

## Introduction

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### *The Other Voice*

The shadow of convent walls loomed over the life and literary production of the Venetian nun and feminist writer Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652), forced as a young woman to become a Benedictine nun. The most radical female writer in early modern Italy, Tarabotti took up her pen to protest her consignment to the cloister, publishing—at the height of the Counter-Reformation—a series of works attacking the Venetian state and the Church for their abuse of women. By speaking unflinchingly about the physical and psychological toll of enclosure, Tarabotti was able to address not only the experience of nuns but also the broader subjugation of all women. Tarabotti wrote seven widely circulated texts and several others that have been lost: most of those that survive are polemical in nature, explicitly contesting the *raison d'état* that led both secular and ecclesiastical leaders to sacrifice the needs of women to advance their own power. Tarabotti called convents prisons because of the number of unwilling girls who lived in them, relegated to the strict cloister imposed after the Council of Trent even though they had no religious vocation. Beyond issues concerning the cloister, Tarabotti's works also advanced a more general, and equally trenchant, critique of the misogyny intrinsic to social custom and literary and religious culture. She exposed the paradoxes of women's condition—how men deprived women of an education and then judged them to be ignorant, or expected women (and not themselves) to be chaste and temperate—and described how economic and political factors such as rising dowries worsened women's situation in the Republic. With a clear-sightedness worthy of Machiavelli himself (whose works she read despite their prohibition by the Church), Tarabotti analyzed the larger political and social mechanisms that conditioned women's lives. Her scathing attack on forced monachization landed one work, *La semplicità ingannata* (*Innocence Deceived*), on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1661. While monastic walls are a constant presence in all of Tarabotti's works, usually as a barrier imposed forcibly upon nuns, *Paradiso monacale* (*Convent Paradise*)—Tarabotti's first published work and the centerpiece of her devotional writing—invites the reader into the cloister to experience the spiritual joys as well as trials of enclosure. In *Convent Paradise*, the figure of the nun as protagonist is flanked by the built environment of the convent and the rituals that structure the lives of its inhabitants.

Despite the wide interest garnered by Tarabotti's feminist thought, her devotional writing has been largely overlooked. Most notably, *Convent Paradise*, originally published in 1643, has remained without a modern edition or translation until now. Yet as the work with which Tarabotti first announced herself to Venice's literary milieu, it was central to the development of her social and political thought

as well as to her literary success. Along with *Le lagrime d’Arcangela Tarabotti per la morte dell’Illustrissima Signora Regina Donati* (*Tears of Arcangela Tarabotti For the Death of the Most Illustrious Signora Regina Donati*, 1650), an elegy for a convent sister that elaborates a powerful vision of female sanctity, *Convent Paradise* provides important insight into the religious and cultural climate that shaped Tarabotti’s life and literary voice.<sup>1</sup> More nuanced than the straightforward celebration of religious life for women that it presents itself to be, the work—as careful analysis reveals—offers a new framework in which to understand this foundational feminist writer and political theoretician. With *Convent Paradise*, Tarabotti embraces her status as a nun in order to assert authority in religious matters, and claims a divine endorsement of her controversial sociopolitical thought. Her text is also shaped by a persistently feminist approach to sacred materials: a radicalism that, while less overt than that found in her other works, is equally compelling and rewards close attention. At the same time, *Convent Paradise* reflects the religious culture that colored every aspect of Tarabotti’s life as a seventeenth-century Venetian and nun, offering a meditative portrait of monastic life and of the material and spiritual challenges of the cloister. Richly intertextual, it offers insight into the liturgy Tarabotti recited and into her familiarity with an array of religious texts and biblical passages; Latin citations from scriptural readings and the Church Fathers are woven into the text, alongside references to vernacular literary works by Dante, Petrarch, and others. *Convent Paradise* underscores her commitment to certain aspects of Catholic thought, such as the importance of female saints, the intercessory role of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, and the centrality of free will. Tarabotti herself saw no contradiction between her religious and secular writings, which, taken together, reflect the many facets of female experience in the early modern period. Considering Tarabotti’s devotional writing alongside her more openly polemical texts illuminates the complex interplay between religion, gender, and dissent in early modern Venice.

