

Hungry women

Sin and rebellion through food and music in the early modern era

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Longing for food has always had different implications for men and women: associated with power and strength for men, it tends to have a worrying proximity to sexual pleasure for women. Showing an interesting parallelism throughout the Cinquecento, Italian humanists and teachers insisted on forbidding women music and gluttony. Food and music were both considered dangerous stimulants for the female senses, and every woman was encouraged to consider herself as a kind of food to be offered to the only human beings authorized to feel and satisfy desires: men and babies. Women could properly express themselves only inside monastic circles: the most prolific female composer of the seventeenth century was a nun, as was the first woman who wrote down recipes. Elaborate music and food became the means to maintain a lively relationship with the external world. Moreover, nuns also escaped male control by using the opposite system of affirming themselves through fasting and mortifying the flesh.

*In memory of Francesca,
who enjoyed cooking
and loved music*

The relationship between food and Christianity has always been problematic and ambivalent, given the complicated dynamics respecting intentionality and the remission of sins. From reading Penitentials – books circulating between the sixth and eleventh centuries where penances were mathematically calculated, which spread after the crisis of public penitence, but before the diffusion of manuals for confessors (Muzzarelli 1994; 2003: 10–11; 2006: 66–7) – we can see that the remission of sins followed simple rules managed by the priest,¹ who assigned a precise number of days of taking only ‘bread and water’ as a penance.²

- 1 Previously, public penitence had instead been managed by the bishop. The new custom arrived on the Continent from Ireland.
- 2 Bishop Burchard of Worms wrote the last Penitential; the *Corrector sive medicus* (*Patrologia Latina* 140, cols. 949–1014), which was the nineteenth book of his *Decretum* (discussed in Vogel 1974).

After the eleventh century the deprivation of food is changed to personal repentance. The relationship between the individual and sin, which will result in personal repentance, is inevitably accompanied by a careful consideration of it, starting with Original Sin, the source of all human transgressions. In the common opinion the idea of Eve having the primary responsibility for Original Sin is perceived as an indelible stain on woman's honour. This is also shown in iconography: in some pictures the serpent speaking to Eve (Genesis 3:1–5) is dressed as a woman (Flores 1981).³ Theological discussion in the Middle Ages was focused on the *quality* of the Original Sin: was it the consequence of *gluttony*, a view sustained by Ambrose, Evagrius Ponticus, John Cassian, or was it derived from *pride*, as was thought by Augustine and Pope Gregory I? The scholastics too considered gluttony not a fault in itself, but an accessory, because of the shift in the origin of the sin: the *intention* has modified the base of the sin, despite the pleasure derived. In fact, for Thomas Aquinas the deployment of *reason* and *measure* could govern the difficult relationship between human impulses and desires. But, despite the long-standing theological discussion, the most important doctrinal censorship crystallized around *gluttony*: this is a vice 'invented' by medieval monks, and women were made directly responsible for its origin, connected as it was to the famous apple (Casagrande and Vecchio 2000: XI–XVI, 124–48).

The idea that women were not able to control themselves because of their natural instincts had its origins in this basic concept. Women needed help to resist vices, starting with gluttony, which is the first corruption and generates all the others, especially the carnal ones. In medieval iconography respectable, slim women do not eat or drink in public. By contrast, men exhibit their power and superiority by their voracious appetite for food and drink.

This cultural attitude was to persist for centuries, despite the aesthetic shift in the perception of female beauty towards more generous physical shapes. The female sphere of activity was thoroughly delimited, and every woman had to act

3 The widespread tradition of the female-headed serpent has been investigated in Flores 1981 (my thanks to Sigrud Harris for directing my attention to this work). According to Flores, its earliest statement might be in Petrus Comestor's *Historia scholastica* (c. 1169–1173; *Patrologia Latina* 198, cols. 1053–1722), a very famous biblical paraphrase from the Creation to the Acts of the Apostles. The assumed similarity between devil and woman ('quia similia similibus applaudunt') has been the precondition for the incarnation in woman's clothing (Flores 1981: 4–5). On the same subject see also Bonnell 1917, Kelly 1971, and Crowther 2010: 28–9.

as a *social mirror of men*, with the function to affirm and confirm male identities.⁴ This was the aim of preachers, humanists, and male tutors.

