Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance
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In late March 1575, a cart enters the large arched tunnel at one end of the façade of S. Maria del Baraccano that gives access to its inner courtyard from the busy Via S. Stefano—this is a only 100 meters or so from the major city gate of Porta S. Stefano used by traders and pilgrims heading out across the Futa Pass to Florence. The cart carries Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia and all her belongings. Her father is dead, her mother unable to keep her. Possibly her brother Cristofaro, who pledged 100 lire for her dowry, pushes the cart. At the door, the keeper asks their business and quickly calls for the guardiana, or matron. At the moment, this older woman has her hands full preparing space in the dormitories for a new contingent of girls. It has been at least five years since she had to deal with the sudden entry of a large group of girls. Sixteen new girls are to be entering S. Maria del Baraccano in the space of a few days, and in keeping with the home’s customs, everyone moves around as the newest entrants are put into the least pleasant quarters while those who have been there for a few months or years can all move their beds to better parts of the dormitories vacated by girls who have just left to rejoin their families or to start new lives as wives.

Valeria and her fifteen novice companions are the lucky remainder of a group
of thirty-five whose loss of a parent and resultant poverty had been described on application forms drawn up by family, friends, neighbors, and priests when the Conservatory of S. Maria del Baraccano had posted notice that it would open its long-closed doors to some needy but worthy girls.¹ These were girls whose family backgrounds had been investigated by some of Bologna’s leading gentlemen and gentlewomen, whose strategies for staying alive over the past few months since the deaths of their fathers had been closely questioned, who had been brought into the home about a month ago and examined to see whether they were still virgins, and who had subsequently returned a few weeks later for a formal meeting in which more gentlemen had looked at them closely to see whether they were attractive. The number of girls had been whittled down at each stage of this process, until the confratelli finally voted on 23 March to take in sixteen of the abandoned and orphaned who had been proposed to them. These girls had spent the days since then assembling what goods they could muster to keep them through the years ahead: a bed, some linens, a few pieces of clothing for winter and summer.

At this point, the matron orders one of the conservatory’s girls to prepare an inventory of all the goods on Valeria’s cart. The only things worth noting specifically are a chest, a bed, and a mattress. The list goes to the guardiana, who later passes it on to one of the home’s administrators, who in turn writes it on a fresh page of the ledger where he records the names, backgrounds, and fates of all the girls in the home. Cristofaro’s dowry pledge is already there, and any further pledges that come in will be recorded as well. Cristofaro can’t bring the bed farther than the door, since no men are allowed in the home regardless of their family connection to the girls there. Even visits outside of the home are not allowed; Valeria may not see her brother or mother again for a few years. As her brother leaves, a group of girls helps Valeria bring her things to a spare spot in the dormitory where, over the next few days, she meets the girls that she will live, work, and sleep beside for the next few years. Angelica di Benay, who in eight years will be expelled as a witch—possessed and “a servant of the devil.” Ortensia, who at the same time will be returned to her family because she is “a good girl, but broken [guasta]” and because the home’s authorities fear the effects of her broken state—physical or emotional—on the others. Ana di Caratini, who will die in a year and be buried in the local parish church. Laura di Filippo Maria, already ill with fever and dead in five months. Caterina Zanotta, described as “a quiet girl,” and Isabella Prossero, “a good girl.” Constancia, the only one of the group who will eventually become a nun.⁴
For better or worse, these sixteen girls move as a pack, bound together by their arrival together in a home where alliances and enemies have already been made, and where it has already been almost two years since any new girls—only two that time—entered. Their beds, most of them brought along from their own homes, are clustered together in the dormitory. Their earliest lessons in the customs of the home are taken together with a senior girl who acts as mistress of novices. They all enter equally untrained into the workshop of the home and begin with the most basic forms of needlework and lacemaking. They will mature into adolescence within the walls of S. Maria del Baraccano, seldom even getting onto Via S. Stefano, much less into the rest of the city beyond. Most will eventually leave together: nine of the group will exit in eight or nine years, most of them to become the wives of Bolognese craftsmen. By this point, four of the others will have died and Constancia will have already spent four years in the Convent of S. Lorenzo. Is it the loss of her companions that “breaks” Ortensia and leaves her so distraught that the Baraccano expels her for fear of the effect she will have on younger girls? Though they have come from homes across the city, and from families that have been broken and broken up in different ways, these sixteen girls become something like sisters in the years that follow their entry into the quiet conservatory on busy Via S. Stefano. Having managed to get into the home, what kind of life do they lead there?

Valeria and her companions entered a home meant to protect their bodies, shape their character, and prepare them to return to the streets and neighborhoods of Bologna as wives and mothers. Locked doors and strict timetables could achieve some of this. Yet ultimately the girls’ interaction with each other and with the older women who lived in the home and took on its day-to-day operation created the community that shaped them. Some of these older women were hired on the basis of their connections to confratelli or their experience in other homes. Others were members of a religious community who saw life in the home as a form of religious service. Yet others had come decades before as abbandonate, and had never found the opportunity or the will to leave. Since all homes employed girls in a range of administrative duties, the movement from abbandonata to administrator was a path of imperceptible degrees. The ones who remained might have some physical disability that made it difficult to find a husband, but might equally be those who chose to stay out of religious conviction, out of the emotional attachments they had made, or out of the fact that despite all its difficulties, this was a life that they preferred over any other option before them. For while statutes and confraternal overseers laid out a rigorous and often
difficult life, the conservatory was in the end a space that women made. In some ways, they could do more here than they could elsewhere as wives, domestic servants, or nuns.

This chapter looks first at what a girl like Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia could expect to do in a day or a week at Bologna’s S. Maria del Baraccano, and how these duties and opportunities changed as she matured in the conservatory. We will see the structures set in place—the timetables and the older women who supervised daily life—and, as much as possible, what the sources tell us about how life actually was lived. As we saw in the previous chapter, the prescriptions found in conservatory statutes suggest a rigorous and disciplined life, but minute books and other records tell a much more complicated story.

**Daily Rhythms**

Renaissance people were early risers. Valeria and her companions were wakened just before daybreak by the *guardiana*, or by one of the older girls that she had assigned to go from bed to bed down the length of the old pilgrims’ dormitory shaking each girl awake. The bells sounding matins at the nearby convents of S. Pietro Martire and the Trinità provided the cue, and in these first hours of the day the convent’s nuns and the conservatory’s girls followed similar routines. The girls gathered around a common basin to splash water on their faces, and then drew some clothes out of the chests at the foot of their beds. Some girls had simple chests, while others may have had the more elaborate decorated *cassoni* in which over the years they had been gathering the linens and goods that they would need when getting married. Families began assembling this trousseau early, and after the death of a girl’s father, the *cassone* remained a reminder of her parents’ hopes and long preparations for her marriage. If the mother had also died, this chest might well be her own old *cassone*, containing a few of her clothes and some of the items that she had brought into her marriage. These wooden chests were typically longer and narrower than a modern steamer trunk or blanket box. Wealthy families commissioned painters to decorate them inside and outside with images suggesting both the wife’s fertility and her submission to her husband, and sometimes had more erotic images painted on the underside of the lid. At a time when clerical ceremonies were less important than legal arrangements or property transfers in marking a marriage, the celebratory procession of the bride and her *cassone* through the streets from her father’s to her husband’s house was the common way of publicly demonstrating that she was passing from
the authority of the former to that of the latter. Whether simple chest or decorated cassone, the box that held her clothes would eventually accompany Valeria in the same way when she left the conservatory in nine years to become the wife of Antilio de M. Erchole Agochiarolo.6

Valeria pulled a dress of modest cut and sky-blue color out of the chest. Whatever she had worn up this point, on gaining admission to the conservatory she had to adjust to its dress code, and this was something that caused frequent fights. Girls defended their right to wear their own clothes, particularly if they had come from more comfortable homes. That shifted the financial burden of dressing the girls away from the conservatory, but there were drawbacks. S. Marta wanted its girls to dress as equally as possible because, its statutes claimed, clothing was one of the main triggers of jealousy and fights between the girls. For the peace of the home “there should be no recognizing superiority among them” (“tra loro non si conoschi maggioranza”)—as clear a sign as any that girls had been fighting repeatedly over clothes.7 Clothes were a key marker of status, particularly for young women of marrying age, and families of modest and middling means often had more invested in their dresses, capes, hats, vests, and shoes than they had in furniture or real estate. When parents died, attire became the legacy left to their children. Flaunting a silk dress, a fine woolen cape, or an expensive linen blouse in the conservatory could stir up envy and fighting. Some poor girls came into the conservatory with very few clothes, particularly in the case of homes like Florence’s Pietà and S. Caterina. On the other hand, many of the girls accompanying Valeria into S. Maria del Baraccano were from reasonably comfortable homes, where they had accumulated clothing in colors and styles that their parents’ ambitions and budget would allow. In spite of the strict sexual morality of the time, prepubescent girls faced fewer sumptuary prohibitions, and their parents used less restrictive clothing as a means of advertising their charms and attracting the interest of a future husband. As they matured into adolescence, their parents put them into more modest styles to protect them from what could become the more threatening attention of older boys and men. Yet on the breakup of her home, all of Valeria’s clothing—fine and plain, revealing and modest—had been packed into the chest. When the confratelli of S. Maria del Baraccano finally admitted her into the home, they informed Valeria and her guardian what kinds of clothing she would be allowed to wear and what she would have to give up or keep stored away.8

Valeria, like S. Marta’s girls, could bring in modest clothes: no frill or decoration and no excess cloth in ruffled sleeves or heavily pleated skirts and bodices.
In lieu of a particular uniform, the confratelli and consorelle of S. Maria del Baraccano had decided that as much as possible, these clothes should be sky-blue so that the girls could be identified as being part of a single community. Picking up on the idea that the clothes of a Renaissance girl were in part about attracting a spouse, the S. Marta statutes told the girls that their dresses should have the modesty expected of a bride of Christ. Friends, family, and guardians could send gifts of clothing to S. Marta’s girls, but these too were to be modest. Poorer girls or those not lucky enough to have patrons outside the home were told to be patient and to be happy for the good fortune of their sisters. More practically, they could also share the clothes that others had outgrown and no longer wanted, or that had been donated to the home. S. Maria del Baraccano had two ways of handling this. If there were a lot of needy girls without sufficient clothing, from time to time their names were written on slips of paper, put into a bag, and then drawn out one by one. In this lottery, the first one chosen had the first choice of clothing in the communal store, the second drawn had second choice, and so on. In cases of extreme need, the gentlewomen who acted as visitors could intervene and assign a blouse or skirt or underclothing to a particularly needy girl. These same gentlewomen were also encouraged to donate clothing to the home, though it all had to be in the signature sky-blue color. The home preserved the girls’ right to keep their own clothing. Yet the ever more insistent orders that these be modest and unadorned—by 1648, S. Maria del Baraccano wanted them “cut soberly by the tailor” (“tirata con gravità dal Sartore”) to avoid giving the impression that these were vain and giddy girls—suggests that at least some girls entered the home with very individual and sometimes questionable outfits. The outfits—and perhaps the girls—would not have lasted long. By 1648, this conservatory tolerated no exceptions to its regulations on cut, color, or cloth. The resident guardiana, or warden, was to enforce this, and the gentlewoman visitors made sure she did.

Clothes were clearly a preoccupation. They affected the girls’ emotional state and behavior and for some homes they became a tense focal point for arguments and discipline. But others saw them more creatively as an avenue for getting through to the girls. Pietà girls who mistreated their uniforms were sentenced to wear the most patched-up ones in the storeroom. A bit more creatively, when Vittorio Dell’Ancisa wanted to get through to the girls of Florence’s Carità home, he wrote a pair of pamphlets that compared their spiritual choices in life to two sets of clothing they could wear: It’s hard to strip yourself of the clothes of the unre-generate soul (Il vestito dell’anima vecchio e brutto da spogliarsi) and It’s nice to dress...
yourself in the new clothes (Il vestito nuovo e bello da vestirsi). Vittorio went through almost every bit of clothing an adolescent girl could hope to wear—with the exception of underwear—and then added the cuffs, garlands, and crown that she may have dreamt of or dressed a doll in a few years before. Each item could be bad or good, depending on the girl's spiritual disposition: the dress represented either charity or cold-heartedness; the veil, humility or complacency; the belt, modesty or hostility. Vittorio's double-sided Pygmalion could top herself off with the crown of prayer—or of pride, and carry with her the little book of devotion—or of idle curiosity. Fashioning the theme of the Old and New life around clothing made more immediate sense to a 16-year-old girl than a traditional sermon about suppressing the Old Adam (or Eve) or putting on the armor of God. Vittorio aimed to convince the doubters by promising that modest clothes on earth would win a girl the most lavish clothes she could dream of in heaven. Vittorio left all undergarments apart from a petticoat (sottana) out of his imaginary trousseau, but did include a ring, necklace, earrings, and gloves, items that could point either to the somewhat better class of girls living in the Carità or to the dreams that girls regardless of class might share. But whether new clothes or old, they could only hold Vittorio's outfits in their imagination. Like their counterparts in S. Marta, the girls of the Carità wore modest colors, with no silk, no ornaments, and no superfluous decorations or excess of cloth.

