

**The Lives of Umiliana de' Cerchi:**  
Representations of Female Sainthood in Thirteenth-Century Florence

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The earliest *Life* of the Blessed Umiliana de' Cerchi (1219-1246), a Florentine mystic of the early thirteenth century, underscores the traditional virtues of obedience, humility, and charity.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text, the author and Umiliana's contemporary, the Franciscan Vito da Cortona, depicts the pious mystic as a model of saintliness not only for urban religious laywomen like herself, but for all Christians, regardless of gender, nationality, or religious status. Yet the description of Umiliana's actions set against the expressed framework of Vito's text, reveals another text, one that is made up of silence, darkness, and defiance of earthly authority.<sup>2</sup> There exist, in fact, numerous instances of literary tension between Umiliana's chastity and descriptions of her marriage and motherhood, her spiritual and family life, and descriptions of Umiliana's life and the rhetorical outline of the *Life* itself.

In this paper, I shall analyze the relationship between this text and the context within which it is inserted, that is, the connection between Umiliana's individual actions, her life, and Vito's description of her saintliness, his *Life*. While narrative tensions may also be found in descriptions of Umiliana's relationship with her confessor and her role as guide and model for other religious laywomen, I shall limit my focus to those textual tensions that regard Umiliana's family. Although Umiliana is described as rejecting father, husband, and children, and likewise the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, this radical movement, far from being hidden by the author, is actually brought forward and even highlighted as evidence of her sanctity. The tension between the stated purpose of Vito's text and its descriptions belies one of the challenges inherent to hagiography: glorifying the individual saint while establishing or reinforcing models of sainthood. The *Life* of Umiliana, therefore, offers an example of this more general phenomenon while also revealing the particular problems of the hagiographic representations of female lay piety.

The underlying strain in the *Life* exists between the expression of who Umiliana is and the description of what she does. An analysis of the text most readily begins, therefore, with the one who expresses this characterization, the author, Vito da Cortona. After locating indications of Vito's authorial perspective within the text, I shall demonstrate how various scenes within the same text challenge his authority. In this way, I consider Umiliana first as a character in relation to the author of her text. Then, in the second half of the essay, I shall consider Umiliana as a character in relation to the text itself. By placing this characterization within its historical context, I shall extend the analysis of the *Life* of Umiliana to show how the tensions that figure so prominently in this text are indicative of the historical, theological and societal climates within which the text was written. Ultimately, however, the textual tensions arise from the various—and contradictory—models of womanhood.

Recent scholars have emphasized studying the life of the hagiographer in addition to studying the life of the saint, to better evaluate his words.<sup>3</sup> Originally from Cortona, Vito lived most of his life in Florence at the newly established church of Santa Croce.<sup>4</sup> He apparently knew Michele of Florence, another Franciscan of Santa Croce and Umiliana's confessor, quite well. Moreover, Vito claims that he himself was acquainted with Umiliana, and received many of the testimonies first-hand. Vito's Franciscanism is hardly immaterial. A member of a recently established order himself, one that emphasized poverty, chastity, and humility (precisely the same qualities he emphasizes in Umiliana's *Life*), Vito must also have been aware of the thin line that separated such an officially sanctioned order from heretical movements. By writing Umiliana's *Life* almost immediately after her death in 1246, Vito set out to form not only a new saint but a new saintly model as well, one that would be both Franciscan and lay.

Similar to the process of official approval undergone by the Franciscan order itself just a few years before, Umiliana's spirituality underwent a process of "refinement" where her actions were both recognized and approved of as conforming to doctrine. Vito stressed that Umiliana's "calling" lay not in the traditional roles of wife, mother, or nun, but as the first Florentine tertiary. Although Umiliana was not, in fact, the first Third Order Franciscan, the assertion is nevertheless important, for it marks Umiliana as a new and original personality, yet also grounds her devotion in previously established and sanctioned orders. Although Vito compares Umiliana's life to other saints' lives, most notably the lives of the desert fathers, his text also reveals a consciousness of the originality of Umiliana's holiness.

The novelty of Umiliana's role as both religious and lay was expressed, in fact, as not only a model in a long line of holy lives, but also as a new form of spirituality, one that would bring the challenges of the hermetic life to the urban sphere. In this way, Umiliana, through Vito's text, offered an example of female piety that could both legitimize and unite scattered groups of Florentine penitent women, while safely avoiding charges of heresy. Although Innocent III had forbidden the founding of new orders, these Franciscan laywomen led a nebulous existence alongside the already established Franciscan order. And yet, although clearly linked with the Franciscan religious order, their lay status was central to their spirituality.

