilda and her lands, again reflecting Henry's knowledge that warfare was one of position. He had to remove her from that position. Henry and his troops saw her as a major threat, leading them to direct military actions against her strongholds, which reflects of her real and threatening authority.

Henry proceeded in a methodical and effective manner, pushing her back city by city and castle by castle into the mountains. Then a combination of weather, the terrain, and Matilda's vigilance inflicted on him a defeat from which his prestige never recovered.<sup>167</sup>

Matilda was able to hold back the Holy Roman Emperor from taking her lands and from permanently establishing an anti-pope. In so doing Matilda militarily humiliated the most powerful secular authority in Europe.

The one direct battle in which Matilda did participate was calculated to gain her almost certain success. The battle of Sorbara, late in her military career, was a dawn raid on a sleeping camp. Although Matilda did not often engage Henry because he had troops in far superior numbers, she did not hesitate to attack when Henry's encamped troops had let down their guard. This indicates that she was willing to fight when the opportunity came. For the element of surprise to work in this instance Matilda had to work decisively and quickly to attack the encamped soldiers without their having been alerted to her intentions. She used sound military skill and tactics to decisively defeat the emperor, which reflects her still considerable authority of

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<sup>167</sup> Eads, *Mighty in War*, 202.

which the emperor had long been afraid. This demonstrates that she was pragmatic in her decision to enter into battle and that she did not waste the lives of her troops needlessly. She avoided direct conflict with Henry when, given his greater numbers, heavy losses on her side were likely and victory was nearly impossible.

Matilda's military defeat of the emperor makes her especially unique among medieval women who wielded authority. After she defeated the emperor at Sorbara and he consequently retreated back to Germany, her reign continued well into her 70s and was thereafter relatively peaceful and prosperous. Having defeated and crippled the Holy Roman Emperor, she was able to regain all of her lands in Tuscany and continued to maintain her authority until her death in 1115 A.D. She had defeated and pushed back the emperor by using military tactics that did not include open battle but instead relied on her command of castles and her ability to hold those castles from being forcibly removed from her control.

Matilda broke or questioned many of the social norms relating to the place of women within political and military circles. However, the fact that she was able to wield authority, reflects the fact that, although social norms found her to be an oddity, at no time was she directly forced out of her offices because of her gender. Through her exceptional role as a woman of authority historians can see conflicting ideas about where females belonged and where they were believed that they should belong, socially, in the future.

Certainly none of the other women that this thesis addresses ever would, or could, reach such heights or real political and military authority as did Matilda. That fact alone does not signify the decreased status and role of women in Florence that did occur over the subsequent centuries. What does indicate changing statuses were laws that specifically addressed those statuses and roles. Also vitally important is the fact that, after Matilda's death, there was no

longer one elite family, like Matilda's, that enjoyed authority in Northern Italy. Upon Matilda's death, because she had no heir, she donated all of her worldly goods and lands to the Church. Certainly this influenced the rise of city-states in Northern Italy: had the march survived and continued to rule, it would have been significantly more difficult for city states to become as powerful in Northern Italy as they actually did. After Matilda's death, by law women were no longer able to hold political office, and as elite women they were increasingly limited to the public spaces in which they could be honorably seen. The new republican ideals of the city-state focused on a collective body of male citizens rather than a single ruling family; this reduced the ability of women to influence politics because their husbands, fathers, or sons were now part of a much larger group rather than any of them constituting a single ruler over a given city. Matilda's death and the rise of communes in Northern Italy certainly influenced how ideas of republicanism developed in Florence.

As an example of the rise of republican ideals within Florence, Umiliana, of the powerful and rich Cerchi family of Florence, certainly benefited from the dissolution of the march; its disappearance allowed families like hers to rise and become extraordinarily wealthy on a smaller political field within the city. The rise of the Florentine commune emphasized the collective role of wealthy male citizens over all others, including their female family members.

### *Beata Umiliana*

Umiliana's life, described in Chapter 2, describes her spiritual influence on other tertiary women within the city. Her contacts with religious men were also an important aspect of her life. Her hagiographer wrote her *vita* with the intent of increasing the popularity of her cult so that she could be elevated to the status of sainthood. Umiliana acted in ways that rejected patriarchal structures, but to a much lesser degree than Matilda. Rather than influencing politics

or using military force, Umiliana was able to directly influence a very different group of people than was Matilda, by using spiritual authority. She was able to stay in her family's tower, to some degree against her father's will, because the commune sought to keep its women safe. This, if anything, indicates that women were excluded so much from business or other ways of making a living that they had to be protected from destitution. Her hagiographer, Vito of Cortona, used her attempts to reject her father's wishes as evidence of her devotion to a holy and religious life.

Umiliana de' Cerchi converted "as if inspired by God, a month after she went to her husband she began to reject the pomp and adornments of the world."<sup>168</sup> Vito of Cortona attributes this to her piety and desire to serve God fully, but the timing makes one wonder – did something happen in the month immediately after her marriage that upset her or made her feel that she wanted to reject worldly things? From the hagiography it is impossible to tell, given that the purpose of the text was to emphasize her piety and religiosity. This episode does fall within religious hagiographic stylized notions of a saint-like woman, but the possibility remains that, if the story itself is accurate, that something less religious and more traumatically human happened.

Vito of Cortona mentions that "the fine clothes which she wore out of respect for her husband were a source not of joy but of torment to her."<sup>169</sup> The outward appearance of one's wife, then, seems to have influenced the honor she was perceived to bring to the family, and Umiliana was not willing or able to completely reject that norm, though she certainly did her best to circumvent it by cutting the clothes she received into shorter pieces, or by taking them in and using the excess cloth to donate to the poor. This idea that one's wife could bring honor or dishonor to a family may have also influenced the threats that her husband made against her and

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<sup>168</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 98.

<sup>169</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 98.

the ill treatment that Vito of Cortona claims she received from him. If, as Vito of Cortona states, she was “sometimes beaten because of the works of piety with which she humbly served the needy,”<sup>170</sup> it is perhaps more realistic to attribute her husband’s presumed beatings of Umiliana to the dishonor that she may have brought to the family by being out all night distributing the family’s clothes and food to the poor. She was limited in her actions by her husband and his family, but she did still manage to sneak out into public, masculine spaces. Thereby she transgressed civic laws and civil order, which would have been dishonorable to her husband and his family. The inability to control a woman of their family reflected directly on them and potential business partners or political allies would have seen that as a family to avoid. Yet, Umiliana did manage to enter public spaces in the city.