If in their early years conservatories could ill afford uniforms, and so preferred to stipulate what the girls should bring with them, many eventually came to the point of recognizing that a uniform was the only way of keeping peace between the girls. Homes with poorer girls adopted this practice almost immediately out of necessity, since the pauper girls they accepted would have little beyond the clothes they wore on entry to the home. Uniforms were also more practical for girls as they cleaned the rooms, worked in the kitchen or laundry, and entered the home's workshop. A modest cut and color could be guaranteed, and in the larger homes the problem of cost was overcome to some extent by having the uniforms made internally by a group of the girls who had been trained as seamstresses. The sheer uniformity of these standardized outfits also helped the homes when they sent the girls out into the streets, markets, and churches to collect alms, or on those occasions when they marched in ritual processions marking the feast day of their home's patron saint, a parish feast day, or even a city-wide procession like that held on Corpus Domini. The girls became known by the color of their uniform: the fanciulle of Bologna's S. Croce and Florence's S. Caterina were the blue girls, while those of Florence's Pietà were the white.
girls, and, from 1709, those of the Ceppo were the black girls.\textsuperscript{12} When Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia was told to stock up on sky-blue clothing, this was one step toward a uniform; a girl entering a century later would not have the choice. There was more than practicality going on here. These ever-tightening restrictions on what they wore were part of a broader effort to have the girls fit a single model of what they should be.

Having donned her sky-blue dress, where does Valeria go? S. Maria del Baraccano’s statutes do not lay out a specific routine, but other conservatories like S. Croce and S. Giuseppe do. Of these two, S. Giuseppe’s strict schedule is timed down to the quarter hour and focuses on getting the girls through their work and associated duties, while S. Croce rounds out physical labor with an extensive set of spiritual exercises.\textsuperscript{13} The girls of S. Maria del Baraccano, and those of Florence’s various conservatories, followed routines that embraced these two emphases to greater or lesser degrees.

Girls in S. Giuseppe had an hour after waking to dress, make their beds, and generally tidy up before heading off to the conservatory’s workshop. S. Croce’s girls were to make the sign of the cross with the Holy Water that each had in a container at the head of her bed and recite a litany of prayers, including one to their guardian angel. Having made their beds, the girls headed first to the conservatory’s chapel, where all of S. Croce’s two dozen girls, together with the six or seven Franciscan tertiaries of S. Antonio who looked after their daily needs, gathered to recite the Divine Office. New girls sat together to listen, possibly for the first time in their lives, to this liturgy of prayers and psalms. An older girl, the mistress of novices, sat with them. Teaching them these religious exercises was among the first of the mistress’s duties, with the Morning Office being simply one of a set of prayers that they must memorize. She taught them the responses that they were to make in the Mass, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles’ Creed, and prayers like the Our Father and Hail Mary that they were say through the day. She also trained them how to use the Rosary to structure these prayers. Some girls knew these basics of the Christian catechism, but others had barely heard of them.

In homes with a resident community of tertiaries like Bologna’s S. Croce and S. Marta or Florence’s Pietà, the daily regimen was much like that of a convent. Frequent trips to the chapel for communal prayers marked the day, and the sisters used religious exercises to shape the girls’ habits. Waking, work, meals, and bedtime were all marked by the girls’ filing together into the chapel. S. Croce’s
six or seven tertiaries cared for twenty to twenty-four girls, while S. Marta had three for twenty to twenty-six. In each case, the tertiaries had already been living in community when they were approached by the conservatory’s founders and were asked to help out. As we saw earlier, Italy had a long tradition of women living communally in looser religious communities bound by religious vows but not as strictly regulated or enclosed as the convents of the major religious orders. There was a spectrum of communal styles. Some came about when a charismatic individual or small group of women gathered others together in a single house to share their goods and life, adopt a rule of prayers and religious services, and carry out charitable services in the streets of their local communities. Many were widows, but the communities eventually came to include women who desired an active communal religious life but did not want to live as nuns or lay sisters in a cloister. Some could not afford the dowry, some did not fit into the often upper-class environment of the convent, some wanted more freedom in their practice of public charity than enclosed nuns could exercise. In the end, they were still lay women who could move about the streets more freely than a nun. Some stayed in these communities for a few years, others for the rest of their lives. Some of these communities fashioned individual rules based loosely on conventual and confraternal models, but others associated themselves more closely with the mendicant orders as tertiaries.

Through the later fifteenth and into the sixteenth centuries, these tertiary communities were coming under increasing pressure from local bishops and their host religious orders to adopt a more restrictive and cloistered life. While many did eventually turn themselves into enclosed convents, others resisted and some seem to have taken on the management of a conservatory as a kind of halfway step. It allowed them to live in an enclosed community under the somewhat looser supervision of a local house of friars and in conjunction with a confraternity. Regulations laid on them suggest that some of these women aimed to continue their other charitable work as well; the confraternity that controlled S. Marta insisted that its tertiaries not leave the home without permission, not go out to help the sick, and not stay out overnight. It could not stop them from regularly going to help their clerical overseers at the Franciscan Observant house of the Annunziata, a magnet for Bologna’s sick and poor, but it did require that at least two tertiaries always remain behind to supervise the girls. Tertiaries took the name of “sister” and wore a habit (different from the girls’ uniforms) but they were frequently older widows who had raised their own children and looked after the day-to-day needs of a family home. They transmitted the joys,
challenges, and skills of this experience to the fanciulle with a conviction that nuns could not echo, and they passed on practical tips about everything from shopping to sex based on experience that nuns weren’t supposed to have. At the same time, while they may have avoided the restrictions of conventual life themselves, they brought into the conservatory community a more disciplined life of religious exercises than was found in communities run by hired lay women.

S. Maria del Baraccano did not have a community of tertiaries, and so we do not know whether Valeria’s first stop in the day was the conservatory’s chapel or its workshop. Regardless, she was in the workshop at an early hour working on her quota of spinning, lacemaking, or needlework for four hours before eating. After the morning meal, Valeria and her fifteen new companions were taken in hand by their older mentor and initiated into the procedures and schedules of the conservatory. As noted above, some conservatories appointed an individual, either a tertiary sister or more often a fanciulla who had already lived in the home for few years, as the official mistress of novices. One of S. Caterina’s mistresses took on the job in 1623, when she was 43 and had already been in the home for twenty-nine years; she served a further eighteen years. In other homes, the guardiana made more informal arrangements. In these first days at S. Maria del Baraccano, Valeria’s mentor showed the sixteen girls around the workrooms, the kitchen, the laundry, and the chapel of their new home. Along the way, they learned of the various duties that they would take on and where they would help out as cooks, laundresses, and sacristans. The mistress also introduced the novices to the staff and other girls of the home.

Valeria had to keep her eye out for two of these staff in particular. On entering the day before, the first person she had met was the portinara, or gatekeeper, an older woman named Lena de Fiore. Lena sat at the entrance to the home and made sure that no one went out or came in without the proper authorization and supervision. She had checked her own records and called the guardiana to make sure that Valeria was allowed entry. Most residential institutions, from convents, to hospitals, to brothels, had a gatekeeper of some sort for security purposes. Here at the conservatory, the portinara Lena guarded the boundary between Valeria’s old and new lives. Neighborhood friends could not visit, and even family members needed special permission to come to a room that conservatories, like convents, called the parlatorio, where they might exchange some words with the fanciulla under the eyes of the guardiana. Valeria herself could not leave the conservatory unless she had a particular mission that had been authorized by the guardiana. Even then, a chaperone would have to go with her.
The *portinara* may have arrived years before as a *fanciulla*, and exercised her office as much out of experience and personality as according to any rules written down for her.

Individual gatekeepers might pass messages or discretely allow some contact, but doing so was strictly forbidden; breaking these rules may have been one reason why S. Giuseppe went through four *portinaras* (each hired from outside the home) in the space of ten months in 1629–30 before finally finding one who lasted the next five years.¹⁹ Tight enclosure worked two ways, keeping the girls off the threatening streets and preventing curious tradesmen or packs of boys from bringing their own kind of trouble within its walls. Even the men of the confraternity that governed and funded the home had to pass the *portinara*’s scrutiny and, apart from a few officials who came regularly for business, had to show her the permission slips that proved that their visit had been discussed and approved in a confraternity meeting. S. Giuseppe alone of all the conservatories had a male employee, though this gardener could conceivably work around the home without ever getting past the *portinara* or meeting the *fanciulle*.²⁰

Valeria would only see the *portinara* on those rare occasions when she passed through the doors—the gatekeeper could not leave the doors until they were locked tight at night and the key was handed over to the conservatory’s resident head. This person, whom Valeria would see far more often, was variously called the *guardiana* (warden), the *priora* (prioress), or the *madre generale* (head mother).²¹ These three possible titles suggest the different models of hostel, convent, and home that one or another conservatory emphasized. Groups of tertiaries might nominate one of their number to this post, but supervising confraternities had the final say here even as they did in homes without tertiaries. The *guardiana* who greeted Valeria was a widow named Lutia, recruited by the gentlewomen who effectively ran the Baraccano conservatory and subsequently appointed by the administrative confraternity.²² In her mid-40s or older, possibly a former *fanciulla* or a woman who had experience in other charitable institutions, she walked its halls from morning to night overseeing the girls’ education, work, worship, and recreation, and visiting the sick *fanciulle* daily; she had so much work that larger homes gave her an assistant. A good *guardiana* or *priora* was priceless, and homes recruited and held on to them carefully. Former *abbandonata* Antonia di Simone reentered S. Maria Vergine in 1599 after having been out in the home of *confratello* Altobianco Buondelmonte’s, under the supervision of his wife Margherita. When Margherita died, Altobianco urged that they take Antonia back into the home since she had “a judicious spirit, apt for
governance” (“e di spirito giuditioso, et di governo”), qualities then in short sup-
ply in the home. Though Antonia was too young at that point for serious re-
sponsibilities, the governors agreed to take her back in and give her some minor
duties as part of an apprenticeship for greater duties later on. It is not clear if
Antonia ever rose to become S. Maria Vergine's madre priora, but in 1611,
S. Caterina appointed as priora Domenica di Lanberto dalle Rete, who had ar-
rived seventeen years before at age 20 and had presumably held various posi-
tions in the home in that time; she served as priora for the next forty-five years.23

S. Maria del Baraccano’s guardiana Lutia had first come to know Valeria when
the girl was going through the lengthy nomination process. While the gentle-
women involved were preoccupied with Valeria’s virginity and family back-
ground, and the gentlemen wanted to be convinced that she was pretty and vul-
nerable, Lutia wanted to make sure that she would fit in and pull her weight—a
temperamental, lazy, vain, or sick girl would only make her own work that much
harder. For all intents and purposes, she would be Valeria’s mother for the next
nine years.

In most conservatories the guardiana’s word was law inside the gates, though
some like the Baraccano and S. Giuseppe hedged this with frequent visits by the
gentlewomen who outranked her and had no reservations about intervening.24
When S. Giuseppe’s governatrice quit suddenly in 1639, possibly after a dispute
with the visitors, one of these, Margherita Angiosoli Fantuzzi, took the dramatic
step of temporarily moving into the home with her children to govern the fanciulle
directly.25 Nonetheless, if the portinara was the home’s face on the street,
the guardiana or priora was its face with society. She accompanied every person
from outside, whether it was a gentlewoman visiting, a priest coming to hear
confessions, or a family member. She kept mental and written records on all the
girls, and reported regularly to her confraternal employers when one was ready
to leave, when another had the skills to take on administrative or supervisory
responsibilities, or when another needed special discipline. She kept all the ac-
counts and inventories, and checked these with the confraternity’s financial offi-
cers. She tailored the menu to whatever food was bought or donated, and nego-
tiated piecework with merchants and craftsmen who might want to bring their
goods into the home for processing by the girls.