Umiliana's cult, promoted largely by the Franciscan friars of Santa Croce, was centered in the Santa Croce quarter at the heart of the city of Florence.<sup>5</sup> The years of Umiliana's intense devotion (1241-46) and the subsequent emergence of the localized cult after her death directly correspond to a time of both spiritual as well as political upheaval in Florence.<sup>6</sup> Tensions between papal and imperial powers, which had long been building, finally exploded, shaking the foundation of Florentine society. In 1246, the year of Umiliana's death, Frederick of Antioch, son of Emperor Frederick II, seized control of the city, and began purging it of Guelph power and property. Although Franciscans, supporters of the papacy, were forbidden to have contact with Florentine men, they were, however, permitted to be spiritual advisors to Florentine women. Umiliana may have unintentionally given a legitimate way for the Franciscans to establish and maintain contact with the up and coming Cerchi family, without raising Ghibelline suspicion.

In addition to the political unrest, the Florentine economy was also drastically changing, as the merchant class gained in power and moneylending gained in respectability. A subsequent change in dowry laws reflects the new urban role of women as the commodity that united feuding families and provided the progeny necessary to create the emerging economic dynasties.<sup>7</sup> The *Life* of Umiliana, which describes Umiliana's family almost exclusively in terms of her marital status, illustrates these social and economic changes. Moreover, the tensions within the text itself reveal the incommensurable ideals of womanhood as presented by religious and bourgeois sources. Umiliana's life as a religious laywoman expressed the strains and tensions of trying to "fit" a monastic ideal into the social and increasingly secular structures of the world, structures which were all the more rigid for a woman in late medieval Florentine society.

Hagiography both reflects and reveals these tensions.<sup>8</sup> The account of a saint's life formed a crucial part in the fairly recently codified canonization process, and it can safely be assumed that the elements contained therein ought to reveal what the hagiographer considered to be sainthood. We can further presume that the hagiographer would not have included elements that might have been interpreted as heretical. Yet Vito's text is made up of defiant actions that seemingly contradict the textual model of submission he has constructed. Although her humility and love are emphasized in Vito's description, the text includes a number of references to acts by Umiliana which seem far removed from the rhetorical ideal set up in advance. Umiliana secretly gave her husband's money away behind his back (1.2-5), she defied her father's attempts to remarry her, threatening to plunge herself into a fire rather than marry again (1.7), and she prayed for her children's early death, so that they might not suffer—as she had—the loss of their virginity (1.6). These violations of social norms, however, are presented not as evidence of subversive behavior, but as a testament to the enormous grace bestowed upon the saint by God.

Although not a single testimony is attributed to any male member of the Cerchi family, they figure prominently in the text and function primarily as the underlying force that threatens to impede Umiliana's religious devotion. Yet they are monolithic, devoid of individual characterizations or will. Most striking, then, is that although Umiliana's cult was initially maintained by popular support through the guidance of the Franciscans, later funds for the maintenance of Umiliana's remains and relics came primarily from the Cerchi family, the same family who was so negatively portrayed in Vito's account.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the process for her beatification was moved forward in the late seventeenth century by the family historian, Alessandro de' Cerchi, who certainly could not have been blind to the disapproving depiction of his kinsmen. Vito's negative portrayal of Umiliana's male family members in the *Life* offered later generations a tangible way to expiate the sins of their forefathers. Through the cult and veneration of their family "saint," the Cerchi family joined forces with the Franciscans, and became one of the major Guelph powers.

Vito's narrative, written before the Cerchis' economic rise and spiritual "redemption," supports Umiliana's overthrow of her particular patriarchy, and out of her rejection of both her father's and her husband's authority the narrator builds an alternative family and an alternative authority for Umiliana: the Church. Umiliana's separation from her family, however, did not extend to her female family members, and therefore the Church did not completely fulfill the role of family.<sup>10</sup> It appears that the women of her family did not, for the most part, figure into the political intrigues and mercantile machinations of her father, husband and brothers, and therefore were able to lead pious lives while living alongside their "infidel" kinsmen. From the very beginning of her marriage, at the age of sixteen, Umiliana established close contacts with a sister-in-law, Ravenna, with whom she collaborated in acts of charity (1.1). Six years later, a year after the death of her husband, Umiliana returned to her father's house, where she interacted with other women