In regards to Umiliana’s ability to travel in the streets of Florence, her *vita* suggests that she was able to go into the streets to feed the poor and to attend mass and other religious services. “She did not fear foul weather, not heat, not rain, but conscientiously and with eagerness of spirit assiduously visited holy places.”<sup>171</sup> Umiliana, like women of this time and place generally, was permitted to attend religious services. However, her actions exceeded such permission, especially her donations to the poor. Perhaps those types of actions, too, were acceptable? Her giving them bits of her own personal clothing seems likely to have been frowned upon at least by her husband and his family.

After Umiliana returned to her father’s home her situation, financially and socially, had shifted because her marital status had changed. She was now a widow rather than a wife, giving her more autonomy, in part because she no longer had children for whom she would have needed to care; though she answered to her natal family, that relationship was different than when she

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<sup>170</sup> Webb, “Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” 100.

<sup>171</sup> Webb, “Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” 104.

had been an unmarried, and presumably virgin, daughter. Her travel into the public spaces of the city continued.

Vito of Cortona describes her tower home as a prison and asks “what did she lack of the monastic life, who lived in such continuous silence and observance?”<sup>172</sup> In other passages he relates that she made visits to convents. Priests and friars minor visited her in her tower cell, and at least one of her two daughters came to visit her. The fact that such people did visit her in her tower suggests that Vito of Cortona’s claim that her home was as a prison to her should not be taken literally. Although she spent almost all of her time in prayer and contemplation, if we take her hagiography at face value, then, the reality was that she often spoke with visitors and friends.

The evidence suggests, then, that even if Umiliana perceived her tower cell as a prison, she was able to both receive visitors and go out into the streets, at the very least, for the purpose of attending religious services. Due to her poverty, her father having revoked her dowry, she was no longer able to give to the poor as she once had, at which point she turned to devote a greater deal of time to prayer and devotion, which presumably did reduce the amount of time that she actively spent in the streets of Florence.<sup>173</sup> It seems that at this point her status had shifted again, now from widow to holy woman. This is reflected in her having asked her companions not to refer to her by her magnate family’s last name, Cerchi, but by some other name that her hagiographer does not provide to his readers. The changing of a name for a female has long been significant: it has been used, and is still used, to indicate the shift from single status to married status. In this case it may refer to a shift, at least temporarily, from magnate status to the status of a holy woman. It almost certainly reflects a distinction in significance between the two names.

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<sup>172</sup> Webb, “Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” 106.

<sup>173</sup> Webb, “Umiliana de’ Cerchi,” 105.

Another indication that she had taken on the role of a holy woman is found through her devotions and her rejection of worldly concerns. Vito of Cortona mentions a time after her move to her family's tower in which the devil came to tempt her away from her devotions. This temptation, like others she experienced, was based upon worldly concerns, this one particularly political in nature. The heightened fighting between the Guelf faction and the Ghibelline faction within the city had reached its apex during her lifetime, while she was "imprisoned" in her tower. The devil described to her how machines were "set up to propel stones at towers" and said, "[L]ook, the whole city is destroyed and consumed by fire, and the fire is getting close to your house."<sup>174</sup> Vito of Cortona describes how she resisted the temptation to look and continued her prayers, both an assertion and an example of her spiritual devotion. By refusing to give in to worldly concerns Umiliana had gained status as a holy woman.

At the same time, it is possible that with this tale Vito of Cortona was providing the imagery of the attack on the towers in the city to describe Umiliana's refusal to give in to her father's wishes for her to give up chastity and remarry, again reinforcing the import of her spiritual authority and devotion. This reading is suggested by the fact that after her death she appeared in visions to her friends crowned with the diadem of virginity, though, of course, because of her first marriage she was no longer a physical virgin at the time of her death. Rather, the point was that beginning with her widowhood she carefully guarded her chastity at the same time that she was rejecting other worldly concerns. The political realities of the city during the time that Umiliana devoted herself to a chaste and religious life is important to consider as they certainly influenced the types of worldly concerns that she chose to ignore. Anna Benvenuti-Papi discusses the political implications of both Umiliana's life and her posthumous cult.

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<sup>174</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 111.

Benvenuti-Papi discusses how Umiliana's hagiography was able to help dispel political tensions within the city by establishing her as an important cultural figure.<sup>175</sup> When the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II took over the city in 1246, it was only a few months later that Umiliana died following a long period of suffering.<sup>176</sup> It was Frederick's army that was propelling projectiles into the city and creating havoc when the devil tempted her to look out her window. When Frederick II took over the city, many citizens were imprisoned because of their affiliation with the pope and his legates, and these men prayed, though the intercession of Umiliana, that they be freed from the prison of the *podestá*. Her miraculous intercession allowed many of these men to escape and evade capture. It serves as more evidence of her spiritual authority by divine intervention through her.

Questa prova della Potenza intermediatrice di Umiliana sarebbe stata raccolta ed inserta nei miracoli da frate Ippolito, solo nel 1249, ma i testimoni che giurarono sulla assoluta attendibilita` del fatto, udito dalla stessa bocca del nunzio, collocarono cronologicamente l'evento con circostanziata chiarezza.<sup>177</sup>

[This proof of the intermediary power of Umiliana would be collected and inserted into miracles by Fra. Ippolito in 1249, but witnesses swore on the absolute attendability of the facts; hearing the same as if from the *nuncio*, they placed the events chronologically with detailed clarity.]

In 1249 Fra Ippolito, a local Franciscan monk, began collecting testimonies of miracles at her tomb or that had occurred through her mediation. Her miracles were often related to politics in the city, despite the fact that she had rejected such concerns while she was alive. Using her *vita* to expand her cult also allowed a large variety of citizens, no matter their political faction, to share something religious and important in common – an intercessor for and from the city.

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<sup>175</sup> Anna Benvenuti-Papi, "In castro poenitentiae" : santità e società femminile nell'Italia medievale, (Herder, Roma), 1990, 77.

<sup>176</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, "In castro poenitentiae," 81.

<sup>177</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, "In castro poenitentiae," 80.

Benvenuti-Papi also argues that her cult connected her faithful, both those of her present and future, around her example of piety and served to blur the lines between the Guelf and the Ghibelline.<sup>178</sup> Umiliana's posthumous political power was not that something she had intended; nor did it arise through her active participation in politics; rather, her hagiography was used posthumously as a tool to encourage unity within the city at very tense political moments.