### Convent Paradise and Convent Life in Seventeenth-Century Venice

Born in 1604, Elena Cassandra Tarabotti—who would assume the name Arcangela as a nun—entered the convent of Sant’Anna in Castello as a young girl, probably around 1617.<sup>2</sup> One of six daughters, Tarabotti (as she tells us in her *Letters*

1. Arcangela Tarabotti, *Le lagrime d’Arcangela Tarabotti per la morte dell’Illustrissima Signora Regina Donati*. Venice: Guerigli, 1650. A modern edition and translation of this work by Ray and Westwater is forthcoming.

2. In her *Letters*, Tarabotti says she was eleven years old when she entered the convent, but Emilio Zanette’s research suggests the date was 1617, making her thirteen. See Arcangela Tarabotti, *Letters Familiar and Formal*, trans. and ed. Meredith K. Ray and Lynn Lara Westwater (Toronto: Iter Inc. and Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012), 153n319 (letter 99); see also Emilio Zanette, *Suor Arcangela monaca del Seicento veneziano* (Rome: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1960), 27.

*Familiar and Formal*) was born with a limp; her parents, Stefano Tarabotti and Maria Cadena dei Tolentini, would have deemed her less marriageable than her sisters.<sup>3</sup> Marriages in Tarabotti's Venice were a costly undertaking, requiring a steep dowry; in comparison, the fee required to enter a convent was more modest, making it an appealing alternative for many families, if not for their daughters. Records for Tarabotti's convent, for example, show that her father paid a sum of 1,200 ducats for her "spiritual dowry"; more unusually, he also paid a supplementary fee to exempt his daughter, because of her congenital condition, from extra duties.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, a typical marriage dowry for a young woman of Tarabotti's social class in seventeenth-century Venice could cost tens of thousands of ducats.<sup>5</sup> Girls who paid a dowry to the convent would become choir nuns, with a voice in convent governance, as distinct from the *converse*, usually of lower social class, who did not pay such a fee. Many young girls entered the convent, like Tarabotti, as *putte a spese*, or boarders, entrusted to the nuns in order to receive

3. On Tarabotti's limp, see her *Letters*, 108 (letter 53). Of Tarabotti's five sisters, two would marry, while the others remained unmarried but did not enter convents. See Zanette, *Suor Arcangela*, 4; Elissa Weaver, "Introduzione," in Francesco Buoninsegni and Arcangela Tarabotti, *Satira e Antisatira*, ed. Elissa Weaver (Rome: Salerno, 1998), 11; Elissa B. Weaver, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Antisatire: In Defense of Women, against Francesco Buoninsegni*, ed. and trans. Elissa B. Weaver (Toronto: Iter Press; Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2020), 4; and Simona Bortot, "Introduzione: La penna all'ombra delle grate," in Arcangela Tarabotti, *La semplicità ingannata*, ed. Simona Bortot (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2007), 23. Francesca Medioli states that Tarabotti had four, not five, sisters; see Tarabotti, *L'Inferno monacale di Arcangela Tarabotti*, ed. Francesca Medioli (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990), 111. According to Zanette (*Suor Arcangela*, 27), Tarabotti's younger sister Camilla was accepted into Sant'Anna as an *educanda* (boarder), but never entered the convent. Medioli says that another younger sister did enter, although no archival source is cited: "Tarabotti, Arcangela (1604–1652)." *Encyclopedia.com*. <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/tarabotti-arcangela-1604-1652>>.

4. See the Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter ASV), Sant'Anna di Castello, Atti, busta 4 doppia fila [subsection marked "1620, polizze del mese luglio e agosto"]: "On September 12 we received 1000 ducats from Steffano Tarrabotto [sic] for his daughter Elena's dowry, which with the 200 ducats already given amounts to the 1200 ducats he promised his said daughter as her dowry" (12 settembre r.mo [ricevemmo] dal s[igno]r Steffano Tarrabotto ducatti mille che son per dotte d'Elena sua figliuola et con gli altri ducatti 200 datti per inanzi fanno li ducatti mille e dugento ch'havea promesso per dotte di detta figliolla). On the supplement paid by Stefano Tarabotti to circumvent convent rules against admitting a candidate with an illness or disability, see Margherita Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello. Inventario archivistico di un monastero benedettino femminile" (tesi di laurea, University of Ca' Foscari, Venice, 2005–2006), 22.