from her family, as well as with women religious. Indeed, the majority of Umiliana's acts of charity and miracles were performed for women, and the witnesses to her saintliness are overwhelmingly female with the exception of a handful of Franciscans.<sup>11</sup> Although Vito asserts that she had completely withdrawn from her family and from society, the actions described in the text reveal that Umiliana was quite active in a feminine family and society. Indeed, numerous documents from the time period clearly trace the outlines of a burgeoning lay movement in Florence, made up principally of women, of which Umiliana was almost certainly a part.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Umiliana's contacts with women were, in some way, excluded from Vito's idea of "society." Or perhaps these contacts indicated a potentially threatening spiritual "dis-order." Therefore, although these contacts were not downplayed, their social role was.

I would argue not that Vito took what he thought to be heretical practices and first purified and then sanctioned them with his words, but rather that the experience of Umiliana, living inside and outside all social orders (including the religious order of which Vito himself was a part), was extremely difficult for him to present. Although he asserted unity, his words reveal paradox. Recent scholars have suggested that paradox of this sort stems from a male hagiographer's inability to describe a feminine religious experience in masculine terms. Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that feminine religious experience is radically different from masculine religious experience because, more often than not, it lacks a turning point, a reversal or conversion.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in Umiliana's *Life*, we find no conversion and no abrupt change. Her dedication to God comes a month after her marriage, a case of poor timing perhaps, but not a dramatic alteration, at least not textually, for the *Life* contains no reference to Umiliana's spiritual life before marriage. Therefore there is no indication of a lapsed state of grace from which Umiliana could convert. Umiliana's dedication is expressed instead as a sort of continuum, as she very gradually moves closer to God and further from the world.

The paradox in medieval hagiographic texts, according to Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, reflects a situation in which the decisions typical in a religious life lay far outside the domains of choice to which medieval women were limited.<sup>14</sup> The religious life often included the denial of the very things that were already denied to women: a choice in marriage and sexual relations, public activity, and the possession of private property. And yet the new penitent orders, by embracing those very restrictions that delineated a woman's life, found powerful role models in the women with whom they came in contact. Many recent hagiographic studies do not adequately address the unique experience of the Italian lay mendicant. While important figures like Claire of Assisi and Catherine of Siena loom over the field of study of Italian female saints, "smaller" women, like Umiliana, are worth noting, not only for their own stories, but also for the way in which these stories reveal interconnections linking mendicant orders and laywomen. Moreover, these stories also reveal powerful bonds among the women themselves, even while these associations were almost always described solely in relation to paternal or fraternal lineage, or in relation to the male hierarchy of the Church, through male confessors (usually mendicant brothers or priests).

Although women figure prominently in the *Life* of Umiliana as her friends, sisters, allies, and adorers, the central action of the first part of the *Life* involves Umiliana's contact with the men in her family, primarily her husband and her father. Unlike the Lives of many other saints, this one begins not with the holy woman's birth in 1219 (her entrance into her father's family), but with her marriage sixteen years later (her entrance into her husband's family): "Domina quædam Humiliana nomine, filia Oliverii Cerki, civis Florentiæ, cum esset annorum XVI, tradita est nuptui a parentibus" (1.1). Vito asserts that about a month after her marriage to a prominent Florentine merchant and moneylender, Umiliana decided to consecrate herself to God:

Et quasi Dei plena, uno mense peracto post ad ventum suum ad virum, spernere cœpit pompas seculi et ornatus, ita ut faciem non ornaret; et vestimentorum cultus, quæ ob viri reverentiam portabat, erant sibi non ad gaudium, sed ad crucem tantum.

(And as if she were filled with God, one month after she joined her husband, she began to spurn the ostentation and ornamentation of that age, such that she did not make herself up; but the care for her clothes, that was a sign of respect for her husband, was for her not a pleasure, but a heavy cross. [1.2])

Unable at this point to dedicate her virginity, Umiliana gave her material wealth instead. Despite the sometimes violent opposition of her husband, Umiliana spent the next five years engaged in "covert" acts of charity: preparing food for the poor during the night, giving away possessions, even secretly tearing the sheets of her wedding bed into pieces to give to the needy (1.2-5). Her husband's death, five years after their marriage, signaled a change in Umiliana's piety, as her charity moved out into the open:

Dicitur etiam quod marito suo vicino morti, donare Voluit dotes suas amore Dei, si ipse pœniteret veracitur, et

juxta præceptum Sacerdotis Dei usuras redderet quas tenebat. Post mortem viri in domo ipsius, eo quod liberior erat, liberalitatem suam liberalius ostendens pauperes sæpe tenebat in mensa sua et magis orationibus insistebat. (It is said that, since her husband was close to death, she wanted to give her dowry to the love of God, if her husband should honestly repent, and according to the precept of the priest of God, if he should have returned the interest from the activity of usury. After the man's death, in his own home, since she was freer, showing more openly her own generosity, she often used to invite poor people to her table, and she applied herself all the more in her prayers. [1.6])

Although Umiliana did not decide to dedicate herself fully to God until after her marriage, her hagiographer emphasizes her chastity throughout the text. She may have lost her virginity, yet her chastity remained unharmed. Although she could not dedicate her virginity, she could and did dedicate her body through mystic activities and suffering:

[E]t propterea quia non sufficiebat sibi tam inopi pauperum cura, prorupit in hoc votum, dicens: "domine tu nosti, quia dum potui, tibi largius ministravi: nunc autem facultatibus privata, animam meam et corpus totaliter tibi trado."

(And since for her it was not enough to occupy herself with those who were so poor, she pronounced this vow: "Lord, you knew that, to the extent that I could, I have given to you with great generosity; now, deprived of my means, I entrust to you all of my soul and body." [2.10])

The need to "validate" Umiliana's cult arises from the difficulties of canonizing a female saint, particularly one who was married.<sup>15</sup> The narrator therefore constructed a new model of feminine piety, one that included marriage and motherhood, not as evidence of sainthood in and of themselves, but as evidence of sainthood in how they were suffered and then cast aside. Marriage is a test that Umiliana endured—apparently patiently—the first time around. The second time, however, she balked, pulling herself out of the bridal economy. Although the hagiographer provides no information regarding Umiliana's feelings about her first marriage, he reports lengthily about her opposition to the second. A year after her husband's death, Umiliana returned to her father's house, where an effort was underway to remarry her. Umiliana defied the possibility of remarriage by asserting her own independently and privately contracted marriage with Christ:

In illa oratione tanta superfusa est gratia, ut quasi ebria videretur; et tantam cordis accepit constantiam de non nubendo, et tanta veri Sponsi certificata est Voluntate, quod ante flammæ quam viro parata erat tradere corpus suum: et ex tunc ad prima verba, quæ de recipiendo marito audivit, confidenter respondit, dicens: "Quid me laceratis quotidie de marito? Adducite ad me illum cui me tradere cupitis, et ex alia parte faciatis mihi fornacem accendi, ut inter utrumque posita eligam quod Voluero."

(In that prayer, the woman is so showered with grace, that she seemed a prey to intoxication; and with such firmness of spirit she accepted not marrying, and with such a desire she was sure of the true Husband, that she was ready to first throw her body on the flames before throwing herself into the arms of a man. And from then on, at the first mention of her taking a husband again, she responded confidently: "Why do you torture me every day for a husband? Bring me the one to whom you wish to hand me over, and on the other side, allow me to build a furnace, so that in the meantime, I shall choose in which of the two places I wish to be placed." [1.7])

This spiritual marriage is presented in great contrast to her earthly marriage, for the consummation Umiliana achieves with Christ is not a union of sexual activity, but one of suffering.

Discouraged from his efforts to remarry her, Umiliana's father turned instead to the re-acquisition of her dowry (1.8). Yet Umiliana defied her father's request, refusing to swear to anything that might allow the dowry to be regained. Thus she further disengaged herself as a commodity in late medieval Florentine marriage economy. Undaunted, Umiliana's father tricked her into signing papers that returned the dowry to him. The scene stresses that Umiliana's money is not and never was her own. Her charitable resources always came either from her husband or from her father. Umiliana's own dowry was, in a sense, a representation of her "worth" as a marriageable young woman of a wealthy Florentine family. Umiliana rejected her family's wealth, thereby achieving the Franciscan ideal of owning nothing: "nihil in hoc mundo proprium possidere" (1.8). By separating herself from her male family members, Umiliana also rejected the social class and prestige that went along with their wealth. Although her brothers' social value might derive from their wealth, Umiliana's social status was gained by her relationship—either by marriage or by

birth—to men. Declaring herself to be the daughter only of her father in heaven, Umiliana cut herself off from not only her father, but also all of the prestige that went along with her alignment with and within the Cerchi family:

Ut video non est fides in terra, quia pater filiæ, et filia patri detrahit et denegat veritatem. Habeat igitur me pater meus in domo sua deinceps, non ut filiam, sed ut famulam et ancillam.