The guardiana had to be careful in her relations with the confraternity; one
Baraccano guardiana so exasperated the confratelli with demands that it expel dif-
ficult girls—for bad behavior, insubordination, and even bed-wetting—that they
turned around and threw her out instead.26 S. Croce didn’t allow her to enter-
tain visitors or keep pets, in part out of concern that what food there was go to the girls, but also because brothel madams used exotic pets, food, and drink to set an open and sophisticated tone for their establishments, and S. Croce wanted to keep its home for prostitutes’ daughters as far as possible from those associations. S. Caterina housed the daughters of the poor generally, and could afford to be slightly more generous with its reputation, if not quite its food. It allowed family or visitors from far away (or poor Florentines) to eat a bit if they came to visit their daughters or nieces, but these girls could not sit with them while they were eating—they ate alone behind the locked doors of the refectory, with the guardiana or priora keeping watch. In the end, watching was what the guardiana did most: she had to, in the words of S. Maria Vergine, be solicitous and vigilant and trust no one but herself, “remembering that all the others sleep under her eyes.”

Having met the people who would structure her life in the days and years ahead, Valeria had to learn the rules that they operated by. Her mentor started by instructing the girls in the fundamentals of the Christian faith, using some of the catechetical books that were being produced at the time by confraternal Schools of Christian Doctrine in their free and very popular Sunday School lessons—in order to do this, the mentor herself had to be literate. Beyond prayers, the Rosary, and confession, she taught them how to sing laude, the vernacular praise songs popularized by confraternities three hundred years before and still commonly used in worship. And beyond religious exercise, she also began instructing them in the rules of the house: what they couldn’t do, where they couldn’t go, when they had to be in one place or another, and whom they had to obey. These lessons expanded into a general education in manners and proper deportment. S. Caterina thought this work so important that it had two older girls, a mistress of novices and a mistress of children (maestra delle giovane), who worked together to root out insolence, aggression, and foul language, and to mold their charges into girls who were discrete, grave, respectful, clean, capable of standing in line, and, above all, silent. In some cases, she might even instruct the more capable ones how to read and to sing more complicated works than the laude.

The mistress-mentor had to be sensitive enough to understand how best to bring a girl through the potentially wrenching transition from her old life with her own family in a home, with access to friends and the street, to a new life with a set of girls in an institution, with no access to family, friends, or street. We cannot portray her as a college dorm counselor, and should not overestimate any
conservatory’s investment in the psychological well-being of its new charges. But nor should we underestimate the realization in many homes that a girl’s rough entry could make problems for everyone who lived there. This is a point at which we have to read between the lines of statute regulations in order to extract from the strict prohibitions some sense of what some mistresses of novices might have been up to. What are we to think when we find the author of Florence’s Pietà statutes so vexed about romantic novelle and the dreams that they might put into a young girl’s head that he prohibits its mistress of novices from giving them to the girls, and even threatens to dismiss a mistress who carries them around? Clearly this was the kind of thing that the girls circulated among themselves to pass the time and help lift them imaginatively outside the conservatory walls. Some mistresses must have passed these romances on to the few girls who could read, or read them aloud to those who they thought were having a particularly hard time making the break from their old lives. So too the restrictions against chatting together, playing games, or singing popular songs; the exasperation of the statutes hints at how often the girls passed their time in this way.

Those writing the statutes had an abstract model of what they wanted their wards to become, but women like the mistress of novices had to live with these girls day to day. And, for all their firm prescriptions, the statute writers too seem to have had some inkling of what human qualities this required. Together with its frequently firm and disciplinary line, the Pietà wanted the mistress of novices to have “a loving and charitable spirit,” to sleep in that part of the dormitory where the novices slept, to wake them in the morning and make sure that they washed and dressed and ate, and to pray with them before they went out to their work.30 She was the older sister who helped girls like Valeria step by step through the many rapid adjustments in their new lives.

Even if her formal novitiate lasted three or six months, Valeria did not spend much of it in lessons. She moved quickly into the world of work, picking up in a more regulated way the domestic chores and paid work that all Italian children had been doing since they were 6 or 7. Valeria’s work had two purposes. On one hand, it contributed to the income that helped the conservatory put food on the table, wood in the fireplace, and clothing on the backs of the girls. On the other, it provided the discipline, skills, resources, opportunities, and mentors that should help Valeria and her companions find a way out of the home as a servant or wife once they reached late adolescence. All of these institutions embraced work as much from conviction as from necessity. Orphanage and conservatory statutes
sounded a consistent refrain: although work would not get you to heaven, it fore-
stalled the idleness that would certainly send you to hell. It also prepared chil-
dren for the realities of adult life: S. Giuseppe’s statutes warned the priora, “Mind
that you don’t keep them too softly, so that (domestic) service won’t be strange
to them later.” As we try to assess the work, we can distinguish between work
routines—and homes—which emphasized sending children out into the city at
the earliest opportunity, and those which employed children internally.

Many homes initiated their newest girls like Valeria with alms gathering in
churches, streets, markets, and homes. Some conservatories thought alms col-
lecting was undignified and unsafe, but practiced it nonetheless out of economic
necessity. A few had confratelli do the rounds, and others employed profes-
sional collectors, though this cut into receipts and didn’t take advantage of the
sympathy—and alms—that a 10- or 11-year-old girl could generate. Youngest
girls were favored for this, both because they did not yet have the skills to work
in the conservatory workshop, and because an older girl on the street would at-
tract suspicion, no matter how worthy her cause. Alms gathering was labor-
intensive and systematic, since each home targeted particular markets, neighbor-
hoods, and churches on particular days, and tacit agreements between the
homes kept each out of the other’s “territory.” The girls’ distinctly colored
uniforms helped donors keep the conservatories apart, and distinguished girls
like Valeria from the collectors for convents, friaries, hospitals, and foundling
homes who worked the same churches, streets, and piazzas. Strict guidelines
safeguarded the girls’ safety and honor, and the reputation of the conservatories
themselves. The Pietà allowed only its novices to go around the streets collect-
ing food and money because once a girl had become fully inducted, the restric-
tions of enclosure prevented her from going out on the streets. Two women
called servigale who ran messages, picked up food supplies, and generally did all
the “outside” work for the Pietà accompanied and kept an eye on them.

Pietà novices went out in pairs every second day first thing in the morning,
and began by visiting churches. They arrived early so as to say confession before
Mass began, and then during the Mass they moved discretely among the wor-
shipers with their alms boxes. Other abbandonate and beggars would be there,
and the Pietà girls were under strict orders not to leave their companion’s side,
not to talk to the girls of S. Niccolò, not to gossip with relatives, and not to stand
around chatting with the poor or with any others who were canvassing for alms;
they were to stand silently. This would have been a hard rule that was easily vi-
olated, since the Pietà novices no doubt ran into friends and neighbors that they
had known for years and talked to frequently before moving, only days or weeks before, into the conservatory. These people would be full of questions about what conditions were like in the conservatory, and the girls for their part would want to know about how things were with other friends and family. It is hard to imagine them standing silently, though they had to talk discretely so as to avoid the eye of the servigale.35

However hungry, the girls were forbidden to eat while they were collecting. This was a practical matter, since many people supported the conservatory with gifts of food, and it would be tempting for the girls to take a bit of what they had received in their baskets and big canvas bags. Girls generally collected alms in the morning as people attended Mass before starting work, while they more often gathered food in the evening as marketers were clearing out older and half-rotten items that no one wanted to buy. The girls—and the home’s reputation—were most vulnerable when they were out on the street, so traveling in groups with a chaperone was a given. S. Marta paired fanciulle with one of the resident tertaries, while S. Maria del Baraccano had an older girl go along, and ordered that this chaperone should never let the girls out of her sight, and certainly not let one go into a shop on her own. Similarly, Florence’s S. Caterina noted that girls shouldn’t fall for the old trick of a man inviting them to accompany him home and get the alms there.36

Among the few private homes that the girls could visit were those of former abbandonate who had since married and set up their own households. These women sympathized with the young girls and might have a strong enough sense of obligation to give some alms. They might also want to hear news of what had happened to some of their former companions, or to some of the longer-serving tertaries or staff. Visits like this also allowed the home itself to keep up with its former abbandonate, over whose life and property it sometimes tried to keep some claim, and who might be encouraged to, like Caterina Trigari Providoni of S. Croce, remember the home in their will.37 Yet even here the novices were to be cautious and discrete. The Pietà ordered that when they went in to a former abbandonate’s home, they must never speak with any men who might be there, and shouldn’t gossip with the women. Prohibitions like this might seem impractical and moralistic, but conservatories aimed to help their wards preserve their honor, and one way was to remove them from the suspicions, speculations, and knowing nods that animated gossip. S. Bernardino of Siena had preached against gossip’s corrosive effects over a century before, and keeping a girl behind en-
closure was a means of preventing her name from circulating in conversations outside the home.\textsuperscript{38}

Having spent a few hours gathering food and alms, the girls returned immediately to the conservatory. They shouldn’t play along the way; they shouldn’t stop to watch the performances of street players or charlatans or listen to street musicians. At the same time, they shouldn’t pass up the opportunity to thrust the alms box in front of passersby and gain a few more pennies. Arriving back at the house, they gave the alms boxes and baskets to the \textit{portinara} or reported directly to the mistress of novices or the \textit{guardiana}. The girls told her where they had been, what had happened to them, and what they may have learned from visiting the homes of former \textit{abbandonate}, and she in turn gave whatever cautions or warnings were necessary. In most instances, the alms box itself could only be opened when the supervising confraternity’s bookkeeper had arrived—having two or three locks with separate keys held by various officials ensured observance of this rule—to carefully record receipts in the conservatory’s ledgers.

Alms gathering was an important means of what we might now call “marketing” the home, and it was vital to meeting costs. In 1553, Florence’s S. Maria Vergine gained 85.8 percent of income from alms, with the girls’ efforts accounting for 7 percent of this. In 1556, the second year of operation for Florence’s Pietà, alms accounted for 72 percent of total income and the girls themselves collected 39 percent of this sum. At the end of the century, S. Caterina sent out about one-quarter of its girls, most between ages 8 and 12, and these gathered over 40 percent of its income with their alms boxes.\textsuperscript{39} Table 3.1 shows what percentage of conservatory income came from alms, and how those donations were in turn broken down. As homes matured they relied less heavily on girls collecting funds in regular trips around the city and drew more on alms boxes placed in churches, pledges (“ordinary”), and special appeals (“extraordinary”). Taken together, alms continued to generate between one-half and two-thirds of total income for most conservatories. Florentine homes relied more heavily on pledges from regular donors, while Bolognese homes collected alms in the public churches that were part of their complex and then made appeals to guilds, confraternities, citizens, and the senate when crisis hit.

Florence’s S. Maria Vergine soon took its wards off the street, but its poorer homes of S. Caterina and S. Niccolò could not have functioned without the girls’ efforts. And while the balance sheets on which Table 3.1 are based leave out the Pietà’s alms gathering in the 1570s, we know from other sources that by
the end of that decade, the Pietà girls regularly collected almost 8 to 12 lire in their circuits every second day through the city, and up to 17 lire around Christmas or Easter. Ten lire bought over 40 pounds of meat, while 15 paid for a month’s worth of firewood, so these were not insignificant amounts; in fact, as we will see below, the girls collected enough each month to cover about half of the Pietà’s food costs. As local economies rose and fell, and girls and collectors were more or less effective, alms receipts varied widely. S. Giuseppe, which from 1629 to 1639 got anywhere from 15 to 75 percent of its income from alms, tried not to base its operations on this unstable income, but few other homes had the luxury of doing without it.

Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia may or may not have carried the S. Maria del Baraccano alms box through the churches of Bologna. What is more certain is that she carried brooms and laundry through the home’s corridors. In the most common form of work, the girls themselves washed the floors, cooked the meals, did the laundry, and in many instances made the uniforms. The mentor or mistress of novices introduced the new girls to these tasks as well, and the kind of domestic work each girl performed depended in part on the size and organization of the home, and whether there was a community of tertiaries to handle some of these chores. Homes with a few dozen residents like S. Giuseppe and S. Croce worked it into the daily schedule, with each girl sweeping, washing,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Percentage of Income</th>
<th>Alms Box</th>
<th>Church</th>
<th>Ordinary</th>
<th>Extraordinary</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bologna</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Croce</td>
<td>1620–25</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Maria del Baracanno</td>
<td>1575–85</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Maria del Baraccano</td>
<td>1592–99</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Florence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Caterina</td>
<td>1591–1625</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Niccolò</td>
<td>1560–74</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Maria Vergine</td>
<td>1565–83</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pietà</td>
<td>1557–58</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pietà</td>
<td>1566–71</td>
<td>59.18</td>
<td>30.18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pietà</td>
<td>1572–78</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources:* Bologna: ASB, PIE, S. Croce, ms. 149; ASB, PIE, S. Maria del Baraccano, mss. 264, 265; Florence: ASF, S. Caterina, ms. 25; ASF, Ceppo mss. 147, 149; ASF, Pietà, mss. 55, 57.
drawing water, bringing in wood, and doing other chores for an hour in the late afternoon between their shifts in the conservatory workshop. Larger homes, and bigger tasks like laundry and cooking, required more concentrated labor for more than an hour a day. The youngest girls started off with the most basic duties, much as they would have had they been working in private homes as domestic servants: cleaning vegetables, hanging wet sheets and clothes out to dry, scrubbing floors.

Homes with a hundred residents or more, like Florence’s Pietà and S. Caterina, appointed more experienced and able girls as mistresses of distinct operations. They fulfilled immediate domestic needs, trained all the young girls in basic household skills (*funzione domestiche*), and apprenticed a few of the more promising girls in more responsible roles. S. Caterina organized this domestic work most precisely, appointing up to twelve girls to keep the home clean and the girls fed. At least two girls handled the kitchen, one cooking the evening meal (the midday meal was simply bread and wine) and the other cleaning the pots and dishes and putting things back in order after meals. The Pietà appointed one girl as cook, and brought others into the kitchen in two-week shifts so that over time more of them could learn how to cook. Along with staples like oil, vinegar, and salt that the home bought, these cooks worked with whatever seasonal fruits and vegetables or other perishables like fish and meat that the alms collectors might gather in their visits to the city’s homes and markets. The more prosperous Bolognese homes got fresh fruits and vegetables thanks to the sharecropping system employed in their farmlands. In 1613, S. Giuseppe calculated that its farms ought to bring in 88 capons, 58 hens, 21 geese, and 2,225 eggs, and it used these figures to set limits on how many girls it would shelter that year.

The food homes purchased seldom went beyond staples like cheese, legumes, grain, and small amounts of pork or other meat, but they occasionally added seasonal treats, so as the girls sat to table they might find cherries in June and melons in August. Table 3.2 compares the Pietà’s monthly costs for three staples: meat, flour, and the catch-all term *camangiare*, which incorporated fresh fruits, salad, vegetables, legumes, and bread. While roughly half the food budget went to purchase meat, each of the 100 to 125 girls ate the equivalent of only a little more than a pound of meat per month, except for Lent, when the only meat purchased went to the sick. While Italians generally did not eat as much meat as northern Europeans, most ate four to eight times more meat in a year than these Pietà girls. The bits of beef, mutton, and pork flavored the stews and soups that a Pietà girl ate alongside the chief staple, bread. The Pietà bought grain in
### Table 3.2. Basic Food Purchases at the Pietà, 1578–1579

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Quantity (pounds)</th>
<th>Price (lire/soldi/denari)</th>
<th>Quantity (staia)</th>
<th>Cost @ 3 lire/staio*</th>
<th>Gabelle</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Price L.s.d.</th>
<th>Total L.s.d.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1578</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>35.12.08</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>[300]</td>
<td>22.01.04</td>
<td>Legumes, vegetables</td>
<td>12.11.00</td>
<td>379.05.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>45.03.11</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>[576]</td>
<td>35.13.04</td>
<td>Legumes, vegetables</td>
<td>5.07.04</td>
<td>662.03.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>41.06.08</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>[300]</td>
<td>17.07.00</td>
<td>Squash, cherries</td>
<td>10.07.08</td>
<td>369.01.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>32.18.02</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>[117]</td>
<td>07.09.00</td>
<td>Beans, <em>citrioli</em>, <em>zucche</em>, <em>finocchio</em></td>
<td>25.09.00</td>
<td>182.16.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>32.14.00</td>
<td>1192 lbs + 2 stai</td>
<td>14.03.04</td>
<td></td>
<td>Squash, melons, figs, <em>cavolo</em>, onions, beans</td>
<td>21.13.04</td>
<td>68.10.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>32.10.08</td>
<td>48 + 3 sacks</td>
<td>[144+]</td>
<td>14.00.00</td>
<td>Squash, onions, <em>lupini</em></td>
<td>15.04.00</td>
<td>205.14.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>30.05.08</td>
<td>192 + 1 stai</td>
<td>[579]</td>
<td>36.18.00</td>
<td>Onions, vegetables, eggs, chestnuts</td>
<td>28.02.08</td>
<td>678.06.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>51.10.00</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>[576]</td>
<td>32.12.04</td>
<td>Onions, chestnuts</td>
<td>26.14.08</td>
<td>686.17.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>9.12.08</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>[300]</td>
<td>19.00.00</td>
<td>Beans</td>
<td>4.08.00</td>
<td>333.00.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 1579  |                   |                           |                  |                     |          |                        |              |              |
|       |                   |                           |                  |                     |          |                        |              |              |
| January| 163              | 30.06.04                  | 60 lbs           | 4.06.08             |          | Beans                  | 34.03.00     | 68.16.10     |
| February| 204             | 41.03.08                  | 96               | [300]               | 19.01.04 | Onions                 | 13.02.00     | 373.07.00    |
| March | [for the sick] | 8.06.04                   | 48 + 10 sacks    | [144+]             | 9.14.04  | Rice, chickpeas        | 43.04.08     | 214.07.04    |
|       |                   |                           |                  |                     |          |                        |              |              |
| April | 45 + 2 sheep     | 13.13.00                  | 1 stai           | 4.00.00             |          | Vegetables             | 10.03.04     | 27.16.04     |
| May   | 134               | 31.14.00                  | 96               | [300]               | 18.10.00 | Beans, cherries        | 8.05.08      | 358.09.08    |

*When making bulk purchases, the Pietà paid just over 3 lire per staio. The figures in square brackets represent the pro-rating of these bulk costs, while other figures represent real costs for occasional purchases on the market. For calculation of bulk costs, see ASF, CRSF ms. 112/81, c. 81v (bulk purchase on September 6) and ASF, CRSF ms. 112/2, c. 102r (gift of 48 staia in 1565).
bulk at harvest time in order to cut costs, and stored it with farmers or millers, who then carted sacks of flour into the city every couple of weeks so as to stretch out the costs of the gate tax (gabelle). Bulk grain cost a little over 3 lire per staio (at 24 liters, roughly two-thirds of a modern bushel), and the Pietà brought in the equivalent of between a half and a full staio per girl per month, buying extra bread as needed when donations of the staple failed to meet needs. Through the summer, the Pietà girls found squashes, beans, and cabbage on the table, and in the fall the home bought up items like chickpeas, onions, and chestnuts that would appear in their soup bowls through the year. Unlike meat and flour, these spese di camangiare were seldom recorded by weight or volume, so we cannot determine how much salad the girls ate through the year, or how much zucchini squash they faced through the summer.\textsuperscript{45}

Food was precious and in demand. The cooks had to keep the kitchen door locked and couldn’t allow anyone in but the guardiana’s assistant (who helped with inventory) or the home’s nurse (who oversaw preparation of medicinal broths and special dishes for sick girls). Bread was what the girls ate most often. It was so important that S. Caterina entrusted it to two pairs of girls who rotated weekly, rather than to the two mistresses of cooking. Every weekend these two mistresses of bread ground as much flour as they would need for the week, and twice weekly they baked the bread that would supplement whatever the collectors brought in, always making sure that they had at least a two-day supply on hand. The mistresses of bread could bring in some other girls to help them, waking them at the first bell of the nearby Annunziata convent to boil the water used in the bread. Bakers had careful instructions on preparing the dough, making sure that the wheat was well sifted to remove the chaff, measuring out all the flour and water for consistent results, kneading the dough well, and letting it rest twice for best results.\textsuperscript{46} When meals were ready, another girl looked to getting the tables ready and food out on them. The refettor\`aia closely rationed the bread and wine, putting them on the table just before the meal began, making sure no girl ate too much, and then returning them to a locked closet after meals. When supplies were running low, she told the bakers to get busy. Girls in other conservatories could have some bread for breakfast, but the S. Caterina girls normally ate only at midday and in the evening. A bit of bread was allowed to them if they needed a breakfast on summer mornings, when waking at sunrise meant a long wait before lunch, but this was generally frowned on as an indulgence, “because eating so close to lunch is very unhealthy” (“perche il man-
S. Caterina eventually allowed breakfast only for those girls whom the prioress judged to have a weak stomach. 47

Outside the kitchen and refectory, S. Caterina was most concerned with making sure the dormitories and clothes were clean. Apart from keeping the girls close to godliness, clean clothes and sleeping quarters helped keep them far from plague, at least according to the medicine of the day. Every day two girls washed the dormitory floors and threw open the windows in order to air out the noxious vapors that collected overnight in the crowded space. Bad air in the sleeping quarters led directly to plague according to contemporary doctors, so the Pietà ordered its nurse (infermiera) to take care of making the beds and ensuring that the sheets, floors, and walls were clean. S. Caterina’s dormitory crew also cleaned out the lamp and filled it with oil so that it would be ready to burn though the next night, “for any accidents that might happen.” Yet these cleaners weren’t the personal servants of their companions. Any girl who failed to make the bed—her own or what she shared—and generally tidy up her small area before heading off to work in the morning risked being reported to the prioress and being disciplined for her sloppiness.

Clean clothes and linens were the job of the bucattiera. Most homes did this weekly or biweekly, but the impoverished S. Caterina conserved its soap, to the point where we can wonder how seriously its administrators really took the health threat of dormitory vapors. Once a month in summer and every two months in winter, the bucattiera set a cauldron boiling and gathered a large work crew to strip the linens from all the beds, gather up all the towels and tablecloths, and assemble the clothes. Washday was a Monday and the bucattiera began getting busy the night before, filling the washing cauldrons on Sunday after vespers so as not to lose any time the next morning. And as in any town or village of the time, laundering was a celebratory communal event with singing, laughing, and joking as the girls sorted the clothes, stirred them in the boiling water, wrung them out, and hung them up in S. Caterina’s small courtyard. They had done this kind of work since they were children. Things could get so out of hand that the bucattiera was told to try and at least keep the laundry crew talking quietly so as not to disturb any girls who might be resting in the conservatory’s infirmary nearby. Some conservatories washed more frequently, but outside of its monthly or bimonthly wash times, S. Caterina’s dirty laundry just piled up. Only the linens for the chapel could be washed in the weeks between. 48

Having washed, dried, and folded the home’s linens, the bucattiera distributed some to the girls and brought others to a colleague who made, repaired, and
stored a good deal of the conservatory’s cloth goods. The *sarta* had extensive responsibilities and special training, and may have been hired from outside. She had to know how to prepare and cut linen and woolen cloth, she worked closely with the *bucatiera* to make sure that they weren’t damaged in the washing, she repaired and refashioned items when necessary, and she stored a great deal of the girls’ clean and dirty clothing so it didn’t add to the crowding in the dormitory. Girls received their fresh linens from the *sarta* on a regular schedule: clean white shirts every two weeks in winter and weekly in summer; smocks, neckerchiefs, ribbons, and caps weekly through the year; napkins every two weeks; sheets monthly or bimonthly. In winter the *sarta* distributed leather shoes, heavier shirts, and gowns. These schedules kept most of S. Caterina’s girls in cleaner clothes than they had ever worn. But different expectations could surface as often as spills and accidents. When girls came to the *sarta* in between these scheduled times, pleading perhaps for a clean shirt or new smock, she could only tell them to wait and, if it seemed that a change was justified, to get the prioress’s permission.49

Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia swept the halls, joined in the laundry drill, and possibly worked in S. Maria del Baraccano’s kitchen. Yet only a few girls could fill these full-time domestic positions, and then only after a long time spent proving their abilities. After she had passed her novitiate, with its alms gathering and minor domestic duties, Valeria’s most likely destination in the morning would be S. Maria del Baraccano’s workshop.