A couple of examples on the *necessary* limitation of food:

- (a) ‘With your food, do not decide by yourself, but listen to your husband and ask him for permission, with the understanding that he does not offend God by eating these foods’: these are sentences pronounced by the preacher Giovanni Dominici, a Florentine Dominican who wrote a *Regulation for Conducting Family Life* between 1401 and 1403 (Salvi 1860: 90),⁵
- (b) In 1581 the teacher Bernardino Carroli from Ravenna identified gluttony as one of the most baleful risks to female education: ‘Gluttony is very negative for everyone, but especially for a woman, because if a scoundrel knows that she can be easily tempted with a festive penny or some cherries or a melon, he will get from her whatever he wants’; moreover, she would be a bad example for all the other women (Carroli 2004: 181).⁶

In the modern era *music* too became a very suspect activity, and was considered, just as was food, to be a stimulant dangerous to the female senses. In the 1530s the humanist Pietro Aretino wrote: ‘Music and literature known by women are the keys which unlock their modesty’.⁷ In the discussion on the

- 4 This is a reproposal of the current cultural model of ancient Greece, which considered women as means to affirm male identities, men being the only human beings who could be self-represented. This subject is discussed in Frontisi-Ducroux and Vernant 1997.
- 5 ‘Così dico ne’ cibi tuoi, accordati con lui [il marito]; e senza sua licenzia non fare singularità. Intendendo in essi cibi egli non offenda Dio’. On the Dominican preacher see Debby 2001.
- 6 ‘Voglio ancora non sia golosa, perché questo vizio è pessimo in qual si voglia persona, ma più in donna perché essendo questa sua golosità da un tristo e ribaldo saputa, gli basterà l’animo con un soldo di festa o cerase o con un mellone che gli appresenti aver da lei tutto quello che vole. E quando anco ciò non ottenessi, non potrà lei senza biasimo praticar tra l’altre donne, poiché ha in sé questa cattiva parte’.
- 7 ‘I suoni, i canti e le lettere; che sanno le femine, sono le chiavi; che aprano le porte de la pudicizia loro’ (*De le lettere di m. Pietro Aretino. Libro primo*, Venice, Francesco Marcolini, January 1538 (*more veneto*), fol. 41v); my thanks to Dr Antonella Imolesi, responsible for the Fondi antichi della Biblioteca Comunale ‘A. Saffi’ of Forlì, who checked the correctness of the sentence in the print preserved in that library (Raccolte Piancastelli, Sala O, Stampatori, Marcolini 20). The sentence is in a letter written at Venice on 1 June 1537 to his pupil Ambrogio degli Eusebi, at fols. 41v–42r. There is at

conduct of women at court, the topic of the third book of the *Cortegiano*,⁸ Baldassarre Castiglione strictly limited musical practice for women (§ 2: 52–4), never considering composition to be a possible activity (Newcomb 1987: 102, 114 fn. 46). Respectable women played music only within the courts.

The parallel situations are very interesting: if the public side of female active participation – in eating or playing music – was discouraged on account of its improper, ostentatious aspect, the creative side was discouraged in the same way. The intellectual activity of women needed to be limited in order to reproduce exactly the world defined for them by their male custodians. The noble female figures in Castiglione's *Cortegiano* conform to this strict cultural model: they 'nourish speech, but don't produce it' (Zancan 1983: 33), enacting with perfect *sprezzatura* (in this case *goodwill*) the male-centred, male-ordered vision of the world.