(Thus do I see that there is no faith on earth, because a father disparages and denies the truth to the daughter, and the daughter to the father. Therefore, henceforth, my father retains me in his home, not as a daughter, but as a servant and a slave. [1.8])

Poverty did not, however, put an end to Umiliana's good works, for, true mendicant that she was, she began to beg for and distribute alms. It is not surprising that women made such successful if awkward Franciscan models: the renunciation of material goods came quite easy to those who had none. Dispossessed of both her paternal lineage and funds, Umiliana donated the money she collected from wealthy Florentine women to the poor sisters of St Claire, thereby creating a circulation of "feminine currency": money that came from women, through a woman's actions, for the benefit of other women:

Et quoniam fervori suo non satisfaciebat eleemosyna manus suæ, visitabat nobiles Dominas et discretas et timentes Deum civitatis Florentinæ, petens ab eis humiliter eleemosynas pro inclusis Sororibus pauperibus amore Domini Jesu Christi: quas cum multa devotione suscipiens, reponebat in quadam perula munda, specialiter ad hoc facta, deferens ea diligenter pauperibus supradictis.

(And since the alms from her hands did not satisfy her ardor, she would go visit the noblewomen, citizens of Florentine, after having chosen them from Florentine society for their fear of God, humbly seeking alms from them for the poor cloistered Sisters in the name of the love for the Lord Jesus Christ; and collecting the alms with great devotion, she would put them in a small purse, specially made for that purpose, taking them diligently away to the poor sisters that we have mentioned. [1.9])

Currency was a sign of wealth and of social status, and therefore, in accordance with the Franciscan ideal, truly worthless. Money could gain real value only if it was given away. Umiliana's circulation of funds was therefore based on the negative value of money.

After he had obtained Umiliana's dowry, Umiliana's father left her to do as she wished. Denied entrance into a local convent, Umiliana closed herself off in a tower on the family's property:

Intrare Voluit in monasterium S. Mariæ de Monticellis Inclusarum pauperum Dominarum, sed Deus, qui aliud de ipsa decreverat, non permisit.

(She wanted to enter the convent of Santa Maria of Monticello of the poor sisters of the Cloister of the Lord, but God, who had decreed another path for her, did not permit it. [2.11])

It was not unusual, in Florentine households of this time, to have adult children live in buildings attached to their father's house, thereby establishing a household that extended to include several generations. Yet the hagiographer takes great pains to assert that although she lived on the family property, Umiliana was disconnected from her family. Umiliana was neither completely abandoned as the hagiographer suggests, nor did she truly forge an independent life, for she continued to live on her father's property, with a family servant, sustained (at least minimally) by her family's financial resources. The text underscores Umiliana's submission to God's authority, who "gave" her the tower, and rejection of her father's authority (he wanted her out). Moreover, Umiliana, the narration continues, went beyond earlier hermits by seeking her solitude not in the desert, but in the middle of the city of Florence:

Alii relicto seculo et paternis mansionibus, ad solitudinem fugientes, Domino militarunt; hæc in domum patris solitudinem adducens, militando nobiliter vicit mundam, et vitium in medio mundanorum.

(Others abandoned the worldly life and the paternal household, fleeing into solitude, entering the service of the Lord; this woman, taking solitude in the house of her father, fighting for the Lord with nobility, conquered feminine ornamentation, and the vice that is found in the world. [2.11])

The enclosure is presented not as confinement, but as liberation, and Umiliana's existence on her family's property is depicted as freedom from her family. The tension in Vito's text reflects Umiliana's attempt to separate herself from her father's line and Vito's inability to "express" her without it.

Umiliana's physical retreat was neither total nor abrupt. Even toward the end of the *Life*, Vito describes Umiliana's

journeys out of the tower to attend mass and to aid the poor (4.43). She frequently received visitors in the tower, which appears to have become a spiritual center in Florence. Umiliana is described as being both inside and outside the tower, just she is both inside and outside her family. This arrangement, moreover, permits the continued use of the social status of Umiliana's family by the hagiographer, even while he denies its importance. Umiliana is, after all, known to us even today as de' Cerchi.<sup>16</sup> This arrangement is important in light of the political events during the time, as well as the crucial role the Cerchi family would play. But it is also significant given the location of woman in (and outside) late medieval society. Therefore, Umiliana's *Life* offers a glimpse of the social implications of women religious who lived outside the convent walls.