Her gender certainly played more of a role in her life than it did in Matilda's. While Matilda had to decide on grammatically masculine or feminine titles to indicate her level of power, Umiliana was more concerned with the actual authority held over her by male family members. While evidence of the relationship between Matilda and her father Boniface is scarce, he did indicate her as his sole heir to his patrimonial lands in Tuscany, which was certainly not the case for Umiliana. Matilda did have to contend with ideas about a female's subservience to her husband, as seen in the charter mentioned above in which her husband is given spatial precedence over her, while Umiliana, comparatively, was much more under the control of her male family members. Her husband apparently had the right to beat her, because Vito of Cortona's accusation that her husband did so does not seem to have been a contentious point among contemporaries. When her husband died Umiliana stayed in his home for a while, but then she returned to her father's house, forced to give up her two daughters to their father's family, to which they belonged. She had no choice in the matter; she was forced to follow the dictates of the lineage. At no point in her hagiography does it suggest that she ever questioned this practice. Umiliana returned to the *patria potestas*, power of the father, of her natal family. There was no point during which she was a free woman, widow or not.

Her lack of choice is displayed in the cajoling of and threats against Umiliana by her family in their attempts to force her to remarry. According to Vito of Cortona, she resisted the

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<sup>178</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, "In castro poenitentiae," 82.

pressure to remarry not only because of her own desire for continence but also by her placing of herself in the care of the Mother Mary.<sup>179</sup> As Umiliana was a widow of only 22 years old, her resistance was problematic for her family because by remarrying she could forge a new alliance with another powerful family and thereby increase its prestige and wealth. Contarily, by living in the house but producing no revenue or political benefit, she was perceived as a burden, and likely this was the reason for her father's having revoked her dowry.<sup>180</sup>

Umiliana's refusal to remarry reinforces the idea posed earlier that something in her first month of marriage had in some way traumatized, her causing her to be so averse to remarriage that she would accept near-destitute poverty, as suggested by her hagiographer, as a better alternative. What allowed her to make this choice, in part, was the fact that, though her dowry was revoked, she was permitted room within the family home, keeping her from being as destitute as the other poor of Florence. Her economic background gave her freedom in that she did not have to work to be sheltered or fed, and that must have affected positively her ability to be a pious and devout woman.

Umiliana's saintly nature was important to the creation of and devotion to her cult. After her death, when both secular and religious authorities used her hagiography to bring socio-political unity to Florence, her spiritual authority increased within the city and she became a useful tool for her natal family. She was held up by Franciscans, and later by her familial descendents, as a model of piety in the world – an example that all could follow, no matter the realities of their lives, that all could serve God.<sup>181</sup> That Umiliana's *vita* was used as recourse for a city divided seems relatively reasonable. As a woman she was conceived as being an intermediary and reconciler. By promoting the example of a holy woman from the city, civil

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<sup>179</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 102.

<sup>180</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 103.

<sup>181</sup> Benvenuti-Papi, "In castro poenitentiae," 72.

authorities were able to use her as a symbol of Florentine piety. That helps to explain why her cult lasted and even grew in importance after her death. Her miracles also pointed to other ideals that the Church was promoting among its faithful. By donating money to pay for her tomb's upkeep of her tomb, masses to be said in her name, and through their sponsorship of the creation of her hagiography and the collection of memories of her by her friends, her descendents helped to keep her cult alive and visible.

Umiliana was said to have appeared to friends of hers after her death. In these appearances Umiliana was clad in white, which Vito of Cortona explains was a sign of her humility, but, most importantly, she was crowned with a double diadem. When in such a vision Umiliana was asked what the double diadem signified, she, incorporeal, replied that it was the crown of virginity – a gift from God “because of the sorrow which I have always borne in my heart for the virginity which I lost through matrimony...[the other] has been given me because of my faithful chastity which I preserved inviolate for my Lord.”<sup>182</sup> Whatever trauma Umiliana might have experienced in her first month of marriage, perhaps a sexual trauma of some nature, her insistence on remaining chaste and not remarrying gained her a double crown of virginity in heaven. The idea that virginity and chastity were reflections of one's devotion to God was strong well before Umiliana's lifetime, and her hagiography demonstrates that this idea remained powerful in and after her time. By remaining chaste she proved that she was not a simple ordinary female who could not control her lust; she was one of the exceptional ones who resisted all temptation and devoted herself thoroughly to God.<sup>183</sup>

In some miraculous visions Mary Magdalen, who perhaps is, according to modern sensibilities, an odd figure to represent virginity and chastity appeared alongside Umiliana. By

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<sup>182</sup> Webb, “Umiliana de' Cerchi”, 139.

<sup>183</sup> Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 34.

the thirteenth century, thinking about Mary Magdalen had placed her among the chorus of virgins.<sup>184</sup> Through a “combination of divine love and exemplary penance Mary Magdalen was transmuted from an ordinary and sullied cooking pot into a sacred vessel of the Lord’s altar.”<sup>185</sup> Mary Magdalen’s appearance in visions alongside Umiliana, then, indicates the very great level of Umiliana’s devotion and penance that allowed her to regain her virginity. The use of Mary Magdalen also creates a connection in terms of their spiritual authority. Through her connection with Mary Magdalen, Umiliana was portrayed to be similar to her and thus gained, through the likeness, some of the same religious authority that Mary represented.

Katherine L. Jansen describes how a distinction came to be made between virginity of the body and virginity of the mind.<sup>186</sup> Naturally a woman cannot gain physical virginity once it has been lost. In the Middle Ages, however, a woman was able to regain “mental virginity” through piety and devotion, at which point a female might be granted the crown of virginity in heaven, as in this case. To regain this “mental virginity” one needed very great contemplative powers; this idea also indicated the “restorative and therapeutic powers of penance.”<sup>187</sup> These visions, then, helped to cement in the minds of female Florentines that, through a woman’s acting out true penance and continence in one’s worldly life she could be restored to “mental virginity” and thereby gain the highest rewards in heaven. Umiliana, by remaining chaste in her widowhood, regained virginity of the mind which further reinforced her sanctity. The ideal of “mental virginity” certainly also appealed to and was influential with Villana dei Botti a century later.

Umiliana represented many things. She was a woman from a magnate family and she was a holy woman. She was also a married and then a widowed woman who regained her

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<sup>184</sup> Katherine L. Jansen, “Like a Virgin: The Meaning of the Magdalen for Female Penitents of Later Medieval Italy” in *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, Vol. 45 (2000), 132.

<sup>185</sup> Jansen, “Like a Virgin,” 134.

<sup>186</sup> Jansen, “Like a Virgin,” 143.

<sup>187</sup> Jansen, “Like a Virgin,” 139, 141.

“mental virginity” through piety and devotion. Finally, she was a woman around whom a city could gather religiously in an attempt to ease political infighting. All of these roles speak to the place of women within Florentine society in the thirteenth century. Umiliana had fulfilled her duties to her family by marrying and having children. However, when her husband died, she refused to remarry, which was in keeping with the preferences of the Church and which in later centuries it would encourage explicitly. After her death she participated in politics in the only manner that was acceptable, through divine intercession and as a mediator. Umiliana’s *vita* presents her as a perfect holy woman, but it indicates the conflicting roles and messages that women were being given by different parts of society. Conflicting messages would not disappear in the thirteenth century, and women would continue to be caught between secular requirements of them, familial desires, and the requests and suggestions of the Church. The life of Villana dei Botti reflects many of the same contradictions does the life of Umiliana.