5. Tarabotti, *L'Inferno monacale*, 113. The average dowry for marriage ranged from eight to forty times the cost of a spiritual dowry. Cf. Francesca Medioli, "Monache e monacazioni nel Seicento," in "De monialibus (secoli XVI–XVIII)," ed. Gabriella Zarri, Francesca Medioli, and Paola Vismara Chiappa, *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 33 (1997): 688.

a rudimentary education before going on to take vows (or, for those whose families had not designated them for monastic life, before returning to the secular world).

In mid-seventeenth-century Venice, there were some thirty-nine convents on the main island alone, housing more than 2,500 cloistered nuns, a number that had risen significantly since the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The increase was not due to growing religious fervor, but rather to complex economic and political factors that took little account of girls' own desires. As the price of marital dowries skyrocketed, convents provided a safe and honorable placement for girls whose families could not afford to, or chose not to, marry them off. Among the noble class, there were also fewer available bridegrooms; Venetian aristocratic families increasingly restricted marriage and inheritance to one son alone so that a family's landholdings would not be parceled out into many increasingly less valuable portions. Jutta Sperling has argued that noble families, facing a dearth of eligible men, thus placed their daughters in convents rather than marry them "down."<sup>7</sup> Although Tarabotti's family was not noble—it belonged to the well-to-do citizen class—the demographic factors described above conditioned the seventeenth-century convent environment whose contours Tarabotti exposes in her works.

If eldest sons, by primogeniture, were destined by their families to marry and inherit, older sisters were often consigned to the cloister so that a family would have time to save money for younger sisters' marital dowries. As the eldest of six sisters, Tarabotti's position in the family (even beyond her congenital limp) rendered her a likely candidate for the convent. In *Convent Hell*, one of Tarabotti's earliest works, which circulated only in manuscript due to its portrayal of the moral corruption rife in convents, Tarabotti bitterly contrasts the lives of married daughters, filled with luxury, and those of daughters in convents, marked by physical deprivation and discomfort.<sup>8</sup> *Convent Paradise*, by contrast, embraces the physical trials of living in a convent as necessary to spiritual rectitude. *Convent Paradise* and *Convent Hell* can be understood as two radically different perspectives on the same convent experience: one belonging to nuns by vocation, the other to nuns by coercion.

6. See Medioli, "Monache e monacazioni," 676–78. According to Jutta Sperling, there were almost three thousand nuns in Venice in 1642: see *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 28, table 2.

7. In Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*, 26–29. See also Stanley Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Although a religious career was also frequently chosen for unmarried sons, men were not subject to strict cloister.

8. In her *Letters* (158, 231), Tarabotti directs two missives (letters 106 and 188) to her sisters that suggest tension in their relationship.

Families' economic and social motivations for placing their daughters in convents aligned precisely with the policies of the Venetian Republic, which encouraged this practice as a means to control the growth of the patriciate.<sup>9</sup> Tarabotti herself recognized the political dimension of forced monachization and criticized the "reasons of state" that led to girls' unwilling enclosure. Although Tarabotti takes pains in *Convent Paradise* to emphasize that many nuns voluntarily chose convent life, the frequency of forced monachization compelled even influential Church figures to recognize the problem. Venetian Patriarch Giovanni Tiepolo stated that nuns made "a gift of their own liberty ... not just to God, but to their native land, to the world, and to their closest relatives," emphasizing not the spiritual dimension of their religious profession but its convenience to family and state.<sup>10</sup> Cardinal Giovanni Battista de Luca described forced enclosure as a penance of "everlasting imprisonment, which is perhaps the second greatest after capital punishment."<sup>11</sup> As Craig Monson has noted, it would be difficult to find "a clearer example of male domination" than forced monachization, since it "devised a sexually segregated, constricted sphere for women, where they were locked away to preserve the family patrimony and protect family honor."<sup>12</sup>

Forced monachization was officially prohibited by the Church. Chapter 17 of the Decree on Regulars and Nuns, which was formulated during the twenty-fifth (and last) session of the Council of Trent in 1563, required that girls be examined before taking the veil to make sure they took this step of their own volition and not under coercion.<sup>13</sup> Practically speaking, however, it was impossible