Umiliana's motherhood is similarly described in a paradoxical way. During her marriage, Umiliana had several children who later became reminders, perhaps, of her loss of virginity.<sup>17</sup> These children receive ambivalent treatment by both the hagiographer, who scarcely makes reference of their existence, and Umiliana herself. The first mention of these children involves Umiliana's unconcern for their youthful illnesses, for she knew that if they were to die at such a young age they would surely go straight to heaven with their chastity intact (1.6). After she returned to her father's house following her husband's death, it appears that Umiliana's in-laws raised her children.<sup>18</sup> In a scene that occurs toward the end of the *Life*, Umiliana's daughter drops dead while on a visit to her mother in the tower. Umiliana's first concern is not for her daughter's life, but for the scandal that might occur should anyone discover her dead in Umiliana's room ("et suorum scandalum temebat," 4.43). After worrying for several hours, Umiliana prays to God, makes the sign of the cross, and her daughter's life is restored.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether it is Umiliana herself who expressed these feelings of detachment or whether it is her hagiographer who highlighted or perhaps invented her indifference in order to avoid dealing directly with the problem of Umiliana's loss of virginity.<sup>19</sup> Alone, these references may appear odd, but they are not presented in isolation; rather they are paired up with Umiliana's devotion to the Christ child. Her earthly motherhood is de-emphasized in order to elevate the importance of her desire to mother (that is, to both bear and nurture) the child of God. As God the father substituted for her father on earth, and as Christ substituted for any potential husband, so, too, does the infant Jesus substitute for Umiliana's children.

This is, at least, the rhetoric. Yet even within this rhetorical substitution there are a number of inconsistencies. First, Umiliana is not completely estranged from her father. Although described as being isolated from her family, Umiliana is very much in contact with her kinswomen, who are left, after her death, to continue her legacy. Secondly, while she may claim to be married to Christ, we cannot help but notice that this marriage comes after Umiliana's first marriage to a man. Finally, Umiliana's children do indeed visit her after her husband's death, and maternal images fill her thoughts. Indeed Umiliana's passion for the Christ child could perhaps be the displaced affection for her own children. While motherhood in the Middle Ages was in part a social construction different from those with which we are more familiar today, it is clear from Vito's emphasis on Umiliana's affection for the Christ child that maternal tenderness was, in fact, an idealized feminine quality. Her children, however, separated from her by her husband's family, as well as hindrances to her religious devotion, do not receive this affection. Instead, her devotion is to the child Jesus.

As wife, daughter, and mother, Umiliana's actions within the text inscribe her both inside and outside of Vito's description. While medieval women were held to stricter moral judgments both by religious and social orders, they were also bound to harsher limitations by these same orders. Although Umiliana gave away money that belonged to her father and husband, she could give nothing of her own away, until she committed herself, body and soul, to God. This process, and the mystic actions of which it consists, make up most of the second half of Vito's text. Satisfied in his portrayal of Umiliana as an ordinary woman, the hagiographer later sought to establish her as extra-ordinary. While this is similar to much of hagiographic rhetoric, this rhetoric reveals itself, as in the case of Umiliana, in a different way with women saints than with men, as a result of their different roles and categorization. The inside/outside relationship of Umiliana to her world evidences the peculiar situation of the mystic penitent lay woman, both inside and outside the orders of society, family, and religion.