#### Villana: Preacher and Prophetess

As noted in Chapter 1, as a young woman Villana had attempted to avoid marriage by running away. After her marriage she enjoyed a conjugal relationship with her husband, until the fateful night when she saw the demon in the mirror, which indicated to her her inner darkness brought by her love of worldly goods. Like Umiliana, the conflicting interests of family and Church are evident in her *vita*. As a young child she had wished to serve God, but those yearnings faded when she came to enjoy the worldly. She turned back to God when she realized what she had done to her soul when she appeared to herself in a mirror as a demon. She had fought against the desires of her father that she be a “useful” woman by getting married to help to enhance the status of her lineage, so when she did then give in and marry, she sinned because she had turned away from God.

Villana's *vita*, like Umiliana's and others, was also written for the instruction of the faithful.<sup>188</sup> While her *vita* displays many of the same characteristics of Umiliana's – torment by the devil, fasting almost constantly, charity to the poor, etc - two major differences stand out with respect to her mortification and her public presence.

First, Villana's mortification of her body went well beyond extreme fasting.

Si cinse sulla nuda carne, sul petto, una zona di ferro, che tanto tenacemente le aderì, da non potergliela togliere dopo morta che strappandole la carne.<sup>189</sup>

[She put on her nude flesh, her chest, a strip of iron, which adhered so tenaciously that none were able to remove it after her death without tearing her flesh]

From Villana's example, we then know that by this period even a woman of the third order had come to use the cilice, an item one wore and was intended to create discomfort.<sup>190</sup> This development can be explained, in part, by the context of the Black Death. Villana and other survivors of the 1348 plague constituted only 10% of the city's former population. The "Arm of God" was still stretched out because sinners had not reformed. Consequently, bodily mortification was used as an attempt to rectify that situation, to literally whip all sinners into a more wholesome life.<sup>191</sup> The Black Death certainly affected Villana's turn to a more religious life and the type of asceticism that she practiced. Though Umiliana also self-mortified, it was done with more makeshift items like bunches of sharp twigs rather than with an iron cilice.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Chiara Frugoni, "Female Mystics, Visions, and Iconography" in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi eds, Margery J. Schneider trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 158.

<sup>189</sup> Orlandi, *La Beata Villana*, 59.

<sup>190</sup> The cilice has taken a number of forms over the centuries, originally it was a hair shirt that was intended to cause discomfort as a sign of repentance. Villana's cilice included some form of iron component, likely spikes that, when the cilice was tightened, drove themselves into the skin increasing the pain and, by extension, the repentance and piety.

<sup>191</sup> Cohn, *Texts in Translation*, 326-27

<sup>192</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 119.

The second major difference between Umiliana's and Villana's examples is Villana's move into public spaces. A female's enclosure was "essential to ensure the honor and virtue of the women and their families."<sup>193</sup> This applied to women of upper classes but not to women of the lowest classes. Perhaps this is why, a century earlier, Umiliana had asked her friends not to use her name when they were walking in public;<sup>194</sup> despite the fact that she had been partially estranged from her family, it seems reasonable that her request to be called something else only in public might suggest that she did not want to bring dishonor to her family. Villana either had no such concerns or rejected them because she felt that, after having once turned away from God, she could no longer resist his calling.

It is difficult to discern how her husband reacted to her re-conversion, because he is hardly mentioned in her *vita*, except to say that she married at around the age of 16 or 17 and that she enjoyed his marital embraces. Yet, at the time of her re-conversion she was not a widow, leading the modern reader to either believe that her husband was not a significant actor in her life or be left wondering why he is so absent from the record. That he was not significant in her life seems unreasonable, however, bearing in mind that she was under his *patria potestas*. Perhaps her husband did not object to her turn to a religious life? That also seems unlikely, considering how happy they seemed to have been when first married, attending parties in their finery. It is possible that they had a chaste marriage, although she would not have been able to reject sexual intercourse with her husband if he had desired it.<sup>195</sup> Whatever the case, the scant evidence does not address this glaring absence of her husband from her life after her re-conversion. It seems likely that her husband may have been fine with most of her religious activity that involved her

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<sup>193</sup> Weddle, "Women's Place in the Family and the Convent," 64.

<sup>194</sup> Webb, "Umiliana de' Cerchi," 120.

<sup>195</sup> Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 48.

attending mass and perhaps even helping the poor. However, her preaching certainly would have upset her in-laws and the civic authorities.

Villana's preaching in the *piazza* of Santa Maria Novella challenged the idea that women were allowed only in the private spaces of the city. However, much of the reason for keeping women inside was because they were considered "vain and fickle, and the source of all great dishonor, shame, sin, and expense."<sup>196</sup> It is possible that her life as a religious woman gave her some insulation against this particular restriction. Scholars have argued that women became more enclosed and more restricted as the centuries during which these same women lived in Florence. This paper's intent is not to disagree with those claims, but how does one rectify the existence of Villana in the public, and therefore political, places in the city? In those places she was not only being seen by many in the public, but also actively preaching, challenging contemporary ideas of what spaces were acceptable for women. In this sense Villana stands out among her female contemporaries.

Weddle describes how unmarried girls were supposed to be locked up in a "hidden and honest place" so that they [would] be 'acceptable to God and to their husbands, and to other people with whom they converse.'<sup>197</sup> Lynn Marie Laufenberg also discusses briefly how "Florentine laws forbade women to enter most civic buildings, such as the Palazzo Signoria. They were only admitted to the judicial palace of the *podestá* if they were to be tortured."<sup>198</sup> This exclusion from civic buildings meant that they "conducted any legal business, such as

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<sup>196</sup> Weddle, "Women's Place in the Family and the Convent," 64.

<sup>197</sup> Weddle, "Women's Place in the Family and the Convent," 64.

<sup>198</sup> Laufenberg, "The Long Arm of the Florentine Law, Two Texts (1343, 1345) in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, Katherine L. Jansen, Joanna Drell, and Frances Andrews eds., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 199.

lodging accusations, testifying, or delivering confessions, with the notary at the front doors of the palace.”<sup>199</sup>

Seating in the city during the fourteenth century may help to reflect the significance of Villana’s public preaching, a practice in which it was dangerous for not only women but also any unordained individual to engage. Benches around the city were an important element of civic life. Yvonne Elet argues that women of status would have never used the benches around the city, while it is possible that lower class women used them illegally.<sup>200</sup> Seating in public areas was “used to distinguish different levels of citizenry...it was the custom of the city for ordinary citizens to be seated on the ground on rush mats, while knights and doctors were seated on benches.”<sup>201</sup> At no time, it appears, was it appropriate for women to sit on these benches in the public sphere.