9. On forced monachization, see, for example, Gabriella Zarri, "Monasteri femminili e città (secoli XV–XVIII)," in *Storia d'Italia*, annali 9, *La chiesa e il potere politico*, ed. Giorgio Chittolini and Giovanni Miccoli (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), 359–429; Francesca Medioli, "Monacazioni forzate: Donne ribelle al proprio destino," *Clio: Trimestrale di studi storici* 30 (1994): 431–54; Francesca Medioli, "The Dimensions of the Cloister: Enclosure, Constraint, and Protection in Seventeenth Century Italy," in *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), 165–80; Giovanna Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio: Monacazioni forzate, clausura e proposte di vita religiosa femminile nell'eta moderna* (Pordenone: Biblioteca dell'Immagine, 1996); Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*; and Mary Laven, "Cast Out and Shut In: The Experience of Nuns in Counter-Reformation Venice," in *At the Margins: Minority Groups in Premodern Italy*, ed. Stephen J. Milner (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 72–93.

10. Quoted in Letizia Panizza, "Volume Editor's Introduction," in *Paternal Tyranny*, by Arcangela Tarabotti, ed. and trans. Letizia Panizza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4n6. Panizza's edition is a slightly abridged translation of Tarabotti's *Semplicità ingannata*; see p. 31 below. As Patriarch of Venice, Tiepolo was the highest ranking ecclesiastical figure in the Republic.

11. Quoted in Medioli, "The Dimensions of the Cloister," 169.

12. Craig A. Monson, *Divas in the Convent: Nuns, Music, and Defiance in Seventeenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 6–7.

13. Giuseppe Alberigo et al., eds., *Conciliarum oecumenicorum decreta* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1991), 781.

to enforce this rule, since families could pressure girls into feigning that they had chosen religious life for themselves.<sup>14</sup> In *Convent Hell*, Tarabotti pointed her finger at professed nuns, too, as complicit in such coercion, deceiving girls into thinking convent life was pleasant and easy when the reality was quite the opposite. In *Convent Paradise*, on the other hand, Tarabotti tends to blame unwilling nuns themselves for their lack of vocation.

With the Counter-Reformation imposition of strict enclosure—driven by the Church’s anxiety to protect nuns’ chastity at any cost—the practice of forced monachization assumed drastic consequences. Nuns were prevented from setting foot outside the convent after the profession of vows, their contact with the outside world was discouraged, and their lives were so strictly regulated that even their contact with female relatives had to take place across the parlor grate. Convent architecture began to assume a prison-like aspect, as windows and doors were reduced in size, barred, or eliminated altogether.<sup>15</sup> While *Convent Paradise* does not comment directly on such measures, the text—again, in contrast to the perspective presented in Tarabotti’s other works—presents nuns’ isolation from the world as useful to their spiritual advancement.

### *The Convent of Sant’Anna*

The Sant’Anna convent in which Tarabotti spent most of her life is the setting for *Convent Paradise*, both materially and spiritually. Within the walls of this convent, situated at the margins of Venice, Tarabotti underwent the rites of passage that bound her to the perpetual enclosure celebrated in *Convent Paradise*, while the convent’s daily rhythms of worship and communion provided the inspiration and the source material for her narrative.

14. In many cases it was difficult for girls to go against the wishes of their families or to question a destiny that might have been laid out for them from birth. See Schutte, “The Permeable Cloister?,” in *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*, ed. Elissa B. Weaver (Ravenna: Longo, 2006), 21.

15. On strict cloister and its effects, see, for example, Raimondo Creytens, “La giurisprudenza della Sacra Congregazione del Concilio nella questione della clausura delle monache (1564–1576),” in *La Sacra Congregazione del Concilio: Quarto centenario dalla Fondazione (1564–1964)* (Vatican City: n.p., 1964), 563–97; Raimondo Creytens, “La riforma dei monasteri femminili dopo i Decreti Tridentini,” in *Il Concilio di Trento e la riforma tridentina: Atti del convegno storico internazionale* (Rome: Herder, 1965), 45–84; Francesca Medioli, “La clausura delle monache nell’amministrazione della congregazione romana sopra i regolari,” in *Il monachesimo femminile in Italia dall’alto medioevo al secolo XVII a confronto con l’oggi: Atti del VI convegno del Cento Studi Farfensi, Santa Vittoria in Matenano, 21–24 settembre, 1995*, ed. Gabriella Zarri (Nagarine di San Pietro in Cariano [Verona]: Il Segno dei Gabrielli Editori, 1997), 249–82; Medioli, “Monache e monacazioni”; and Zarri, “Monasteri femminili.” On convent organization and rules see Schutte, “Permeable Cloister”; Zarri, “Monasteri femminili”; and Medioli, “La clausura delle monache.”