But some women did not agree with this restrictive and officialised vision of the world, and they invented some effective strategies as a response. Those female saints who were incorrectly defined as *anorexic*⁹ actually affirmed themselves by using food as an alternative means to their prescribed destiny. These women took to the extreme the frugal attitude to food demanded by society, transforming it into a means of affirming their active presence: Rudolf Bell interprets their refusal as a way of challenging the patriarchal society of that time (Bell 1985), subverting the 'normal', intellectual male superiority. But the extreme rejection of food, as demonstrated by the example of Catherine of Siena (1347–80), could be deemed to be evidence of religious unbelief. Catherine fasted from the time she was very young, like the Desert Fathers; completely focused on the Eucharist as a food, she rejected the plans her family's had made for her, and did not marry. She only avoided the accusation of heresy because the Dominican Raymond of Capua became her confessor and biographer; he testified also that Catherine supported herself only by drinking water (Bynum 1987). Again, male authority is important to guarantee the adoption of a different life for a woman, who in this case firmly wanted to

least one other imprint of the same book also produced in Venice in the same year by Curzio Troiano Navò and brothers.

- 8 The treatise was written between 1513 and 1524, revised and definitively published in 1528.
- 9 On this questionable definition, originating at the end of the nineteenth century, and applied to a dietary behaviour derived from different preconditions see Vandereycken and van Deth 1994.

imitate Christ¹⁰ although Jesus was incarnated as a man, not a woman; the *imitatio Christi* should *not* have been a model for women. In fact, women who used fasting and longing for the Eucharist as way of affirming their independence were suspected of heresy.¹¹

The pre-eminent religious model for women was Mary, and her relationship with food implied that mothers were invited *to become food* for their babies. Breastfeeding was not customary, especially in the upper ranks of society, but the crusaders had brought back examples of eastern Christian iconography which depicted Mary sweetly feeding Jesus (Fortunati 2005: 58), a resonant example for every woman. The humanized image of the divine mother completely at the service of her son (Cassigoli 2009) began with Tuscan paintings of the fourteenth century (Giotto, Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti), encouraged by the theologically less conventional attitude of the mendicant orders. Breastfeeding was *the only leading role* allowed by the Church to women in the modern age, and medical science encouraged the appreciation of the mother as nurse, an activity normally precluded by the hiring of wet nurses.¹² Moreover, mercenary breastfeeding was an activity completely organized by men: the father of the baby got in touch with the wet nurse's husband, and the two men decided on the price of the service (Muzzarelli 2013: 5–19, 33).

Religious iconography connected to food records another symbolic tension: the image of knowledge being instilled into Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) through the milk falling from the Virgin's breast. The topic of the *Lactatio Bernardi* probably originated in Spain at the end of the thirteenth century: its earliest incarnation is in the first scene of the Palma de Mallorca Retablo with

- 10 The behaviour is based on an anonymous dialogue written in the fifteenth century, in four books, the last one devoted to the Eucharist. The aim was to reach perfection through the mystical practice achieved by individual meditation. On the *imitatio Christi* pursued by women in the Middle Ages through their bodies see Bynum 1991.
- 11 The accusation of sorcery did not exist during the Middle Ages; it began only in the fifteenth century (Gatti 1991). The most popular manual about witches of that time was the *Malleus maleficarum* ('The Hammer of Witches'), written by the two Dominicans Henricus Institoris (Kramer) and Jacobus Sprenger, printed in Venice in 1474 and considered valid at least up until the mid Seicento.
- 12 On the historical and social reasons for wet nursing see Fildes 1988. The most famous treatise on obstetrics and gynaecology during the modern age was written by Scipione Mercurio: *La comare o ricoglitrice* ('The Godmother or the Midwife'), Venice, Giovanni Battista Ciotti, 1596, with many reprints. It was not the first work on this subject, discussed since the beginning of Cinquecento, but its approach is innovative: it directly speaks to the midwives who helped women in childbirth, and for this practical reason it is the first ever printed book in the vernacular language (Roscioni 2009: 627–8).

the lactation of St Bernard (Stoichita 1995). In all the images involving the *Lactatio Bernardi* the gush falling from the Madonna's breast – who never offers any real physical contact – transmits divine knowledge. In fact, it was normally held that breast milk could also instil into the child both emotional and cultural characteristics from the nurse, and for this reason milk coming from animals was discouraged (Muzzarelli 2003: 50–2): Mary personifies the Church, which feeds all humanity with its doctrine. It is very possible that this powerful image indicated a different route to be taken by those women who wished to be visible in the modern age. And I think that food and music can perhaps be considered quite similar in this respect. Let's see how.