These scholars’ arguments make Villana’s preaching in the *piazza* of Santa Maria Novella appear to be even more striking – she was likely speaking to an audience of the poor, both men and women, but also to rich males who were sitting on the benches in these public and political areas while they discussed communal business. She violated cultural norms that expressed a loss of honor for a family who did not keep an elite woman from the public spaces in the city. She also potentially dishonored her husband’s family even more by preaching and prophesying in public. By transgressing the accepted and normal order she was rejecting ideas related to the place of females within Florentine society; but we must note that, by using her status as a holy woman to carry out these acts she upset civic authorities less than she did her own family.

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<sup>199</sup> Laufenberg, “The Long Arm”, 199.

<sup>200</sup> Elet, “Seats of Power,” 451

<sup>201</sup> Elet, “Seats of Power,” 449.

Her *vita* relates that she was concerned with being considered *pazza* (crazy) for preaching in the streets. However, after she preached a prophecy and it then came true, she seems not to have had a problem with citizens being upset at her presence.<sup>202</sup> We are not told what her first prophecy was, but her hagiography says that her prognostication came to pass and that this gained her significant fame as a prophetess and afforded her a great deal of legitimacy.<sup>203</sup> Her fame as a prophetess likely made her appearance in the streets something of an appealing figure to many middle- and lower- class people. At least, that is how her hagiographer presents her efforts. The reason for this may lie in the fact that her hagiography was attempting to publicize her cult and wished for her to be canonized; that was a role that required heroic efforts to teach others about the love of God. A woman limited to non-public spheres of the city but nonetheless occupying and preaching in them presented a problem and created a clash between the needs of the secular authorities and the requirements of canonization. The physical pain that she experienced after each episode of public preaching may be allegorical in that it might reflect the conflict between secular and Church authorities.

Regarding Villana's public role, Elizabeth Alvida Petroff argues that Villana transgressed significantly in ways that far exceeded the norms of civic sensibility. "In actuality there is only one real transgression for a woman: to go public, to be a visible, speaking, informed moral leader."<sup>204</sup> To become a saint, however, one had to be a public moral teacher. The literate woman who had a public voice was a concern to civil authorities. Consequently, contemporary hagiographers were forced to contradict themselves when recording and assessing the actions of this type of woman because such a woman had to be portrayed as a "good" woman, not as a transgressor. The fundamental conflict inherent in this situation is in the need in hagiography to

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<sup>202</sup> Orlandi, *La Beata Villana*, 63.

<sup>203</sup> Orlandi, *La Beata Villana*, 63.

<sup>204</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 176.

show that a saintly person taught while this obviously conflicted with the civic norm that women not being permitted in public spaces.<sup>205</sup> Villana was in a precarious position; should she give in again to worldly concerns by stopping her public preaching and by obeying secular law, or should she disobey the worldly and focus on the sacred? Like Umiliana a century earlier, Villana received contradictory and conflicting messages from society and the Church. Her life reflects that those forces pulled her in different directions. However, if her conversion described above is accurate she would not have desired a return to worldly concerns, and from the moment of her re-conversion she had decided to follow the recommendations of the Church.

This apparent freedom that Villana had, however, was insufficient for her. Her relatives had to prevent her from running away in her adulthood. “Although Villana’s biographer is concerned to use all the rhetoric at his disposal to create the portrait of an ideally obedient, silent, immobilized woman, he must also tell us of her frustrated attempts to become more autonomous and mobile.”<sup>206</sup> When she broke out of this pattern, by preaching in the square, she was afflicted with a long illness, which her hagiographer tells his readers, she accepted happily in a display of her spiritual devotion.<sup>207</sup> By her actions Villana was necessarily challenging public order and its perception of decency. The ways in which this reflected her status as an elite woman is unclear, but her status as a holy woman grew and expanded, in large part because of her public preaching.

The increased restrictions placed upon women in contemporary Florence are evident in Villana’s life. Her frustrated attempts to run away from her family, both in childhood and in her adult life, are used in her hagiography to display a great deal of spiritual devotion. Her *vita*, like Umiliana’s, was used as an exemplar to others; others would have read about her attempts to resist worldly temptation and the patriarchal power structures under which she lived. Her

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<sup>205</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 176-77.

<sup>206</sup> Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 176.

<sup>207</sup> Orlandi, *La Beata Villana*, 63-64.

conjugal family did restrict her movements when they refused to let her run away to a convent or elsewhere. Her public preaching was almost certainly against the will of the family and it seems reasonable that her hagiographer exaggerated how much she prophesied in public. Conversely, it is possible that because of her prophecies she had gained sufficient spiritual authority to be considered a holy woman and therefore afforded more leniency by the commune. The reason for her having been allowed to preach in public without incurring serious social sanction is unclear. Whatever the case, her hagiography portrayed her as a woman who refused to give in to power structures with which she was unhappy. Her hagiography praised her for her actions in part because she was so popular with citizens of the city; had she been less popular or disliked it seems more likely that she would have been sanctioned or reprimanded by the city.

Somehow Villana had the opportunity, even if it was far from ideal, to challenge public order. She preached in public and influenced those around her in the city through that public role that she assumed. As we shall see below, Alessandra, as the only link that her exiled sons enjoyed with the city of Florence, did not have the same option.

#### Alessandra: Mother and Confidant

Alessandra's letters to her sons provide us with a view into how she viewed her own position within society more than any documents do for any of the other women studied in this thesis. Her position as a Strozzi, her husband's lineage, was one that she fostered and promoted over any relationship she might have had with her natal family.<sup>208</sup> Alessandra, unlike Umiliana, was a slightly older widow, at twenty eight, and she had five children who survived to adulthood – her position within the Strozzi family was secure enough for her to stay to raise her sons. It is

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<sup>208</sup> Gregory, *Selected Letters*, 6. She did have correspondence with one of her brothers but he had failed in business and was destitute. Alessandra often had to provide him with assistance rather than the reverse.

also possible that she made her decision to stay with her children. Had she remarried, the children would have been expected to stay with their father's family. The decision to stay with her children was an active decision that she made, which was possible because of the survival of three sons. There were acceptable roles for widows and mothers in society; Alessandra took them much farther than most other contemporaries did or could, but she never transgressed in ways that might have influenced negatively the position of her sons politically, economically, or socially.