Figure 5. Convent of Sant'Anna in Venice: Interior Courtyard, 2018.  
Photo by the editors.

The convent of Sant'Anna was established at the far edge of the *Castello sestiere* in the early thirteenth century as an institution for Augustinian hermits,<sup>16</sup> with the church, convent, and cemetery dedicated to Saints Anne and Catherine. When the monks moved to a more central location, they sold the property to a group of Benedictine nuns who desired a secluded setting. These nuns—who numbered four plus the abbess—took official possession of the property in 1305. As time passed, however, the nuns living in the convent began to lose the ascetic religious fervor that had led them to this isolated spot, and—pleading poor health—asked ecclesiastical authorities for permission to leave the premises when necessary in order to visit their families. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,

16. Of the Brittiniani branch. The information on Sant'Anna that follows in this paragraph is from Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello," 3–8.

such loosening of regulations became common in Venetian convents. From authority figures such as abbesses and prioresses to simple choir nuns, there was increased laxity both inside and outside the convent: fasting and prayers were not always maintained, nuns left the convent even for long periods, and men were allowed relatively free access to the *parlatorio* (the convent parlor or visiting room). In large part because many of the women were unwilling residents, these sorts of violations continued to occur despite legislation promulgated in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the structures of the Sant'Anna complex—already nearly four centuries old—began to fail. In the early seventeenth century, a decision was made to tear down the old church and build a new one. The construction project would stretch from 1634, when the first stone of the new church was laid, until 1659, when the new church was consecrated.<sup>17</sup> It was ongoing, that is, for about half of the time that Tarabotti spent at Sant'Anna, from her entrance around 1617 until her death in 1652. The church contained some notable ornamentation, including paintings by Domenico Tintoretto, Bartolomeo Scaligero, Santo Piatti, and others; the ceiling was painted by Francesco Ruschi.<sup>18</sup> A gilded grate divided the nuns' church from the exterior church. In the internal choir, there were two paintings by Albrecht Dürer, while the refectory featured a Greek marble column. A cloth embroidered with silk and gold threads by Perina and Ottavia Robusti, daughters of Tintoretto and nuns at Sant'Anna, was modeled on the *Crucifixion* painted by Tintoretto for the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, and exhibited on the altar several times a year starting in 1609.<sup>19</sup>

17. Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello," 14–16. Many documents regarding the church's decrepit state in the seventeenth century and the nuns' attempts to rectify it can be found in ASV, Sant'Anna, Atti, busta 6. A loose sheet from 1636, for instance, reads: "The convent building in which we most poor nuns of Sant'Anna live is among the oldest in the city, since it was built 800 years ago. It usually houses more than seventy of its noble and citizen women who constantly pray to the blessed Lord for this most serene Republic. This building has been reduced to such a state that—beyond it being necessary to knock it to the ground for its decrepitude because of its age, such that it no longer can stay upright—it is also necessary to level the adjoining *coro* [choir], where we go for all the Divine Offices both day and night. Experts say that we will have to do the same to the church." (Il Monasterio di Noi poveriss.e Monache di S.ta Anna di questa città, il quale è delle più antequi, perch'è 800 anni che fu' fabricato, ordinamente ha più di 70 sue nobile et cittadine, che continuamente pregano il sig.r Iddio per questa ser.ma Rep.ca, è esso ridotto in tal stato, ch'oltra ch'è necess.o di metterlo tutto in Terra per la corrosità, nella ditta antequità sua, che più non può tenirsi in piedi, fa' anche che insieme insieme [sic] il nostro coro ch'è congiunto con esso, nel qual stamo a' tutti li divini officij, diurni et notturni, convenirà medesamente venir in terra, et li Periti affermano che cosi saremo astrette di fare anche della giesia.) The account exaggerates both the age of the church and the number of elite nuns.