There was only one place where female creativity flourished almost freely during the modern age: the *cloister*. Gabriella Zarri demonstrated a clear paradox (Zarri 1986, 1987): the nunnery allowed a real social and cultural alternative to those women who could not be wives or mothers. The monastery allowed the development of a female creative identity, affirmed in a muted way artistically and with food.

Aside from roasted food, which was traditionally managed by men (Montanari 2004: 35–40, 57–61), the practical management of food inside families has always been relegated to women, but this never implied any creative aspect to the activity: even in ancient Rome the professional *chefs* were men.¹³ The earliest medieval recipe books date back to the thirteenth–fifteenth centuries,¹⁴ but the first one definitely compiled by a woman comes from an Italian cloister: Maria Vittoria della Verde, a Dominican nun from Perugia, wrote down 170 recipes from 1583 to 1607.¹⁵ These are recipes for the daily and festive uses of the nuns.¹⁶ The compiler adopts a humble tone, minimizing the value of her contribution. But refined excellence has always been the main

13 *De re coquinaria* ('The Art of Cooking') by Marcus Gavius Apicius (25 BC–37 AD), known through a Latin revision perhaps written during the fourth century AD, is the most important source on Roman cooking.

14 The most important recipe book of that time is Maestro Martino's *Libro de arte coquinaria* (fifteenth century), reprinted many times until end of the Seicento (Capatti and Montanari 1999: 185–6).

15 Suor Maria Vittoria lived in the nunnery of St Thomas at Perugia. The years appear on the heading and at fol. 87r of her manuscript preserved in the Archivio del Monastero della Beata Colomba at Perugia (Casagrande, 'Introduzione', [Della Verde] 1989: 13). The modern edition has both the dialect and Italian texts.

16 As in the Middle Ages, many cooking times were defined by the corresponding spaces of common prayers: for example, the space of 5 Pater and 5 Ave Marias corresponded to c. 3 minutes; the space of 7 psalms corresponded to c. 10 minutes ([Della Verde] 1989: 103, 309).

feature of food coming from nunneries, signalling them as being unique places where female creativity and expertise were both recognized and encouraged.¹⁷

At the same time, it is again a female cloister which produces the first instrumental music to be composed and printed by a woman,¹⁸ who also was the most prolific woman composer of the seventeenth century: Isabella Leonarda (1620–1704) was an Ursuline nun from Novara (Grilli 2005, Carter 1982, Dahnk Baroffio 1983, Monticelli 1998, Schedensack 1998) who produced around twenty collections of musical pieces, mostly motets. This fact is also very interesting because instrumental music was not customary in nunneries.

It is clear that both food and music helped the nuns to maintain a lively relationship with the external world (Muzzarelli 2003: 49), all the more necessary after the Council of Trent (ended in 1563) decided on absolute seclusion for nuns, threatening excommunication if they even passed through the gates of their convent.¹⁹ I think that nuns' professional production of food for body and mind could be interpreted as a substitution for the traditional female task inside the family – the *nutritional care* of the group. Since the customary beneficiaries of this care were lacking in nunneries, the work of the nuns was externally directed, and their products were perfected: it was imperative that they seemed celestial, like the wonderful interior gardens which reproduced heaven on earth, in order to limit the exacerbation of seclusion following the Council of Trent ruling (Zarri 1994: 208). The cloisters were clearly perceived as bridges between earth and heaven, essential in 'their intercessory function for towns and in their

17 The eighteenth-century MS B.3574 of the Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio at Bologna preserves a very interesting collection of coloured images of nuns living in various convents of the town preparing their specialities – not only gastronomic – inside their nunneries (Fanti 1972).