The type of authority, even if limited, that Alessandra's unique position as a widow and mother afforded her was bolstered by the fact that her husband's father, as well as all of his brothers, was already deceased. The only living male relatives of Matteo di Simone, her deceased husband, were cousins of his from whom Alessandra sought advice and who gave an education of their trade to her sons, but they did not enjoy the influence over her or her children that paternal uncles would have had. Her familial authority was almost unchecked, then, in comparison with contemporary widows and mothers. There were other widows in the city who stayed with their children. However, Alessandra's lack of immediate male relatives increased -- or even altogether enabled -- her authority. Alessandra was well connected to the Strozzi family, and their exile by Cosimo de' Medici created an unusual situation for her. The fact that her sons were exiled as they came of age meant that they were forced to leave the city and Alessandra was required to fill roles that otherwise she would have had no cause to have done.<sup>209</sup> This increased her influence over her sons, but it also placed her in a more non-traditional role as she attempted to have their exile lifted. This was not a normal role for a mother. Still, she could work through only written correspondence and the extended Strozzi family to have her concerns and requests placed before magistrates within the city. The same laws under which Villana lived and that

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<sup>209</sup> Crabb, *A Patrician Family*, 21, 25.

addressed the acceptable ways in which women could interact with the magistracy continued to hold true for Alessandra. Never did she cross that boundary of propriety, because to do so would have constituted for her sons a form of political suicide.

Alessandra's view of her position in society as a woman reflects contemporary social norms. The solidification of the patrilineal principle and the subordination of women to the men in their families is evident in Alessandra's letters to her sons. Alessandra was a product of her society and had fully accepted the current norms of patrilineal inheritance. When she wrote to her sons, it was their needs with which she was concerned. When her eldest son, Filippo, asked that she send her youngest son, Matteo, named after his father, to him because at thirteen he was of an age to begin learning business, she wrote to Filippo saying that she would indeed send Matteo, "seeing how much you want to take him away and make something of him, not thinking of my own comfort but of what will be useful to you, as I have always done and as I will do to the end."<sup>210</sup>

In the handful of letters to her sons that she wrote about her daughters, she was largely concerned with their dowries and other elements of their marital or reproductive status.<sup>211</sup> She also made reference to the fact that nothing could be accomplished in a household as long as marriageable daughters were present; apparently getting daughters married was both a burden and the focus of all activity until a suitable match could be made.<sup>212</sup>

The idea that female children added little to a family and were of relatively little concern is reflected in a letter written by Alessandra in December of 1499. Alessandra wrote to Filippo in anticipation of a visit to her in Florence by his father's cousin, Niccolo. Niccolo was one of her deceased husband's cousins who had taken Alessandra's sons on as apprentices in business, and

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<sup>210</sup> Gregory, *Selected Letters*, 43.

<sup>211</sup> Gregory, *Selected Letters*, 29, 57, 59, 61, 65.

<sup>212</sup> Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 101.

so the family owed a great deal to him because of his generosity in this matter. In this letter she makes two striking comments, the first regarding her oldest daughter, who had become pregnant. She wrote that “Caterina is pregnant and expecting the child in the middle of February. As that’s the case I think we should take out some insurance so we won’t lose the five hundred florins they’re owed from the [Dowry] Fund.”<sup>213</sup> Discussion of her impending first grandchild is not something that Alessandra, at least in her letter, celebrates with her son. That would have been, in part, because the child would belong to its father’s family, not Alessandra’s. Rather, what she concerns herself and her sons with is the question of making sure that, should Caterina die in childbirth, her remaining dowry not be lost. This certainly reflected the realities of the difficulties and high mortality rate that accompanied childbirth and life in general. Alessandra had already lost her husband and three children, so it is perfectly reasonable that, given her own history, as well as death statistics of the day that she should be concerned with the death of her daughter. It seems harsh and cruel today to read a mother write this about her daughter, but in the reality in which Alessandra lived, it made perfect sense. Sons were exponentially more important because they were the ones through whom the lineage travelled; they were the patriarchs of the family and Alessandra’s letters reflect this truth.

Alessandra’s other striking comment that she made in the same letter, where she asked her son to meet her in Rome, where she would be travelling for Holy Indulgence in the Jubilee Year of 1500, is that “there’s nothing else I care about in this world except you, my three sons, and I’ve sent you away one after the other for your own good and not considering my own happiness.”<sup>214</sup> This was not completely true, given that she did continue to keep in contact with her daughters, as brief mentions in later letters betray, but that she wrote this is telling. She

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<sup>213</sup> Gregory, *Selected Letters*, 51.

<sup>214</sup> Gregory, *Selected Letters*, 51.

perceived her sons to be the ones who were most dear to her, in large part because they were the ones who would carry on their father's bloodline. Her subsequent letter to Filippo addresses Niccolo's visit, the closest living relative on their father's side, under whom Filippo had been apprenticed. Alessandra knew that she needed to treat this relative of her deceased husband with the utmost respect because of the fact that he had taken her sons on to teach them business.

After Niccolo's visit, when telling her son Filippo how she had honored her deceased husband's cousin, she added that her son-in-law Marco had come from across town "because Catarina gave birth there; she had a boy and is well."<sup>215</sup> She says nothing else regarding her daughter, even though the letter continues for pages. Indeed, throughout her correspondences with her sons it is generally in passing, if at all, that she mentions her daughters. All of this serves to indicate Alessandra's views regarding her daughters once they had been married: daughters left their natal family and so were, in nearly all respects, of much less concern than were sons. Just as we saw in Umiliana's life, girls were a burden until or unless they were married, because they produced less than they cost to keep. Alessandra saw her sons as the ones who would carry on the Strozzi family, and, thus, their well being was significantly more important to her. She believed in the structures of inheritance in Florence and the economic and political power that came with inheritance.

In her letters Alessandra certainly demonstrated that she accepted the contemporary belief in the normalcy and propriety of inheritance through the male line. What is interesting is that she demonstrates this acceptance from the position of a female who had near complete autonomy in raising her children and providing for them, because of both her status as a widow and because of her sons' exile. She likely longed to be not so responsible for providing everything for her children, but the ideas that she portrays about the status of women are belied

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<sup>215</sup> Gregory, *Selected Letters*, 55.

by her very active life attempting to regain citizenship for her sons within the city of Florence. She never had to be concerned that her husband would beat her for not being properly obedient, and she was not subject to a husband or his father to make the decisions that she in fact made with regard to her children.<sup>216</sup> Similarly, her sons could not challenge her economic influence and oversight until they had built their own fortunes, because it was upon her dowry that the entire family survived.<sup>217</sup> By the time that they had built their own fortunes they had so long been relying on her judgment that they continued to do so while in exile. She was the intermediary that they trusted above all others.