## Notes

1. Vitus Cortonensis, *Vita beatae Humilianae de Cerchis*, in *Acta Sanctorum*, Maii IV (Antwerp, 1685), pp. 385-400. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references to Umiliana's life are taken from this text, and shall be identified by chapter and section numbers; references to post-mortem miracles are taken from *Hippolitus Florentinus, Miracula intra triennium ab obitu patrata*, in *Acta Sanctorum*, Maii IV, pp. 403-7. Other extant versions of the Life of Umiliana appear to be based, either as translations or interpretations, on Vito's text. See especially Francesco Cionacci, *Storia della beata Umiliana de' Cerchi vedova fiorentina del terz'ordine di San Francesco, distinta in IV parti* (Florence, 1682). Further information on the life, relics, and cult of Umiliana de' Cerchi may be found in the following secondary sources: G. Battelli, *La leggenda della beata Umiliana de' Cerchi* (Florence, 1940); R. Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, 2.1, *Guelfi e ghibellini* (Florence, 1956; trans. *Geschichte von Florenz*, 2.1, *Guelfen und Ghibellinen* [Berlin, 1908]), pp. 180-88; Maria Romano Franco, *La Beata Umiliana de Cerchi* (Rome, 1977); Z. Lazzeri, "La Beata Umiliana dei Cerchi," *Studi francescani* 7 (1921), 196-206; Claudio Leonardi and Giovanni Pozzi, "Umiliana Cerchi," *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* (Genoa, 1988), pp. 80-93; Anna Benvenuti Papi, "Umiliana dei Cerchi: nascita di un culto nella Firenze del Duecento," *Studi francescani* 77 (1980), 87-117; Benvenuti Papi, "La Santa Vedova," in *In castro poenitentiae: Santità e società femminile nell'Italia medievale* (Rome, 1990), pp. 58-98; Benvenuti Papi, "Cerchi, Umiliana," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome, 1960- ), 23:692-96; Monica Cristina Storini, "Umiliana e il suo biografo: Costruzione di un'agiografia femminile fra XIII e XIV secolo," *Annali d'Italianistica* 13 (1995), 19-39. For Umiliana's reliquary, see James Beck, "The Reliquary Bust of the Beata Umiliana de' Cerchi," *Antichità Viva* 28 (1989), 41-44; Dora Liscia Bemporad, "Due busti reliquiario in Santa Croce di Firenze," *Antichità Viva* 26 (1987), 59-68; Ugo Procacci, "Una lettera del Baldinucci e antiche immagini della Beata Umiliana de' Cerchi," *Antichità Viva* 15 (1976), 3-10.

2. Recent studies that focus specifically on the "transgressive" nature of late medieval female spirituality include Anna Benvenuti Papi, "In castro poenitentiae"; Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago, 1985); Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, *Mistiche e devote nell'Italia tardomedievale* (Naples, 1992); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1992); Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987); Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982); Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean, ed., *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women* (Urbana and Chicago, 1995); Michael Goodich, "The Contours of Female Piety in Later Medieval Hagiography," *Church History* 50 (1981), 20-31; E. Ann Matter and John Coakley, *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance* (Philadelphia, 1994); Grado G. Merlo, "Santità e condizione femminile nella Toscana medievale," in *Archivio Storico Italiano* (Florence, 1993), pp. 219-37; Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia, 1995); Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Consolation of the Blessed: Women Saints in Medieval Tuscany* (New York, 1980); Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York, 1994); André Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Age* (Rome, 1981); Vauchez, "L'ideale di santità nel movimento femminile francescano," in *Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII* (Assisi, 1980).
3. Catherine Marie Mooney, "Women's Visions, Men's Words: The Portrayal of Holy Women and Men in Fourteenth-Century Italian Hagiography" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1991). See also Bynum, "'And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 151-80; Benvenuti Papi, "Una Santa Vedova"; Petroff, "Male Confessors and Female Penitents: Possibilities for Dialogue," in *Body and Soul*, 139-60; Storini, "Umiliana e il suo biografo."
4. For information regarding the life of Vito da Cortona, see G. G. Sbaraglia, *Supplementum et castigatio ad Scriptores Trium Ordinum s. Francisci* (Rome, 1936), 3:162; and L. Wadding, *Scriptores Ordinis Minorem* (Rome, 1906), p. 220.
5. Benvenuti Papi, "Una Santa Vedova."
6. For this period in Florentine history and the role of Franciscan friars and lay Franciscans, see M. Bertagna, "Sul Terz'Ordine francescano in Toscana nel sec. XIII: Note storiche e considerazioni," *Collectanea Franciscana* 43 (1973), 263-77; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, 2.1, Guelfi e ghibellini; Lazzeri, "La Beata Umiliana de' Cerchi"; G. G. Meersseman, *Dossier de l'ordre de la Pénitance au XIIIe siècle* (Friburg, 1960); Anna Benvenuti Papi, "Fratelli mendicanti e pinzochere in Toscana," in *Mistiche e devote*, ed. Bornstein and Rusconi, pp. 85-106.
7. For the history of dowry laws in late medieval Florence, see Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1994); Isabella Chabot, "Widowhood and Poverty in Late Medieval Florence," *Continuity and Change* 3 (1988), 291-311; and Maria Consiglia De Matteis, "La donna e la vita quotidiana nell'Italia tardo medievale," in *Frau und Spätmittelalterlicher Alltag* (Vienna, 1986), pp. 409-28.
8. The past thirty years have seen a remarkable increase in the number of studies that utilize hagiography for social histories. A non-comprehensive list of major general studies on saints and medieval society includes Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell, ed., *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 1991); Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981); Pierre Delooy, *Sociologie et canonisations. Collection scientifique de la Faculté de Droit de l'Université de Liège* 30 (Liège and The Hague, 1969); Sofia Boesch Gajano, ed., *Agiografia Altomedievale* (Bologna, 1976); Michael Goodich, *Vita Perfecta: The Ideal of Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century* (Stuttgart, 1982); F. Graus, *volk, Herrscher, und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger: Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* (Prague, 1965); Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago, 1984); Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1992); Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination* (Chicago, 1985); Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident*; Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event 1000-1215* (Philadelphia, 1982); Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago, 1982); Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History* (Cambridge, 1983).
9. For a complete account of this history, see Benvenuti Papi, "Una Santa Vedova," pp. 76-98.
10. It is worth noting that Umiliana's mother, Ulivieri Cerchi's first wife, died young, and although the Life lists Umiliana's stepmother as one of her testimonies, the absence of Umiliana's biological mother in Vito's text underscores the masculine genealogy into which Umiliana's life is inserted. For a discussion of the absent mother and genealogy, see Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et parentes* (Paris, 1987).
11. Vito's text begins with a list of thirty-three witnesses: the three male witnesses are Franciscans (Umiliana's confessor, Michele of Florence, Vito himself, and a certain friar "Bonamicus"); two of the thirty female witnesses