The largest single sectors in both cities’ economies were the labor-intensive and still largely profitable textile industries (wool and silk for Florence, silk and hemp for Bologna).50 Across both cities, thousands of workers in hundreds of small and large shops spun linen and silken thread, wove cloths of all kinds, and finished silk cloth. Paying by the piece for particular forms of processing, cloth brokers and merchants moved raw materials, thread, and bolts of cloth back and forth across the cities from one workshop to another before exporting them to markets across Europe. Conservatories could easily become a stop along the way in this process, particularly for those steps that were labor-intensive but that required little in the way of training, machinery, or even specially outfitted quarters. These steps included unwinding the silk cocoons in basins of hot water (reeling), winding the skeins of raw silk, and spinning the raw silk into thread.51

A single superintendent, the mistress of workers, organized tasks in the smaller and medium-sized homes like Bologna’s S. Croce, S. Giuseppe, and S. Maria del Baraccano, or Florence’s S. Maria Vergine and S. Niccolò.52 Other homes like S. Marta clearly engaged in spinning and weaving, but say nothing in the statutes
about how this was organized, leaving it up to the guardiana or to the resident tertiaries. In many cases, the conservatories initially recruited these supervisors from outside, because they needed to have enough familiarity with a variety of processes to be able to lead the girls through the steps of whatever work came in. There was no question of a trained male master coming in to oversee the work, but the widow of a cloth master would have precisely the training, experience, and gender required. The arrangement worked to her benefit as well, since the mistress, like all the conservatories’ workers, moved into the home, taking with her any female children she might still have. So in August 1555, Mona Betta came to the recently opened Pietà to teach the girls weaving, bringing her 7-year-old daughter with her. Chiara di Antonio came at the same time to teach the fanciulle how to prepare wool and woolen cloth, receiving room and board as her pay. Like guild masters in their workshop, women like Mona Betta and Chiara supervised the girls’ piecework as they taught, apportioning more work as the girls gained a more confident grasp of the techniques. And, like guild masters, they trained their own replacements. Most homes aimed eventually to pass these supervisory jobs on to older girls—Valeria could, in time, become a mistress of work.

If the smaller and medium-sized conservatories had flexible workshops (what S. Croce called the “scuola de loro lavorieri”) that might handle linen at one time and wool at another, the larger conservatories were more like factories, with dedicated workrooms and specialized superintendents who trained and supervised piecework of various types. Florence’s Pietà had separate mistresses for silk, spinning, and weaving, while its S. Caterina had officials designated the mistress of weaving, mistress of silk, and mistress of gold—the gold in this instance being gold thread that the girls used for embroidery or cloth of gold. With captive populations averaging from sixty to eighty and sometimes reaching over 150, these larger homes could engage in more specialized training and production, and could even designate specific rooms for the different operations. As the girls entered the workroom, the mistress assigned them their work and watched closely to see where they needed correction. This is where tension could arise, particularly as more of the girls were promoted as mistresses; as the Pietà warned, “be vigilant that the demon doesn’t come between us.” Anger could flare up quickly if the mistress assigned more work to one girl, or held back too much of another’s because it wasn’t done well enough and had to be fixed, or accused a girl of stealing some of the materials. A girl who spun as her mother had taught her, or wove cloth as she had seen her father do, would not take well to correc-
tion from someone who might be only a few years older and who most likely hadn’t been professionally trained. The Pietà aimed to defuse some of these tensions by rotating these offices regularly, and by trying to invest them with spiritual authority.\textsuperscript{55}

Smaller homes also specialized over time, and some gained a wide reputation for their work. Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia may have spun thread or woven silk cloth, but she may also have made lace, another of the low-paid and labor-intensive tasks that came naturally to conservatories. Lace required a higher degree of training and artistry, and the clear eyes and nimble fingers of young girls. Because it was lighter and more decorous work, S. Maria del Baraccano assigned it to respectable girls while keeping those of a lower station tied to physically strenuous silk production. S. Maria del Baraccano became a significant center of lace production by the seventeenth century and even developed some of its own signature patterns and a reputation for quality that its girls carried right into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{56} Similarly, the Pietà girls quickly developed a reputation as the finest weavers of brocades in Florence, and even supplied fabrics to the ducal court. Professional training—always female—was most often recruited for silk work, since there was a potentially bewildering variety of processing methods employed and a mix-up could be costly for the home. Over a period of just a couple of weeks in 1601 and 1602, S. Niccolò recorded at least twelve different types of raw silk brought in from all across Italy for various forms of processing.\textsuperscript{57}

Beyond training and supervising the girls, the mistresses kept account of raw materials coming in and finished goods going out, and ensured that the girls maintained their quota. Individual girls worked on different pieces for various workshops, and the mistress had to keep all of this separate, so that each girl received her due, and also so that each workshop received back the same pieces that it had sent in. S. Caterina attached a tag to each piece of silk, recording the shop, the work needed, and the weight, and the mistress had to weigh the items after each step to make sure that they matched the tags. At the end of the day, the girls returned the bolts of cloth, unfinished pieces of lace, and lengths of gold thread to the mistress, who locked them away in special chests.

Mistresses were also expected to maintain records of the amount that each girl earned with her textile piecework, ostensibly so that this could be applied toward her dowry or her keep.\textsuperscript{58} According to various statutes, the figures were passed on to the guardiana or priora, who in turn submitted them to the conservatory’s bookkeeper or administrator so that he could record them in the girls’
accounts. But it is difficult to determine how or even whether these injunctions were followed. The first statutes for Bologna’s S. Croce required that the *priora* and *camerlengo* record each girl’s production, but added that “all the works are to the benefit of the casa.” The rare extant account books titled *Libri di Lavori* record goods consigned and not wages earned by individual girls and, more to the point, all conservatory accounts record piecework as part of the institution’s general income. Large ledgers like the one in which S. Maria del Baraccano recorded Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia’s admission, goods, dowry, and fate have their equivalents in the archival deposits for Florence’s S. Maria Vergine, S. Niccolò, Pietà, and S. Caterina, and also for Bologna’s S. Giuseppe, but there are no extant volumes for any of these institutions that record the amounts that particular girls earned through their piecework.

The mistresses were not the only ones looking over Valeria’s shoulder to see how she did their piecework. Confraternities elected, appointed, or chose by lot visitors who, in the course of terms ranging from a couple of months to a year, came regularly to check all the girls’ work. Bolognese homes adopted more formal procedures for this than Florentine ones. The smaller and medium-sized homes that had fewer and less specialized mistresses made up for this with more visitors, and required that they come by the home a few times a week and sometimes even daily. This had to be handled delicately, particularly in the case of confraternities that were made up primarily of men. As with entrance procedures noted in the previous chapter, each of these appointed a parallel congregation of women to have closer contact with the girls. These women visited the homes most often, arriving in their carriages to mount thorough inspections accompanied by the *guardiana* or *priora*. They walked through the dormitories to check for cleanliness and tidiness, peeked into the kitchen, and talked to the different mistresses in charge of domestic and piecework to see how individual girls were working out. Indeed, one of the qualities that S. Caterina sought in its mistress of weaving was knowing how to talk with a gentlewoman on one hand, and a common artisan on the other. Apart from the advice or discipline that they could offer, the gentlewomen kept an eye out for girls who would work out well as servants in the city’s homes and workshops, since moving such a girl out would open up space to take in another *abbandonata*.

On occasion they were accompanied by one of the male visitors—in spite of their ultimate authority, none of these latter could so much as enter the conservatory unless it was in the company of one of the gentlewoman visitors and the *guardiana*. Male visitors came through less regularly—about once a month—to
see about conditions and necessary repairs, to see which girls might soon be of marriageable age, and to update a notebook recording how much each girl was earning toward her dowry. At the next monthly meeting of the confraternity, they would report on all of this. But they also talked to the workshop mistresses, showing them how to carry out particular operations, checking on the quality of the cloth that was being produced, asking about the skill levels of particular girls, and correcting problems where necessary. These visitors aimed to find out just what the girls were capable of producing, since on leaving the home they had to work their network of contacts in order to find more piecework contracts.

Some piecework came in at the door, particularly as a home's reputation spread, but much of it still had to be sought out by the home's officials or by members of the supporting confraternity, many of them merchants and some of them guild masters. Some of these used the homes as an extension of their own workshops, and this could lead to charges of abuse. Four of the six merchants who contracted silk work from S. Croce's girls in 1606 were members of its governing confraternity. This was in the early stages of the fight between founder Bonifacio dalle Balle and the patricians like Alessandro Massarenti who aimed to make S. Croce more like Bologna's other conservatories. Among dalle Balle's frustrations was the fear that his colleagues were forcing the girls to work too much and too often. Those in the workshops now had to continue spinning through the time designated earlier for prayer and lessons in Christian Doctrine, while others were forced out at the earliest opportunity into domestic service. Dalle Balle's vision of an alms-supported quasi-convent was fading, but worse than that, the girls were losing hope of their prospects and the tertiary sisters were unsure of what their role ought to be; they had come to the home to be charitable helpers, not textile overseers. In the administrative duel of statutes described in the previous chapter, dalle Balle's rejected rules of January 1609 were long on spiritual exercises but vague on work. The set actually adopted in April 1609 kept many of the spiritual exercises but gave far more explicit guidelines for supervising work, and emphasized that girls needed to be trained and put into productive work as soon as possible upon entering S. Croce, since the greater number of girls spinning, the greater the benefit for the home. Within a couple of years, the confraternity appointed a team to negotiate better terms from the merchants who were providing silk piecework. Two silk merchants, Hieronimo and Alfonso Salani, responded a year later with a proposal for a monopoly on silk weaving that would, they argued, benefit the home far more than its existing haphazard piecework arrangements did. The S. Croce confratelli
refused the Salani brothers’ proposal, perhaps because the merchants among them didn’t want to surrender their own access to this low-priced workshop, but they did tighten up discipline, expelling Antonia di Santi for her mali portamenti (bad behavior) and for her refusal to work.⁶²

The dispute highlights the difficulty of running these workshops efficiently. S. Niccolò’s first Libro di Lavoro, covering 1589–1627, initially records a substantial number of small commissions by a host of small spinners, wool workers, silk merchants, and the like, for a multitude of distinct and, in the case of silk, specialized operations. After the larger and better-organized S. Maria Vergine took over its administration in 1620, this was simplified radically: only three merchants appear in the records after this, one for gold thread and two for silk spinning. It is not clear whether these are contracting jobbers or whether the three merchants had succeeded in gaining a monopoly over the girls’ work, as the Salani brothers had attempted to do at S. Croce.⁶³ Even if jobbers were in place most piecework was highly seasonal, and conservatory workshops had to deal with wide fluctuations in demand for their labor. A rare set of financial records that tracks how many girls worked for how many weeks each month at S. Maria del Baraccano in the 1590s shows just how elastic that demand was. Table 3.3 tracks the number of girls who performed a full week’s worth each month, and calculates averages over the months for which statistics are available. Between seventy-five and eighty girls lived in the conservatory through this period, and removing at least twenty of these for cooking, cleaning, and laundering leaves fifty-five to sixty girls available for textile piecework.⁶⁴ If sixty girls each worked a full four weeks in a month, the figure for that month’s labor would be 240. In fact, work available averaged only one-quarter of that, and a girl might work only one full week per month in this economically depressed decade. But this average obscures the fact that there could be as little as nine weeks of work available in a particular month (January 1594), and that even the busiest month (August 1596) fell significantly short of “full employment.” Given seasonal demand, Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia would be most likely to be performing paid piecework between March and June, and least likely from December to February.