Still, she was limited in how much she could influence anyone that had the ability to revoke her sons' exile. The roles that she adopted were often not normally those of a mother which indicates that her status as a widow did allow her more freedom than most contemporary wives would have enjoyed. Alessandra never fully challenged social norms; she worked politically and socially through male family members and friends and, although she did not always defer to them, she did not challenge their authority as males. All of her authority had to be channeled through a male, whether it was economic authority through her sons or political and social authority through male relatives. The requirement that her authority be channeled through men is a strong indication that women were even more limited in their actions than had been the case in Matilda's time. Alessandra was extremely influential with her sons, more than any of her known contemporaries, but her actions were limited by those same sons and by other males in Florence. She was independent, and she exercised authority through her sons, but she was not free to act in the ways that she thought best; she was able to act as she did only because her sons and her husband's extended family tended to agree with her intelligent decisions.

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<sup>216</sup> Crabb, *A Patrician Family*, 51, 52.

<sup>217</sup> Crabb, *A Patrician Family*, 60.

As we have seen, Alessandra did have to live increased restrictions on women's freedoms that had increased since the time of her predecessors. Like Umiliana and Villana before her, Alessandra was not permitted in public spaces. Considering that she was trying to influence political figures to allow her sons back into the city this fact proved to be a great inhibitor. Her desire to have her sons return to the city required that she abide by city regulations and not upset the authorities, because she was unable to challenge civic and social norms. She also had to continue paying punitive taxes to the city so that economics would not be used against her sons' return from exile. To influence any of these elements of her life she had to write correspondence or talk to extended family members and have them plead her sons' case before magistrates; she could not do this herself. Her autonomy was a hindrance in these ways because she was unable to do herself much of what she needed to do to help her sons due to regulations on her gender. She was unable to talk directly to any political body to plead the case of her sons; she had to rely on others to do that. She needed to foster favor in the city by acting within the bounds of proper and elite women, which kept her from acting in more "radical" ways.

Like Umiliana and Villana before her Alessandra joined a tertiary order but it was certainly not the focus of her life – she was too preoccupied with matters concerning her sons. She did suffer for their sake. Figuring out finances after her husband's sudden death required her to move her and her family to much smaller quarters, and finding other ways to create revenue upon which they might live was certainly a long trial for her.<sup>218</sup> She was also partially forced into the political life because of the status of her sons. Crabb argues that comments in her letters indicate knowledge of politics in which she was able to discern subtleties that many others overlooked. Politics in the city were closely linked to family interests, especially in Alessandra's

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<sup>218</sup> Crabb, *A Patrician Family*, 69.

situation, in which she was attempting to restore her sons' citizenship.<sup>219</sup> As a female she had no possibility of ever directly influencing politics, although she certainly talked to family friends working on political matters on her sons' behalf.

She wrote letters to the *signoria*, though she could not present them herself in a public forum.<sup>220</sup> She was firmly bound by contemporary social roles. Letters could more easily be ignored or delayed, and Alessandra had no recourse when that happened. Written correspondence, rather than pleading a case in person, demonstrates her political impotency and her inability to honorably cross the public and private chasm; all pleading and maneuvering had to be done by either letter or proxy.

Another indication of the impotency of female political authority is found in the fact that a woman was not required to leave the city if her husband were exiled. Alessandra was allowed to return and live in the city, which, compared to the situation that her sons suffered, who were forced out of the city as soon as they came of age, indicates that the commune and the *signoria* saw absolutely no political threat from women. Even if they were to write letters or attempt to influence those around them, in the way that Alessandra did, women were so unthreatening that there was no reason to require that they enter exile with their husbands. When Alessandra joined her husband Matteo in exile it was her choice to do so; the city had not forced her.

Alessandra, like Villana before her, pushed back against a variety of social structures and norms, but she tended to do so in a way more subtle than those through which one such as Villana had worked, likely because she was even more constrained than Villana had been a century before. The politically neutral marriage alliances of her daughters constituted one such subtle way in which she worked. Making marriage alliances was out of the normal realm for a

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<sup>219</sup> Crabb, *A Patrician Family*, 81.

<sup>220</sup> Crabb, *A Patrician Family*, 85.

female, but, given the circumstances, for Alessandra this was not a serious transgression.<sup>221</sup> She also did not fulfill the ideal of the widow as preached by Savonarola, whom we discussed in Chapter 1, although her lack of remarriage likely would have appealed to him. Savonarola thought that widows should not desire remarriage, and he wanted to see them completely isolated. This was due to his belief that women were dangerous, lusty, and needed to be controlled;<sup>222</sup> we have seen how these ideas were not new in the fifteenth century. Given Savonarola's popularity in Florence, it is likely that these views regarding women were not terribly distant from of the realm of popular sentiment. However, Alessandra was raising her children and providing them good guidance, which likely bolstered her perceived honor. There is no record of her ever having been reprimanded by civil or religious authorities for acting in improper ways as either a mother or a widow. She would have perhaps guaranteed her sons' permanent exile had she transgressed accepted norms, because she had no male to protect her.

Similarly, the fact that she was able to arrange good marriages for her daughters, even if those matches did not constitute development of ties with the highest social tiers, is an indication that Alessandra and her offspring were not considered to have been dishonored by any of her actions. She also remained on good terms with the cousins of her husband, another indication that her actions, whether they were taken in relation to her children or to politics, were all within the realm of acceptable action for a widow with children.

Alessandra reflects many of the social norms under which she lived; her sons were the focus of her life, while her daughters were only temporarily of any serious concern to her, and that occurred only when she was arranging their marriages, and she very apparently was fully aware of the proper place of a widow and mother within society, which is demonstrated in the

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<sup>221</sup> Crabb, *A Patrician Family*, 314.

<sup>222</sup> Eisenbichler, "At Marriage End," 25.

fact that she never seems to have transgressed those roles; she had no ability to do so. She was the most restricted of these four women. In earlier centuries the commune had set laws in place regarding inheritance and the place of women in public spaces that had become, by Alessandra's lifetime, fully accepted by all. As the Medici came into power a new noble family was established, of whom the Strozzi were enemies, further reducing any possibility that Alessandra might have had of breaking out of gendered norms.

#### Conclusion: What is "female authority"?

The lives of these four women demonstrate the various manners and types of authority that they were able to employ to influence the events in their lives. Some of the women were more able to wield authority, whatever the type, because of their social status and because of political and religious realities during their lifetimes. Over the course of these centuries of the middle and late Middle Ages, as we have seen, the latter three of the women studied in this thesis embodied the restrictions placed upon women by the commune of Florence. The commune's accepted expectation of women restricted their movements within not only the physical city but also within political and economic circles.