18 It is the collection of *Sonate a 1, 2, 3 e 4 Istromenti d'Isabella Leonarda Madre Vicaria nel Nobilissimo Collegio di S. Orsola di Nouara. Opera Decima Sesta consagrata al Merito incomparabile di Monsignor Illustriss. e Reuerendiss. Federico Caccia Patrizio di Nouara Nontio Apostolico di Sua Maestà Cattolica, ed Arciuescouo di Milano* (Bologna, Pier Maria Monti, 1693), in four partbooks: Violino primo, Violino secondo, Violone and Organo. There is a copy in the Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica at Bologna, AA.193.

19 Pope Boniface VIII had already required strict claustration for professed nuns with the decretal *Periculoso* (1298), later confirmed by the bull *Apostolicae sedis* (1309) (Sensi 1995: 82). But the discussion in the 25th Session (3–4 December 1563) of the Council of Trent opted for the strictest interpretation: *Decretum de Regularibus et Monialibus*, Chapter V (see *Il sacro concilio di Trento con le notizie più precise riguardanti la sua intimazione a ciascuna delle sessioni. Nuova traduzione italiana con testo latino a fronte*, Venice, Appresso gli eredi Baglioni 1822: 335–6).

close link with the good social practices organized by the nuns for the local communities' (Donadi 2009: 52–3).

But the keepers of the nuns' honour seemed more concerned with its potential compromise through music than through food. The Council of Trent also discussed music in nunneries, but the precise regulation was passed on to the local ecclesiastical authorities. Some bishops (such as Federico Borromeo at Milan), were indulgent or even enthusiastic about nuns' polyphony, but others set their minds against it (as was the case in Bologna). Musician nuns reacted against this and other restrictions on their freedom by often conforming only 'to the letter', eluding the substance of many prohibitions. Many typical examples of this come from the Camaldolese nunnery of Santa Cristina della Fondazza at Bologna, and were vividly reconstructed by Craig Monson (Monson 1995). Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana (1590–1662) lived in this nunnery, for example, and was the only nun from Bologna to have published music – the *Componimenti musicali de motteti concertati a una e più voci* (Venice, Bartolomeo Magni, 1623).²⁰ Although she had lived in the nunnery from childhood, her music surprisingly contains the most modern devices (Monson 1995: 61–5). Moreover, of the ten other women who published music before 1623, five of them were nuns: Vittoria Aleotti, Raffaella Aleotti, Caterina Assandra, Claudia Sessa, and Sulpitia Cesis (Bowers 1987: 162–4). This gives us extremely valuable information: that although without any openings,²¹ the walls of nunneries, following the Council of Trent, were seeping like sponges (Filocamo 2012): the external world filtered inwards, and nuns succeeded in reaching out to the outside life.

I think that the active production of food and music in nunneries could also be interpreted as conscious or unconscious *seduction*. A seduction full of mystery, but even *sensual*, realized by invisible women. Taste and smell, sight, hearing and touch: preparing elaborate food and polyphonic music requires

20 There is a copy in the Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica at Bologna, BB.63, in three partbooks (Canto primo, Canto secondo, and Basso continuo). The print preserves 20 motets, dedicated to Vizzana's religious sisters. On these pieces see Mitchell 2011.

21 'Nuns' post-Tridentine rites of passage – their prostration before the altar beneath a black pall, symbolizing their death to the world, and the cropping of their hair, for example – emphatically articulated their entry into this separate sphere and their rejection of all others. Once within the separate women's sphere created and enforced by the church hierarchy, nuns behind impenetrable walls were to interact with men hardly at all, and then only under strictest control, through veiled windows protected by double grates. Any unauthorized contacts were almost invariably described in overtly or implicitly sexual language. Thus, *clausura* seems to embody the worst, most oppressive aspects of the "women's sphere" (Monson 1995: 9).

active connections across all the five senses, creative cross-references where both *mouth* (connected to food or singing) and *hands* (to prepare food or write down and perform instrumental music) are essential. Even the lexicon can confirm this similarity: we speak of creative *good taste*, and in both cases the external world is delivered of a charming image of the nunnery: lively, colourful, well organized.