("Soror Gisla de Mucello" and "Soror Benevenuta") are nuns; and sixteen are married women—the marital status of twelve others is not revealed. What is striking about this brief list of witnesses is that the female relatives of Umiliana are described not in relation to their husbands, as in "wife of . . ." (like other female witnesses) but in relation to Umiliana, as in "sister of Umiliana" or "daughter of Umiliana." Umiliana's stepmother, for example, is described not as the wife of Ulivieri Cerchi, but as "noverca prædictæ S. Humilianæ" (*Vita*, Prologus). The list of testimonies clearly shows a preponderance of female followers. Similarly, Umiliana's miracles, both those performed during her life and described in Vito's text, and those performed after her death and recounted in the *Miracula*, reveal an overwhelming number of women recipients of the beata's favor.

12. Katherine Jane Gill, "Penitents, Pinzochere and Mantellate: Varieties of Women's Religious Communities in Central Italy, c. 1300-1520" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1994).

13. "Women's myths and rituals tend to explore a state of being; men's tend to build elaborate and discrete stages between self and other": Caroline Walker Bynum, "Introduction," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Bynum, Steven Harrell, and Paul Richmans (Boston, 1986), p. 13. See also Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 27-51; and Bynum, "Women's Symbols," in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, pp. 277-96.

14. Petroff, "The Rhetoric of Transgression in the Lives of Italian Women Saints," in *Body and Soul*, pp. 161-81.

15. For rates of canonization of married women compared to unmarried women, see Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, pp. 121-37; Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident*, pp. 355-74.

16. The use of the preposition di further illustrates my point: Umiliana is "of" the Cerchi lineage, or one of the Cerchis' (possessive). She is identified not with her city, Florence (like Vito da Cortona or Michele da Firenze), but by the genealogy within which she was born.

17. At least two children are mentioned (*Vita* 1.1, 1.7 and 1.43), but it is possible that Umiliana had more. I am inclined to think these two, both daughters, were the only children Umiliana had, given her brief marriage (five years). It is possible that a male child would have provoked greater attention by both the author of the *Life* and Umiliana's family. On motherhood and sainthood in the Middle Ages, see Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, "Introduction," in *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society* (Athens, GA, 1990), pp. 1-68; Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1991); Dyan Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, 1993); and Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1996).

18. Rudolph Bell suggests that Umiliana's family did not fully trust her in the care of her children (*Holy Anorexia*, pp. 106-7); however, it would not have been unusual for children to be raised in their father's household, as that was the house to which they societally belonged.

19. Mooney, "Women's Visions, Men's Words," pp. 264-73.