Matilda used her patrimony to wield exceptional political and military authority in the eleventh century, before patrilineal power structures had developed fully. Her life displays the ambiguous role that she played as a female *dux*, but it also evinces that her contemporaries did not question her right to authority, regardless of her sex. They portrayed her as a woman with significant authority in Tuscany who ruled in her own right by the fact of her birth rather than by marriage. The commune of Florence was not nearly as powerful during her rule as it would later become; at that time a single powerful family, hers, ruled Tuscany, not a group of wealthy male citizens. This began to change during her lifetime and at her death she donated her lands to the

Church. Without a single powerful family controlling Tuscany, city-states broke off from the greater whole that Matilda and her family before her had ruled and set up their own governments that they were able to establish concretely and independently

Umiliana's family was part of that original communal government in Florence, since the magnate families such as hers continued to influence the politics of the city even after they were formally banned from holding government office. Nonetheless, as a woman, her spiritual authority, as a holy woman, was the only way through which she was able to influence others; her holy status provided her with the freedom that she enjoyed to walk about the city and help the poor, and it kept her from living under the power of a husband. Her hagiographer portrayed her as living in abject poverty, even though in fact she was allowed to continue living in her family's tower rather than on the street, which serves as an indication of their level of wealth. After her death her spiritual authority only continued to increase when the commune used her hagiography to unify warring factions within the city in an attempt to resist the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. The influence she had on her companions during her lifetime inclined them to portray her as a saintly woman who performed miracles and who came to them in visions. Perhaps it was her spiritual authority, or perhaps the authority of her family, that led the secular authorities to use her as a rallying point for the city.

Villana's influence in Florence, derived more from her active and public prophesying than from her status as a woman from an elite family. Her upper-middle class natal and conjugal families were interested in keeping her in a proper elite female's role; when she first married she joined her husband at festivities and performed the role of the dutiful wife. After her reconversion she began rejecting elements of the power structure by running away from home and by preaching in public spaces. These actions were a direct challenge to her husband and his

family, as well as the city and its male-lead communal authorities. She also used her role as a holy woman to preach in public without opposition from the authorities. By becoming a public figure she made herself popular amongst citizens of the commune increasing both her influence over them and her spiritual authority among the blessed.

Conversely, Alessandra used familial authority, unprecedented among her female contemporaries, to influence the choices that her sons made regarding politics and economics. Her dowry is what fed and housed her and her young family until her sons made their fortunes. The lack of paternal male relatives gave her autonomy that other widows did not have. She wrote extensively to her sons and they almost always accepted her advice; they trusted her judgment even about the political world from which she was banned. Through her letters to the commune magistrates her sons' exile was eventually revoked. Her eldest was 40 by the time that he returned to Florence; until that point Alessandra had controlled family business interests and political interests in the city. Her inability to publicly petition for the revocation of her sons' exile reflects female political impotence. All authority that she exercised, including all of political, economic, and social authority, was channeled through a male intermediary; a fifteenth-century woman could not act as she saw fit because of the patriarchal power structures, including the emphasis on patrilineage and the male-dominated civic and political world, both of which forced her to work through men.

Each of these women used her authority to achieve very different ends; their success, however, is unquestionable. Even with increased limitations on female movement within the city and on female political involvement, over the centuries each of these women overcame the restrictions placed upon women through the type of authority that she did wield – Umiliana, Villana, and Alessandra could never have ruled Tuscany in the same manner that Matilda had

because the politics and social structure had by their times changed dramatically. Instead, they worked within their particular social and political situations to influence those around them to their own ends.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay I have argued that the ways in which women could acceptably and honorably act were increasingly limited over the course of the central and late Middle Ages in Florence because ideas about patriarchy and patrilineage had become entrenched. The ways in which these women wielded authority reflects the channels and types of authority that were available to them at the given moment. Each woman was exceptional in her own time, but each was limited in the ways in which she could act without dishonoring herself or otherwise being sanctioned by the Florentine commune. None of them were condemned for their transgressions or actions that they took outside of the normal female realm. This was a result of their authority.

Matilda was able to act well beyond the traditional realms of female authority because she lived in the eleventh century, before patriarchy and patrilineage were accepted as the only acceptable construction of authority and prestige. Although her gender's "faults" were used to discredit her, her right to rule was not questioned, even by her enemies. Rather, the popes turned to her and her authority to protect them from the Holy Roman Emperor and to enforce many of the changes that they were advocating to reform the Church. All of the other powerful individuals with whom she interacted were men. Her status as a female ruler was an anomaly even among her contemporaries. Notable, however, is that her exception was not only allowed but also supported and even embraced by many of the male powers, or institutions of male authority, of the time.

Umiliana's life reflects the patriarchal structures that she rejected in favor of a religious life. She subsumed her status as a magnate woman under that of a holy woman, thereby using spiritual authority to increase her ability to resist her father and his desire that she remarry for the

benefit of the family. Her life reflects many of the contradictory directives that women received from secular and religious authorities, but her influence as a religious woman allowed her to act in ways that a magnate woman could not have acted. She was praised by her hagiographer for rejecting the power of her father and the lure of worldly concerns. In reward for this she was given a double diadem in heaven, one for her regained virginity and the other for her constant chastity in devotion to God.

Villana, like Umiliana, embraced her status as a holy woman over her status as a wife of an elite husband. She was less able than Umiliana to devote herself to a religious life, in part because she was still married. Though she did preach in public, she was unable to escape from her natal family in her childhood or from her husband's family in her adulthood. Her spiritual authority was largely derived from her return to a pious life and the rejection of worldly concerns. The preaching that she did in public spaces contributed to her local fame which was then used to promote her cult outside of the confines of the city. Both her own and Umiliana's hagiography were written in attempts to have these women canonized. For Villana, in her hagiography, public preaching and prophecies formed a vital part of the petition for canonization. Villana was able to preach in public spaces because of her status as a holy woman, whereas Alessandra, as a magnate widow, had no such freedom in the fifteenth century when she tried to plead the case of her sons.

Alessandra's influence over her sons, while considerable, had to be channeled through a male. The advice she gave her sons was accepted at their discretion; that they took it at all speaks to Alessandra's intelligence and her ability to make a case for her reasoning. Her efforts to arrange marriages for her daughters and address her problems of taxes with the city, and her attempts to influence political leaders to revoke her sons' exile, always had to be channeled

through a male intercessor in order to bridge the chasm that existed between her and the public, male, realm. When her sons reached adulthood she asked them for their advice more directly; though for years she had controlled the family's finances, in later years she deferred to their judgment as they constituted the patriarchs of the lineage.

Over the course of the four centuries of this study, as evidenced in the lives of these four women, the ability of an elite woman in Florentine society to act independently, to wield authority, or even to influence those in power around her steadily and dramatically decreased. Though other scholars have argued the same point, these four women serve to inform us about how that decrease in authority looked even at the topmost levels of society. Each of these women wielded authority but each was constrained by the society in which she lived.

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