18. On Francesco Ruschi, see p. 40 below.

19. Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello," 17–19. On the cloth, see Isabella Campagnol, "Invisible Seamstresses: Feminine Works in Venetian Convents from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century," in *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750–1950*, ed. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Farnham, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 167–68.





Figure 7. Location of Sant'Anna convent on map of Venice by Giovanni Merlo, *Vero e real disegno della inclita città di Venetia*, 1676, Newberry Library, Chicago, Novacco 4F288.

In the space dedicated to the convent, there were two *parlatori* and two courtyard cloisters.<sup>20</sup> The first floor of the convent had a bread pantry and bakery, as well as the kitchen, refectory, pantry, and a cantina.<sup>21</sup> On the second floor were the infirmary and the dormitories, which alarmed Patriarch Lorenzo Priuli during his 1593 pastoral visit: he found the windows in many of these spaces, and particularly in the infirmary, to be overly large, stretching all the way to the floor and allowing curious outsiders to look in and nuns to look out and communicate with the outside world. He ordered the windows partially bricked in and obstructed.<sup>22</sup> These restrictions, while limiting visibility in and out of the convent, also limited the light that entered. The darkness in the convent that Tarabotti laments

20. Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello," 23. Schutte ("Permeable Cloister," 26) explains the function of the two *parlatori*: the smaller was used by the nuns' elected superiors to meet with outsiders in conducting convent business, while the larger was a space in which the nuns could see approved visitors.

21. Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello," 23.

22. Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello," 23–24.

As for the cells at Sant'Anna, in the absence of an account contemporary to Tarabotti, an eighteenth-century description must suffice: one cell contained a variety of decorations (four big pictures and twelve small, plus an ivory sculpture of Christ), various furniture (two chests, a small table, a stool, two chairs, and a bed), accessories (bedding, window curtains, a copper bucket, a tin lamp), and some tableware (a jug and a silver utensil).<sup>29</sup> Patriarch Priuli had complained at the end of the sixteenth century that the convent's cells locked from the inside, which was a serious infraction of the rules.<sup>30</sup> Vendramin repeated the prohibition on locks in his 1609 visit.<sup>31</sup> Such privacy was forbidden.

### *The Contours of Monastic Life*

The built environment of Sant'Anna was imbued with both practical and symbolic purpose. For those who were destined to take vows, passage from the secular world to the convent was framed by a succession of rituals that were carefully choreographed to move from the public to the private parts of the convent and to punctuate the trajectory of spiritual transformation. Chief among these rituals was the clothing ceremony, or *vestizione* (vestition, also known as investiture), which marked the transition to perpetual enclosure and communal religious life. The reforms instituted by the Council of Trent mandated, at least in theory, a minimum age of fifteen for the clothing ceremony; Tarabotti, as we learn from *Convent Paradise*, was sixteen when she underwent hers. Lacking an official liturgy to govern it, the clothing ceremony varied from convent to convent, but it had two distinct aspects, with the first part unfolding before a public audience that included the girl's friends and relatives, and the second part within the private spaces of the church reserved for the nuns.<sup>32</sup> After the recitation of Psalm 41, *Quemadmodum desiderat cervus* ("As the hart panteth"), expressing the soul's thirst for God, the postulant processed through the main part of the church.<sup>33</sup> The spectacle was accompanied by verse and music, sometimes polyphonic

29. This description is found in Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello," 24.

30. Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello," 24.

31. Schutte, "Permeable Cloister," 27.

32. Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*, 137. The descriptions of the rites of clothing and profession in the following paragraphs are based primarily on the *Ordo rituum et caeremoniarum suscipendi habitum monialium et emittendi professionem* (Venice: n.p., 1612); see also Craig A. Monson, *Disembodied Voices: Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 183–85, and Robert L. Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens: Nuns and Their Music in Early Modern Milan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 132–37. Jonathan E. Glixon notes that the absence of an official liturgy for the clothing ceremony "gave rise to a bewildering variety of formulas" for the ritual; see Glixon, *Mirrors of Heaven or Worldly Theaters?: Venetian Nunneries and Their Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