Volatile labor demand meant volatile earnings, and this became a problem when work became critical to the bottom line of many conservatories. It usually brought in more than the girls’ alms-collecting efforts did, but Table 3.3 underscores how receipts ranged widely, both because of the number of girls working in a particular month varied and because a low-skill job like spinning paid only a fraction of what a more skilled job like weaving earned. In the Pietà’s first year
(1555) work comprised just under 10 percent of income, rising to 22.43 percent the following year. As Table 5.3 shows, piecework rose to 40 percent of the Pietà's income through the years when it remained at Borgo Ogni Santi, and then climbed as high as 64 percent after the move in 1568. Table A.2 demonstrates that by their piecework the girls usually generated from 20 to 44 percent of a conservatory’s income, with figures somewhat higher in Florence than in Bologna.65

Work also served as one means to instill discipline in the girls, though it could be as much the problem as the solution. Girls who had grown up helping their fathers at the bench or their mothers at the spinning wheel were already familiar with a workshop culture that the conservatories didn’t want to bring within their walls. The singing, story spinning, and gossip that passed the time in many workshops created a camaraderie and atmosphere that were far from the silence, modesty, and self-control that conservatories aimed to build in their girls’ characters and project to the city. A good part of work discipline went beyond production quotas into the more delicate questions of deportment and reputation. The Pietà and S. Caterina ordered their mistresses to avoid talking about worldly matters while working, because they were afraid that people passing by on the

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>1593</th>
<th>1594</th>
<th>1595</th>
<th>1596</th>
<th>1597</th>
<th>1598</th>
<th>1599</th>
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<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>147+</td>
<td>23+</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>79</td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21+</td>
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<td>May</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>61+</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>74</td>
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<tr>
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<td>?</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>?</td>
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<td>164</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
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<td>?</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>7+</td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>November</td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>133</td>
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<tr>
<td>December</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monthly average</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Annual earnings (in lire) 2,678 2,713 2,645 2,850 2,538 3,156 2,564


Note: Figures represent number of girls paid for a week of work in a month (e.g., January 1593, fifty-six girls each worked one week).
street would get the wrong idea if they heard wild fables, laughter, and popular songs wafting from the workshop’s windows. Likewise, the girls of S. Croce were taught spiritual songs and prayers in part so that they could use these in the workshop in place of the popular tunes—possibly lascivious and certainly worldly—that workers outside used to pace their production. S. Caterina thought that the Rosary was equally good as a means of pacing work, and so the silk and weaving mistress who went around gauging production had to measure the girls’ progress through it as well. Rules weren’t just about work discipline: “the work brings affliction and melancholy sadness,” said the S. Caterina statutes, using a word often applied to madness or depression (*maniconia*), and they seem to have assumed that using *laude* and prayers to pace the work could give the girls some hope and comfort too. Bonifacio dalle Balle spoke of the girls’ “despair” when he complained that his opponents at the S. Croce conservatory were pushing too much work on them.  

With this understanding of how hard and depressing the conservatory workshop environment could be for adolescent girls, it is impossible to determine how much the mistresses could or would enforce these rules. Yet the girls were drilled in obedience to them, and beyond them they would have to face the censorious actions of the visitors, the prioress, and any other officials passing through. A few tried using mutual surveillance to keep everyone on edge. S. Croce visitors came weekly, and once they had interviewed the *guardiana* and gatekeeper, they talked to some of the girls to ask how the paid staff were doing their jobs. Pietà staff who failed to punish girls for swearing, sloppy work, singing popular songs—or indeed any fault in an extensive list further described below—would themselves incur the corresponding punishment. Girls who were particularly disruptive could find their behavior recorded in the register alongside the inventories of their property and accounts of dowry pledges; Maddalena di Domenico Marino, one of Valeria’s companions at S. Maria del Baraccano, was described tersely in 1584 as one who “doesn’t want to work, is a liar, and steals from others.” Later visitors might look for improvements in Maddalena’s behavior, but it is doubtful they passed their assessments on to the artisan Ghalandro, whom she married in November of that year.  

Work filled most of the day for girls like Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia, but it was broken up with meals and periods of recreation on a schedule that may have resembled that for the girls of S. Giuseppe or S. Croce. Arriving in the workshop first thing in the morning, she worked there for about four hours before breaking for a midday meal. The girls filed into the refectory, washed their
hands at a basin there, took their assigned places at the long tables, and waited
for the mistresses and priora to enter before they began eating. They were ex-
pected to spend this time in silent prayer, and once she entered the priora led
them in a blessing on the food. Pieces of bread and watered wine had already
been set out on the table by the rectorara, and as they ate another girl or a staff
member read to them from some spiritual work, as much to keep them from
laughing and chatting together as to instruct them. Table manners were becom-
ing a marker of class and breeding by this point, and Valeria had to learn how to
eat properly for her own good and for the reputation of the home. When a Bo-
lognese wag wanted to mock Bonifacio dalle Balle and his S. Croce conserva-
tory, he spread the rumor that dalle Balle let the girls dry their just-washed hands
on their smocks and shirts, and that he had them eating their soup with their fin-
gers rather than spoons.69

After half an hour the mistress gave the sign and the girls all rose for a clos-
ing prayer. They then cleaned their places and had an hour for recreation. This
was a diversion from work, but not free time. Younger and newer girls like Vale-
ria were taken in hand by their mentor and given some of their lessons in house
rules, basic reading, or Christian Doctrine. Older girls could spend the time a
little more freely, and likely talked together as they tidied up part of the dormi-
tory or looked busy while they enjoyed the sun in the conservatory courtyard.
The rules forbade them from standing together in pairs chatting, but a bit of
routine or meaningless work no doubt helped many girls find a way around this.
Then it was back to the workshop for a further six hours of work through the
afternoon, broken into two three-hour shifts by another hour of recreation,
which they spent in the same way. The girls then returned their various pieces
to the mistress, who weighed them and recorded each one’s progress before lock-
ing the pieces away and freeing the girls to walk in pairs to the refectory. Any
girl who hadn’t finished her daily quota had to work through her recreation time,
and couldn’t eat until the assigned piecework was done. The evening meal also
featured bread and watered wine, but would include at least a soup of some kind
based on dried beans and whatever the alms collectors had been lucky enough
to find in their rounds that day—rarely some meat or fish but almost certainly
some seasonal vegetables. The mistresses’ sign and prayer closed this meal and
freed the girls for another hour of recreation before they did their bedtime
prayers and went to bed. In the winter, S. Croce allowed the girls to gather
around the fire in the kitchen for a few minutes after meals and in the evenings
before bedtime, since neither the workroom nor the dormitory was heated.
The rules that Valeria learned in recreation time were like those that she learned in the workshop: kneel to priests and to the gentlewoman visitors who come to the house, don’t stand in pairs gossiping, eat and drink modestly and politely, pray frequently through the day, keep yourself neat and clean, particularly your head and clothing. On the other hand, don’t engage in horseplay, don’t talk too loudly, don’t sing worldly songs, don’t insult others, don’t be impudent, don’t swear, don’t act immodestly, don’t keep secrets, don’t go where you’re not supposed to. If Valeria broke these rules, she typically lost food, the most immediate currency in the home and traditionally a focus for women’s self-discipline; here it became the tool of a discipline used to bring her into line. If a S. Giuseppe girl failed to get up on time in the morning, didn’t wash, dirtied the house, or went into the garden or other locked places without permission, she ate only bread and wine for a day. If she talked out of turn, or when she was supposed to be silent, like mealtimes or during prayer or chapel, she was cut off of wine. If she failed to show proper reverence to the mistress, it was bread and water. If she failed to show proper reverence to the mistress, it was bread and water. If caught lying, she couldn’t eat the evening meal. If she put wood on the fire without permission, lit too many candles, or stole something small, she went without food altogether (a bigger theft earned expulsion).

Other punishments aimed to humiliate. A Pietà girl lost food if she didn’t work but other rule-breaking brought on penalties that were levied in front of all the other girls in the refectory. Torn clothing or badly performed work was slung around her shoulders through mealtime. A girl who swore by calling on the devil had to spend a mealtime standing with a piece of metal in her mouth. Girls who gossiped or talked about things in the home that didn’t concern them had to stand through the meal with a sign on their back saying “For Prattling,” and those who went into the novices’ dormitories without permission did the same with a sign reading “For Presumption.” Singing worldly songs earned fifteen lashes in front of the others, or the shame of kissing the feet of all the Pietà’s fanciulle—easily over a hundred at any one time. Vices that might bring the wrath of God on the home or lift the protective care of guardian angels had to be punished in a different place: taking God’s or a saint’s name in vain brought a girl to her knees through the Mass, after which she circulated to ask the pardon of each of the fanciulle individually. Irreverence or insubordination to the resident prioress also kept a rebel on her knees through Mass. With such a strict regimen, it is not surprising that the first Pietà rule had to do with girls who talked about escaping: these had their hair cut. If they managed to get over the walls but were caught and returned, the barbering was followed by a spell in prigione.
The rules aimed to cut off actions that might breed broader rebellion or discontent, or to punish other actions that couldn’t be spoken about directly, even in the statutes. These girls were all maturing sexually, and their dreams and emotions could prove disruptive. The statutes don’t say much specifically about how to work positively with them—though all officials are encouraged to be loving and charitable and gentle—and even the prohibitions are phrased obliquely. We already saw that the mistress of novices wasn’t to allow the girls access to novelle. The stories of chivalric knights and ladies or, if it was Boccaccio, of priests, wives, and cuckolded husbands, could inspire dreams and corrode morals. Pietà girls who joked about sex or marriage had to spend a mealtime on their knees holding two distaffs loaded with raw hemp out in front of them, a punishment more ironic than painful. The girls in Florence’s Carità were strictly forbidden from having paper, pen, and ink, unless it was required for their duties in the home. Were their guardians afraid that they would attempt to write letters to people outside the enclosure, or perhaps pen plays or novelle for their own amusement? Into the sixteenth century, many people had slept two and even three to a bed. By the seventeenth century, conservatories seemed to have feared that this would lead to sexual experimentation: any S. Giuseppe girl caught going into another girl’s bed was sent immediately into the house’s prison and expelled as soon as possible.

Of course, these rules should be taken with a grain of salt. Many were written by men—sometimes clerics—who took their strict regulations from books of manners or sets of spiritual exercises and not from much direct experience raising adolescent girls. Yet many girls chafed under these rules, and we have enough signs that the atmosphere in some homes could be quite turbulent. A few fanciulle managed to escape their enclosures, but they had to be either athletic or clever. Twelve-year-old Amelica de Galusano Sagorij fled the Baraccano after throwing herself out of the window. Some ran away from the homes where they had been hired as servants, or from the hospitals where they had been sent due to serious illness. Others simply resisted all the rules and created so much havoc that they were finally expelled. Apart from a pair of “ungrateful and disruptive” (“ingratitudine e malportamento”) girls who broke out and fled together in 1598, S. Caterina noted of another that she left “by her will and to our satisfaction; she was never much use, and was ungovernable.” Yet another girl was sent back to her mother because “she was always a scandal here, and not very useful,” and a couple of others were let go by the authorities after they had tried and failed numerous times to flee. Antonia di Santi was expelled from S. Croce and returned to her mother in 1611 because of her bad behavior (mali portamenti).
and the fact that she refused to work. On a slightly more sinister note, Orsolina di Benedicto Savorina was one of a few Baraccano girls described in the records as “possessed” (spiritàta or indemoniata).

Possessed or self-possessed? One of Valeria’s companions, Laura di Francesco “il Bologna,” was expelled in 1584 for being “possessed,” but her case shows that there could be more to bad behavior than met the eye. Marginal notes in Baraccano records suggest that father “Francesco il Bologna” was a fiction and that Laura was almost certainly the illegitimate daughter of Senator Francesco Maria Casale, who sometimes served on the Baraccano’s governing councils. Entering the Baraccano dormitory at age 12 was an unpleasant shock for a girl of some standing, and Laura did not take it well. “She is wicked with lies, with swearing, with not wanting to work, with talking back to superiors, and in sum she is incorrigible.” Or so the authorities wrote when they declared Laura to be possessed and shipped her out four years later to board with a widow. Yet this was still Casale’s daughter, so the Baraccano paid the widow’s fee and at age 18 welcomed Laura back long enough to marry her off in its church with a large dowry that Casale had provided.74

We can only imagine the kind of determined resistance, violent protests, fighting, depression, or even insanity that may have led officials to describe a girl as “possessed.” It puts the strict rules on comportment into a sad and almost surreal light, and should remind us that the prescriptions for order, silence, and downcast eyes did not match the daily reality of conservatory life. Many girls were deeply unhappy, but only a few were expelled. Was there any alternative for the girl who took the conservatory enclosure as a prison? The individual cases of escape and expulsion noted above are spelled out in the records, but many similar stories of anger and rebellion may lie behind the numerous records of girls who were returned for unspecified reasons to their families.75

Weekly Rhythms

Work, prayer, eating, and recreation marked the rhythms of Valeria’s daily schedule through the years that followed her entry into S. Maria del Baraccano. Spells on bread and water or even some days in the Baraccano prigione made sure that she kept to the discipline. There were weekly and more irregular rhythms as well. Chief of these were her religious duties. Led by confraternities or assisted by communities of tertiaries, the homes assumed considerable responsibility for their own worship life. At the same time, their spiritual exercises were modeled
on those of the convents. Apart from morning and evening offices every day, the girls periodically headed to the chapel to perform the Office of the Dead for deceased fanciulle, confratelli, or benefactors—donors regularly required this when giving alms or property, and confratelli expected it as part of the normal reciprocation between givers and receivers. S. Caterina appointed one girl as the cantora to make sure the fanciulle knew the right words and notes, and could sing the solemn canto fermo. The girls also confessed and took communion regularly, observed the feast days of their patron saints, and fasted frequently. Every Friday was a fast day, but in Advent and Lent the girls might be fasting three days or more per week. The girls also confessed and took communion regularly.