The Council of Trent was less strict with religious males: they were generally invited to respect the rule of their own order. But nuns were instead required to have exceptional strength. The oppressive prohibitions should have helped them in the fight against their own intellects, but many women reacted negatively to the imposed creative flattening. They protested by means of food, transforming its preparation into an art to be exported, and they also responded by performing challenging polyphonies, accepting external incentives. These enterprising women limited their creative acts on purpose so as not to alarm the men who believed they had to protect the assumed intellectual female frailty (Muzzarelli 2013: 145–50). This is a strategy still used by many women who want to be accepted beyond their traditional roles. Otherwise, female ambition is still perceived as socially aggressive and potentially destructive. Even five hundred years ago it was more prudent for women to use a humble tone, both in recipes²² and in the prefaces of collections of musical compositions.²³ In fact,

22 In a little book with spiritual exercises which is considered to be the twin of her recipe book, Suor Maria Vittoria della Verde wrote (fol. 68r): ‘The profit for a perfect Christian and much more for a religious man lies in the loss, and his greatness consists in lowering himself, his glory is in infamy, freedom consists in denying himself, and ruling is in the cross, living is in dying’ (‘Il guadagno del perfetto christiano e molto più del religioso consiste nella perdita e la grandezza sua è lo abassarsi, la gloria è la ingnomia, la libertà è la negatione di se stesso e il regnare nella croce, il vivere è nel morire’) (Casagrande, ‘Introduzione’, [Della Verde] 1989: 19).

23 ‘Serene Highness, with these and other musical pieces I have always received much help from a scholar servant of Your Highness; for this reason it is my pleasure to dedicate with respect my first complete work, almost insolent for a woman, to the august name of Your Highness, so that under the golden Oak it will be protected from the lightning of malicious gossip’ (‘Serenissima, Ho riceuuto in ogni tempo tanti affettuosi aiuti dalla bontà d’vno studioso vasallo dell’Altezza vostra in condurmi all’impiego di questi, e d’altri molti armonici componimenti, che deuo di ragione la prima opera, che, come donna, troppo arditamente mando in luce, riuertemente consacrarla all’augustissimo Nome di Vostra Altezza, acciò sotto una Quercia d’oro resti sicura da i fulmini dell’apparecchiata maledicenza’): this is the beginning of the dedication to the Grand Duchess of Tuscany Vittoria della Rovere in the *Primo [libro] de’ madrigali* composed by Barbara Strozzi (Venice, Alessandro Vincenti, 1644). There is a copy in five partbooks (Soprano, Tenore, Contralto, Basso, and Basso continuo) in the Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica at Bologna, BB.366.

even in the *Libro de cocina* ascribed to the Mexican nun Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95) ‘the philosophy of the appreciation of the everyday life is surreptitiously affirmed, a kind of strategic minimalism ... which tended to enlarge the female protagonism ... without raising alarm’ (Muzzarelli 2013: 146).²⁴ Just as did Teresa of Ávila (1515–82), Sor Juana used modest images and culinary metaphors for her literary texts, but at the same time she was one of the first to fight for women’s rights in Latin America.²⁵

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24 ‘... si affermava surrettiziamente la filosofia della valorizzazione del quotidiano, una sorta di minimalismo strategico ... finalizzato ad allargare il protagonismo femminile ... senza produrre allarme.’

25 On Sor Juana’s general intellectual attitude see Arias 2005. ‘Although Sor Juana is best known for her poetry, which has attracted the greatest critical attention, it was only a part of her intellectual interest. In fact, she used poetry to give voice to her views of science, music and philosophy’ (Arias 2005: 314).

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