33. See Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*, 137–38.

(featuring multiple independent melodic lines and viewed with ambivalence by the Church).<sup>34</sup> As the strains of Psalm 121—*Laetatus sum* (“I rejoiced”)—filled the air, the postulant continued to make her way to the door of the convent, where she was received by the nuns. The *Te Deum laudamus* (“Thee, O God, we praise”) was then sung, followed by Mass, with clergy and relatives remaining in the public part of the church and postulant and nuns retreating to the inner part of the church, where the girl’s family could not follow. The postulant was expected to express to the father confessor her willingness to sacrifice herself to God. Although, as noted above, the reforms of the Council of Trent aimed to ensure the consent of girls entering the convent, Tarabotti writes in *Convent Paradise* that she participated in this part of the ceremony with her tongue, but not her heart.<sup>35</sup> To symbolize the novice’s new status, her hair—that reminder of female beauty and secular vanities—was shorn. After her tonsure, the novice donned the habit and veil, as well as a belt symbolizing temperance and chastity.<sup>36</sup> The kiss of peace was exchanged between the novice and the nuns, and the hymn “Veni Creator Spiritus” (“Come, Creator Spirit”) was sung; at this point the novice assumed her new religious name. Festivities, paid for by the family, commonly followed the ceremony. This sequence of events could vary.<sup>37</sup>

After the clothing ceremony, the novice nun was supposed to wait at least a year before pronouncing her solemn vows in the profession ceremony, although in practice this next and most important step occurred sometimes sooner and sometimes later. For Tarabotti, it took place in 1623, three years after her *vestizione*.<sup>38</sup> Profession was a grave moment, marking the nun’s death to the world and her new life as a bride dedicated to Christ, and the rituals associated with the ceremony borrowed from both marriage and funeral rites. It was also, in many cases, the last time the nun would appear in a public space.<sup>39</sup> Here, too, as in the clothing ceremony, the sequence of events varied, but Benedictine professions often began with an invitation and the antiphon *Prudentes virgines* (“Prudent Virgins”), followed by an exchange between the celebrant and the novice and an interrogation reaffirming her desire to be admitted to the order.<sup>40</sup> Mass was said, and the novice

34. Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*, 138. See pp. 21–22 below for further discussion.

35. See *Convent Paradise*, p. 86, perhaps echoing a warning in Antonio Grimani, *Costituzioni et decreti approvati nella sinodo diocesana, sopra la retta disciplina monacale* (Venice: Meietti, 1592), chapter 60 (LX). See also Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent* (New York: Viking, 2003), 11, 213n41.

36. *Ordo*, 10–12; Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*, 138.

37. Glixon, *Mirrors of Heaven*, 125. On the hymn “Veni Creator Spiritus,” see note 169 of *Convent Paradise*.

38. See Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 27.

39. Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, 133.

40. Glixon, *Mirrors of Heaven*, 132.

pronounced her solemn and permanent vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. More prayers followed, and the “Veni Creator Spiritus” was again sung. The novice’s new habit was blessed and, covered with a black cloth that symbolized the funeral pall, she lay face down on the stone floor of the church (and thus we find Tarabotti recalling in *Convent Paradise* the experience of “swearing upon the holy stones” [p. 87]). Candles were placed near her head and feet. Upon being invited by the priest to rise and meet her new spouse, she then answered with words declaring her love: *Mel et lac ex eius ore suscepi* (“Milk and honey have I received from his lips”<sup>41</sup>). The newly professed nun was then given a copy of her order’s Rule governing convent life, and sometimes a breviary or psalter.<sup>42</sup>

Tarabotti’s earlier manuscript, *Convent Hell*, offered a harrowing description of the profession ceremony and its effect on forced nuns. Miserable and desolate, such women see “no possible recourse.” When they realize that their laments will not cause heaven to take pity on them, “with harsh resignation” they “try to sublimate their feelings of anguish and, with lips weakened by despair, they force themselves to utter their own burial rites.”<sup>43</sup> *Convent Paradise*—in which Tarabotti is always careful to characterize herself as a willing nun—describes the moment of profession more positively as a solemn step on the nun’s gradual path to salvation, and casts her status as a bride of Christ as the highest privilege. Yet even here, Tarabotti struggles to come to terms with her vows. Tarabotti initially suggests that not at profession, but only subsequently, after a third and final ceremony known as consecration, did she “truly” become a nun, putting aside the inner reservations that had continued since her profession:

Even if I spoke and acted in one way, my mind’s intentions were quite different. I lived in this manner up until my consecration, a nun in name, but not in dress or behavior—the former foolishly vain and the latter vainly foolish. (p. 87)

The “ritual betrothal” of consecration was the final step on the path to becoming a fully professed choir nun and could occur only after a woman turned twenty-five.<sup>44</sup> Tarabotti was consecrated at this age in 1629. Although performance of the rite was increasingly rare after the Council of Trent, its liturgy largely subsumed into that of profession, some convents did continue to enact it

41. This response also appears in the consecration ceremony, discussed below. See Glixon, *Mirrors of Heaven*, 111.

42. Glixon, *Mirrors of Heaven*, 130. On the Rule of Saint Benedict, which governed Tarabotti’s convent, see note 110 of *Convent Paradise*.

43. Tarabotti, *L’Inferno monacale*, 70.

44. Monson, *Disembodied Voices*, 195.

sporadically.<sup>45</sup> The consecration of virgins highlighted the nuns' special status as brides of Christ and borrowed many aspects of the secular marriage ceremony, including the "giving away" of the bride (by a *paranympha*, a special matron appointed for this task<sup>46</sup>) and the bestowing of a ring symbolizing the union with the celestial bridegroom. A group rite, it could involve several professed nuns at once, and last up to six hours; much of it was based on the Feast of Saint Agnes, patron saint of virgins, or on the Common of Virgins.<sup>47</sup> Like the other major ceremonies, consecration—known in Venice as the *sagra*—was an occasion for festivity; typically, the nuns' families would offer sweets and money to the convent sisters to mark the occasion.<sup>48</sup> Consecration had a distinctly public aspect, with a complex and stylized liturgy.

If in *Convent Paradise* Tarabotti at first foregrounds consecration as a pivotal moment of her spiritual journey, however, she soon admits that her resistance to religious life continued for several years after the ceremony:

After my consecration I returned to the vomitus of briefly abandoned vanities—as a dog that returneth to his vomit, so is the fool that repeateth his folly<sup>49</sup>—and persevered in these for five years, with greater harm to this soul than the relapse of a serious illness would cause. (p. 91)

Only around 1633, Tarabotti explains, did she truly come to accept monastic life, following a transformative encounter with a figure whose presence pervades *Convent Paradise*: Cardinal Federico Corner (1579–1653), Patriarch of Venice, to whom Tarabotti would dedicate the work.<sup>50</sup> The cardinal's guidance, she

45. On the consecration ceremony, which eventually fell out of use until the nineteenth century, see Giancarlo Rocca, ed., *Dizionario degli istituti di perfezione*, 10 vols. (Rome: Edizioni paoline, 1974–2003), 2:1620. Monson (*Disembodied Voices*, 197) further notes that the expense and spectacle of the ceremony, along with its public nature, rendered it increasingly problematic. See also Glixon, *Mirrors of Heaven*, 116.

46. On the role of the paranymph, see also note 619 in *Convent Paradise*.

47. Monson, *Disembodied Voices*, 194; Glixon, *Mirrors of Heaven*, 115. The Common of Virgins refers to the office and mass devoted to virgin saints heard throughout the year. See Santha Bhattacharji, "'Pearl' And the Liturgical 'Common Of Virgins' *Medium Ævum* 64, no. 1 (1995): 37–50.

48. Valenti, "Sant'Anna di Castello," 25.

49. [S]icut canis, qui revertit [sic] ad vomitum suum, sic imprudens qui iterat stultitiam suam. Cf. Proverbs 26.11: *Sicut canis qui revertitur ad vomitum suum, sic imprudens qui iterat stultitiam suam.*

50. Federico Corner (Cornaro), son of Doge Giovanni Corner, was appointed cardinal in 1626, despite Venetian laws that prevented doges' sons from accepting papal appointments. A fierce controversy, however, erupted in 1629 when Corner was appointed bishop of Padua; the Republic strongly opposed the placement of a doge's son in this visible role. For two years Rome and Venice were in a stalemate over the issue, which was still not resolved by the death of Doge Giovanni in the same year. The matter was finally settled when the Patriarch of Venice, Giovanni Tiepolo, died in 1631; Federico ascended to