Many of their spiritual duties took place within the conservatory’s own chapel, though in their early years the Pietà girls lined up weekly to go across the Arno to the convent of S. Maria Angeli for lessons in Christian Doctrine and singing. One of the girls, or possibly a tertiary, acted as sacristan and kept the chapel clean and appropriately furnished, and made sure that the lamps had oil and were lit. She also kept the inventory of all that was in the chapel, much of it no doubt donated by various benefactors. Beyond this housekeeping, her duties could verge into those of a chaplain. S. Giuseppe’s and S. Croce’s female sacristan made sure that each of the other fanciulle prayed, did confession, and took communion as much as they were supposed to, reporting any lapses to the guardiana or priora so that the girl could be disciplined. The sacristan also kept records of when and for whom the girls were to say Offices of the Dead. Benefactors demanded requiem prayers in different numbers on various anniversaries, and the sacristan ensured that there were girls ready in the chapel to read through the various offices.

There was a sacramental limit to what the girls could do on their own, and so another official whom Valeria would see often was the priest, whom S. Maria del Baraccano called the padre spirituale and others the padre confessore. These titles summed up the spectrum of the priest’s main duties and the home’s broad or narrow expectations. He was not a resident spiritual guide, but a periodic—certainly frequent—visitor who came to hear the girls’ confessions, conduct the Mass, and possibly give a brief sermon from time to time that addressed problems that had arisen in the home. Some, like S. Maria del Baraccano, were indifferent to whether he was a regular or secular priest while others, like S. Marta, stipulated the mendicant house from which he was to come. Valeria’s confessor was to be over 50 years old, though other homes would take a priest as young as 35 when, according to Aristotle, the passions had cooled. Strict regulations kept
him within the walls of chapel, and like any other visitor or male official, he had to be accompanied by the guardiana or priora if he ventured into the house itself. S. Caterina warned against any familiarity or friendship between the priest and the girls, yet his sacramental duties helped him understand the tensions within and between individual girls and their supervisors, and S. Marta among others wanted him to work deliberately to keep the peace in the home.

The priest could easily become a powerful figure in the home. As we saw earlier, in less than a decade’s service the friar Alessandro Capocchi moved Florence’s Pietà to new quarters, rewrote its statutes, and intervened for it frequently with the Medici. His statutes ordered the girls to call their priest “father” and to treat him as such (matching the resident female head, the “mother,” or madre di casa), though they equally required that he distance himself from the details of daily administration. Some homes certainly tried to limit the priests’ authority. S. Caterina’s first statute writers gave the priest power to make new rules governing the girls’ spiritual or corporal life, but a later hand stroked these lines out. Bologna’s Bonifacio dalle Balle wanted only a confessore for the girls, reserving for himself and the tertiaries care for the girls’ broader spiritual life, which he conducted through sermons and lessons.78

Homes believed that a healthy soul needed a healthy body, and so Valeria’s schedule included regular baths and shampoos. This may have upset some girls who shared the fears of the day that frequent bathing caused illness through the dangerous opening of the pores. Yet with lice abounding, sixteenth-century homes still preferred a clean head above all, and a clean body if possible, as a matter of health. Every two months, girls at the Pietà lined up to get their hair and feet washed by the medica (though girls who went out alms gathering could get their feet washed every two weeks). Working over a large brass bowl, she applied a shampoo made of herbal extracts and, after rinsing, went through the girl’s hair with a special set of combs that would catch any lice there. This work was not about appearance or even, for that matter, about hair. If the medica came across a girl with long hair who was preoccupied with keeping it clean and well-dressed, she simply reached for the shears and cut it to a length that made it easier to manage. The combs were the real tools of her trade, and the medica worked through all the girls in shifts to keep head lice at bay. With over 150 girls within its walls, the Pietà gave her a particular challenge, and beyond organizing the girls into shampoo shifts, she took her combs to the infirmary and even to parts of the home where girls were on duty and worked on them there. This was professional work requiring a keen eye and hand, and as if to further emphasize that
it was about health and not vanity, the girls were not allowed to comb each other’s hair.79

However much she was scrubbed and combed, Valeria would certainly fall ill from time to time. Minor illnesses resulted in her transfer to the infirmary that all the larger homes maintained out of fears of contagion. Here the medica or infermiera (nurse), likely an older fanciulla, examined Valeria within the bounds of her training and competence, and prescribed a regimen based on rest and a diet heavy in broths and infusions. It might be the most rest a girl would ever get, and fearing perhaps that some girls would use the infirmary to get out of work, Florence’s S. Caterina limited stays there to eight to ten days. The Pietà bought meats and some vegetables specifically for its ailing girls, and also had a ricettario, or set of medical recipes that the medica could use to nurse them through seasonal ailments, work injuries, and contagious infections. She could prepare most of these recipes with herbal materials at hand or readily purchased, but a few could only be bought through the apothecary. The ricettario was written in a few different hands, most likely in the 1560s.80 It raises more questions than it answers about the girls’ health and sickness, since most of the fifteen recipes say nothing about how they are to be used. The remedies are not for pills, which could only be prescribed by licensed doctors, but are for ointments, plasters, suppositories, and elixirs, the kind of external remedies and light medication that someone without professional training or guild certification could prepare and apply.81 They were still very serious—if a girl contracted the contagious skin disease ringworm (tigna), the nurse shaved her head and bathed it with mallow, ash, and plantain before smearing on an ointment made of pig fat, pine resin, and powdered wild celery or smallage (altea). Other remedies addressed work injuries or the health problems specific to young girls. There were remedies for sore eyes and for burns, both injuries that girls could expect to suffer as they bent over boiling pots to reel the silk cocoons. Chickpeas, barley flour, and dried lupins were slowly roasted together before being mixed with honey and vinegar to create poultices for skin sores and inflammations. Mixing linseed oil together with fenugreek and iris, or turpentine with resins, pitch, and wax, the medica created ointments which, according to contemporary and classical gynecological guides, helped girls who had painful menstruation or no menstruation at all.

These latter recipes raise questions of their own because remedies that stimulated menstruation sometimes could do double duty as contraceptives or abortifacients. The most complicated recipe in the Pietà nurse’s recipe book was for an “unguento appostolorum da Vicenna.” Did the phonetic rendering of the
great Arab scientist’s name indicate that the recipe was dictated orally to someone who knew its purpose but not the reputation of its author? The Roman physician Soranus had listed most of this recipe’s active ingredients — birthwort, resin, panax, lead dross, frankincense, myrrh, and galbano — as abortifacients and/or contraceptives in his Gynecology. A series of scholastic authors had passed down this Greco-Roman-Arabic knowledge in their encyclopedias, and it had been further diffused through midwives’ manuals and Renaissance herbals. But this was not just knowledge for those who could read books. Birth control remedies were known and exchanged by the prostitutes who walked the streets surrounding the Pietà, which in these years still made its home in the heart of Florence’s red-light district of the Borgo Ognissanti. Some of the girls coming into the home could have been prostitutes, and some of the mothers abandoning them may have been too. Abandonment to charitable shelters was one of the ways that prostitutes aimed to give their daughters a better life, though these homes frequently complained that their wards found it hard to leave the profitable work behind.

Some of the girls going out to domestic service may have been raped, a not uncommon fate for female servants generally and always a bigger danger for those who had no fathers or brothers to protect or avenge them. Getting the girls out of this dangerous location was one of the main reasons that Alessandro Capocchi put forward when he successfully brokered the conservatory’s move from the seedy Borgo Ognissanti to the northern edge of the city in 1568, and helps us understand why he was so determined to tighten up entrance procedures and enclosure at the Pietà. The Pietà’s situation and the ricettario’s terseness lend plausibility to these scenarios, and may even help explain why the recipes are quite literally hidden away in the inner pages of a volume that, judging by its title, ostensibly recorded textile accounts. Did the Pietà’s medica ever prepare these remedies or administer them to the girls as abortifacients or contraceptives? The clues are tantalizing, but in the absence of any other corroborating evidence we cannot say for sure.

If a girl’s medical problems worsened, the guardiana could summon the doctor that conservatories commonly kept on retainer. Bolognese conservatories seem to have done this more frequently than Florentine ones, perhaps because of the city’s pride in the university medical school and its graduates. Valeria would get a visit from the medico Domenico da M. Santo, who received 20 lire annually for being on call. He could use a broader set of diagnostic tools and move the treatment beyond Galenic rest and broths into more complicated medicines and procedures like bleeding. If her condition failed to improve, the girl was
moved out of the house altogether. Here again, the Bolognese homes were more proactive in returning seriously ill girls to their family or guardians, while holding open the possibility that they could return once they regained their health. In one year alone (1609), S. Croce returned four of its roughly two dozen girls to their families for this reason. Valeria could also end up convalescing in the greater quiet and better care of an upper-class home; S. Marta and S. Maria del Baraccano allowed its gentlewoman visitors to take girls into their own homes to nurse them, provided again that they were returned when healthy. Florentine homes more often passed girls on to the city’s main hospital, S. Maria Nuova, which usually had excellent success in restoring patients to health. But a doctor’s medications were expensive, and in the public hospital a fanciulla ran the danger of being morally infected with bad examples. For these reasons, S. Caterina initially called for only light and cheap remedies (medicine leggieri as opposed to medicamenti grandi) and forbade transferring girls to hospitals. It is a small surprise that these lines too were soon struck from the statutes of a home that civic officials had opened to deal with the plague and famine of the early 1590s. Of the first hundred girls in S. Caterina’s register, thirteen died in the hospitals of S. Maria Nuova or S. Matteo. The Pietà had never ruled against public hospitals, perhaps because it needed them almost from the time it opened. Of its first 361 entrants, 210 died in S. Maria Nuova, S. Bonifacio, or S. Matteo. Going to the hospital was, for most Pietà girls, a one-way trip; only one of them returned from S. Maria Nuova.

Outwork—Domestic Service

Escaping over the walls or out the windows was not the only way out of a conservatory. Firm enclosure relaxed slightly for a few girls who got work outside the home. Apprenticeships were not usually an option for conservatory girls like Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia, but she might be allowed to become a servant in a private home. This could come after she had lived in the home for a period, had proven her moral stability and domestic skills, and was ready to be gradually reintegrated into society. It could also be the best way of handling a girl who chafed under the home’s restrictions. Whatever the circumstances, domestic service was not the kind of work from which the fanciulla would return to the conservatory at night. It brought a girl back into the kind of noninstitutional fostering arrangement that we saw earlier, and that was the fate of the majority of orphaned and abandoned children. Servant girls left for contractually defined
periods of time, but this was really supposed to mark their permanent departure from the home. Employers undertook to arrange the girl’s marriage at the end of the contract period, and offered a dowry as her pay, together with the usual room, board, and clothing. Anyone wanting to take Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia out of S. Maria del Baraccano in order to be a servant would have to set out all of these arrangements in a notarized agreement that specified the size of the dowry and date of the marriage before the confraternity would even vote on it.

As we saw above, service clearly had the potential to demean or dishonor a girl and left her open to sexual exploitation in particular; the majority of infants abandoned at foundling homes were illegitimate children born to servant girls who lived in a master’s home. It is not surprising that conservatories for girls of better families forbade it or made no provision for it, or that girls from homes like this frequently lasted only a few weeks before returning to the conservatory. Only a handful of girls took this route from Bologna’s S. Marta or S. Maria del Baraccano. At Valeria’s Baraccano, none of the 161 girls in the first register from 1554 to 1570 are listed as servants, and only 5 of the 182 in the register that picked up the record from 1570. Yet Valeria knew all these 5; one entered the day she did in 1575, and the other 4 arrived in April 1578. Jacoma, age 20, “a good girl, quiet and works,” would do well in the home of Mona Lucia di Frascatti. It is less clear what success Mona Castelani had with 18-year-old Laura, “full of lies and blasphemies and does not want to work or respond to her superiors.” When Baraccano authorities decided that she was possessed, she was freed (liberata) to live and work with Castelani.

At first glance, the situation looked much different in Florence’s S. Maria Vergine. Its first matriculation book registered 85 girls entering in the first 4 years. The bulk of these (46) were still in the home at that point, when their records were transferred to a second no-longer-extant volume and out of our sight. Of the remaining 39, 28 (32.94% of the whole group of 85) were sent out on domestic service contracts, while the rest died, fled, or were expelled. The contracts for the 28 serving girls set terms of anywhere from 3 to 8 to 10 years. Yet 19 (67.85%) of these girls returned to S. Maria Vergine, most within weeks or months, because of disagreements with employers or inability to do the work. A further 7 simply fled soon after getting to their new employers. Only 2 were still with their employers when the new book started in 1556. With so many girls returning or fleeing in such short order, it seems that domestic service was beneath their dignity and far from their experience. They considered the
Vergine’s quasi-conventual arrangements more congenial and more appropriate to their station; the fact that the conservatory doors opened to them so quickly suggests that their overseers shared this view.

Since dishonor and exploitation always threatened, strict rules aimed to make service safer for girls. Almost all homes strictly forbade domestic service with members of the sponsoring confraternities or congregations, to avoid the suspicion (or reality) of confraternity members exploiting their wards. But even this could be reversed for the right reason. The gentlewomen of Bologna’s S. Giusepppe organized themselves as a kind of employment agency and temporarily took girls into their own homes to polish their manners and skills before passing them on as servants to other gentlewomen or citizens. In the decade 1628–38, for which records are relatively complete, slightly less than one-third of S. Giusepppe’s fifty-seven entrants went from the conservatory into domestic service arrangements, often passing first through the private homes of the gentlewomen who acted as their sponsors and mentors. The girls ended up in the homes of some of the leading families of the patriciate, including the Bentivoglio, Leoni, Grassi, and Guastavillani (only two employers were artisans), and since most of the employers were women, the fanciulle clearly got their positions thanks to the strong network that linked upper-class women together.91

The Bolognese conservatories only placed their girls with gentlewomen and citizens, and consistently required that any arrangements had to be approved by the whole confraternity before the girl could pack up and go. Florentines tended to be a little more relaxed about destination and process. The men who ran S. Maria Vergine and S. Niccolò kept their ears open for any respectable people who needed servants, or for weavers or artisans who might need semiskilled helpers, and the five executive administrators could approve a contract without consulting the other members of the confraternity.92 But whether strict or relaxed, all homes closely scrutinized the morals and domestic life of the person who would take the girl in. In the case of S. Croce or S. Maria Vergine, they paid a follow-up visit after one or two months to see whether the girls or the employers were unhappy with the arrangement. This helps explain why so many Vergine girls returned to the shelter. But beyond this visit, officials spent little time over the following months or years policing the arrangements. None of the homes required their male or female visitors to keep tabs on the conditions of those girls who had become servants, even though their counterparts at male orphanages usually did exactly this for the boys who served as apprentices in
workshops in the city. This underscores the fact that conservatories saw domes-
tic service contracts as a form of fostering that effectively relieved them of ongo-
ing responsibility for the girls.

Conservatories that took in girls from respectable families, like Florence’s
S. Maria Vergine and Bologna’s S. Marta, might avoid domestic service, but those
serving a more common clientele had little choice. Not surprisingly, the Floren-
tine conservatory that served the artisanal ranks of society used domestic service
most frequently and with the greatest success. Initially, S. Niccolò’s record of its
girls listed only those who had been “settled [acconciate] with others” before ex-
anding to become a general census of girls both in and outside of the home.
The first group, covering 1558–66, numbered forty-two girls. Most (thirty-
three) came from outside the city or had shallow roots there at best. Almost one-
quarter (nine) went into service with women, four of these being widows and
only one noted by occupation; she was a painter (depintore). When noted, the
male employers (twenty-three) tended to be in the cloth trade. Beyond room,
board, and clothing, girls earned about 10 lire per year; some contracts specified
that this would be given as a lump sum dowry at the end of the period. Only a
few contracts specified a complete term, and this could be anywhere from four
to ten years. Since the girls’ ages aren’t recorded, we cannot tell whether the term
was set to finish at the time when the girl might normally be expected to marry.
Not all girls made it to the end of their terms: Caterina di Domenicho da Fiesole
left Girolamo di Nicholo da Ferrara six weeks into a five-year contract, and went
instead to Maria, wife of Felice della Chanpana. Lamenacha di Meo da Pistoia
lasted for almost three months in the home of a tailor, and three months in
another home before disappearing from the record. Apart from these girls, six
eventually returned to S. Niccolò. Because the records are sketchy, it is hard to
tell what proportion of the whole this represents.

From 1571, S. Niccolò expanded its record to include all its girls, and we can
tell that over the long term just under one-quarter of its fanciulle left to become
servants in a private home. It began in 1571 with a census recording 57 girls in
the home. Some had entered in the 1550s and were now in their late 20s or early
30s; 35 more girls joined this group through November 1579. Of this total of
92, almost half (39, or 42.39%) left the home through the decade for domestic
service or fostering arrangements. Most of them were quite young. Of those for
whom ages were given, over half were less than 12 years old. Almost two-thirds
of the girls who left to become servants were from outside of Florence or from
non-native families. A second census in 1579 recorded 54 girls (including 13
from the earlier cohort). Of these, 12 (22.2%) went to domestic service. From this point through 1598, 113 more girls entered S. Niccolò. Though records through this period become even more sketchy, 26 girls (23%) left the home to become servants in private homes in the city.97

We might assume that domestic service was even more commonly the fate for those girls sheltering in the two homes at the bottom of the Florentine social scale, S. Caterina and the Pietà. It was not. S. Caterina originally prohibited its girls from going out as servants with gentlewomen, “so that they won’t happen to fall into evil” (“accio non habbino da capitar male”). Like so many of the high-minded intentions in its statutes, this line too was scratched out. Yet the prohibition did not make it far out of the mentality of the home’s administrators. The first hundred girls in S. Caterina’s Libro di Ricordi entered from 1591 through the time the famine eased in November 1594. Only nine went out as servants, and one of these returned. All but one came from families rooted outside of Florence. Four left within two years of arriving at S. Caterina, one after approximately six years, and the remaining four after approximately fifteen to twenty-five years. Over the next thirty years, only five more girls went out as servants. S. Caterina’s administrators may have cooled to domestic service after some early experiments, or perhaps the girls themselves were difficult to place, or perhaps attitudes in Florence had changed by the end of the sixteenth century. This was certainly far from the determined effort that had regularly sent almost one-third of the Vergine’s girls, and between one-fifth and one-quarter of S. Niccolò’s girls, out as servants earlier in the century.98

What was up? Florence’s Pietà home may provide an answer, because we can track cohorts and see a deliberate shift in practice over the decades. Three hundred and sixty-one girls passed through the doors of Florence’s Pietà home in the five years after it opened in January 1555. Of these, at least 61 (16.89%) went out into domestic service. A handful (three) left the institution within a month, perhaps because they were either very unhappy and disruptive, or they had simply lodged at the Pietà temporarily until they could move into some prearranged position. Most stayed from two to five years before going out as servants. A handful (three) left the institution within a month, perhaps because they were either very unhappy and disruptive, or they had simply lodged at the Pietà temporarily until they could move into some prearranged position. Most stayed from two to five years before going out as servants, and at this point most were in their mid to late teens.99 We do not know the contract terms for very many of these girls, or how much their previous experience played a part in determining where they went. How many girls were like the baker’s daughter who was sent out to work for a baker on a two-year contract? Did she eventually return to the Pietà, like almost one-quarter of the other servant girls? One 13-year-old left on a seven-year contract but was back in eight months; she
was barely in the door before the Pietà returned her to her mother. This was very likely a girl who didn’t take readily to the discipline of either a home or a master. Most of the others who returned were seriously ill and died soon after.¹⁰⁰

In its early years, the Pietà initially sent fewer of its girls into domestic service than either S. Maria Vergine or S. Niccolò, the only other conservatories open in Florence at the time. We might assume that this was because of its location in the red-light district of Borgo Ognissanti, but in fact the number plummeted after it moved north to a safer district. Table 3.4 divides the 819 girls recorded in the Pietà’s registers into 3 cohorts. The first group of 361 includes those girls enrolled from 1554 to 1559. The second group of 165 includes those registered from 1560 until the home relocated out of Borgo Ognissanti in October–November 1568. The third group of 293 includes those registered from January 1569 through the end of 1601.¹⁰¹

Just under one-fifth of girls (17 to 20%) left to become servants as long as the home was in Borgo Ognissanti, but after the move the number dropped to a handful. The decrease is even more dramatic than the table implies, because domestic service actually declined almost immediately following the move, and the last girl to exit the Pietà on a domestic service contract left in 1584. Thinking back to the Pietà’s collection of medical recipes, and particularly its puzzling birth control remedies, this precipitous drop may confirm that this conservatory’s guardians had decided that domestic service was simply too dangerous and should be abandoned. It is certainly clear that the move itself was part of a larger refashioning of the home away from its founders’ intentions of offering emergency temporary aid in a lay shelter that would return girls as quickly as possible to secular society as wives and mothers like the homes in Bologna did.

The Pietà was turning into a factory. As we saw above, it had a reputation for producing the best brocades in Florence, thanks to an enclosed workforce of orphaned and abandoned girls whose options for leaving were swiftly evaporating. Moreover, it still had the highest mortality rate of all Florentine conservatories, and few financial resources beyond what the remaining girls could earn. It could ill afford to let its most skilled workers leave the home. S. Caterina had a similar problem with high death rates, and with a higher percentage of its girls leaving through either marriage or a return to their families, there was yet more pressure on the remaining girls to maintain the home economically. Bolognese homes, all sustained by the accumulated legacies of their founding confraternities, had no equivalent financial pressures and so could work more deliberately at passing the girls back into society. But while economic necessity might re-
quire Florentine conservatories to hang on to skilled workers for the good of the home, the city had no model for a forced-labor factory in which orphaned and abandoned girls would be compelled to remain enclosed and working until their deaths. The closest model it had was the tertiary convent, an enclosure of lower-class women who, lacking the resources and family connections of higher-class convents, also worked hand to mouth and were prevented by their vows from returning to secular society. Not surprisingly, both the Pietà and S. Caterina, Florence’s poorest conservatories, metamorphosed into convents through these decades. Economic necessity and restricted cultural horizons were perhaps the main factors leading to this result, but politics and administration also played a part, as we will see in chapter 5.

Valeria di Bartolomeo di Pavia spent eight years in S. Maria del Baraccano. Her life there was far more regimented than it would have been in a private home. At the same time, in the work she did and in the obedience she owed to adults who controlled her movements and chose her husband, her experience was not much different from that of other girls of her age and class. One of the greatest differences is the one that is hardest to measure. Valeria lived in a world made by women, and had very little contact with men until she left in 1584 as the bride of Antilio di Erchole Agochiarolo. Almost everything she had learned, from domestic and employable skills to religious doctrine, had come from other women in an environment closed to men. Unlike a convent, all the women in this community were lay, and most were adolescent. However much the statutes may have tried to shut their mouths and regulate their thoughts, Valeria and her companions were girls wrenched out of a previous life and thrown together in a new and strange world. Together they faced the drudgery of institutional cleaning, the meagerness and blandness of institutional cooking, the chill of underheated dormitories, the endless hours of lacemaking and the harsh tongue of a work mistress, or the overcurious gaze of a male visitor who might want to check whether their beauty was intact. Could they avoid talking about this? Together

Table 3.4. Girls in and out of Domestic Service at the Pietà, 1555–1601

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Number in Service</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Number Returned</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 1559</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16.89</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1569–1601</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ASF, CRSF ms. 112/78 and 112/79.
they saw some girls break under this discipline—fleeing, imprisoned, or declared to be possessed. Wouldn’t they share sympathy, scorn, or fear? Together they saw new girls come in from time to time. Could they avoid asking them what had happened to the city and people outside the walls? Together they saw companions leave from time to time, and themselves looked ahead to the almost certain prospect of leaving the home to marry a stranger and raise a family. Could they avoid dreaming or dreading who it would be, what he was like, what he did, where he lived, how they would be received in his family, or whether they would see their own relatives again? In the end, Valeria lived in a world constructed more by her adolescent companions than by adults’ regulations. If anything, enclosure heightened this reality by putting such large numbers of girls together with such small numbers of supervisors. Living in the enclosure of the home freed her from the threats and dangers of the streets and gave her a life which, despite all its difficulties, was almost certainly better than what she would have faced if she hadn’t been allowed in. Was this true for boys as well?