

Fashioning Family Honour in Renaissance Florence: The Language of Women's Clothing and Gesture in the Frescoes in the Oratory of the Confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino in Florence

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Summary: *The concept of family honor in Quattrocento Florence has traditionally been associated with the ruling classes. Young, nubile females, dressed in the best garments that money could buy, pious, veiled matrons and cittadini resplendent in their red robes provided visual examples of a virtuous model of social perfection. This article though, through new readings of the artistic texts found in the Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence, will illustrate how females from the middle and artisan classes played an equally important role in communicating these ideals.*

“The image of a woman modestly dressed to attend only to the concerns in the private realm would never have been valued by a patriarch to visualize family honour.” (Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 209)

This passage from Carole Collier Frick’s scholarly and highly illuminating *Dressing Renaissance Florence* may well ring true when applied to Domenico Ghirlandaio’s fresco decoration of the Tornabuoni chapel in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella, as the dominant female figures evident in several of the scenes are patrician women dressed in the finest cloth that money could buy.¹ Nevertheless, this article will argue that the concept of family honour during the *Quattrocento* was not exclusive to the ruling classes, nor was the visualisation of such an ideal restricted to patrician models.

The notion of honour in Renaissance Florentine society is both difficult to delineate and often associated with the elite group of patrician males who governed the commune.² According to Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) in his *I libri della famiglia* (1441), there existed two types of honour:

Troppo ampla ricchezza, troppo grande possanza, troppo singulare felicità reside in colui el quale saprà essere contento solo della virtù. Beatissimo colui el quale si porge ornato di

¹ Duits, “Figured Riches,” discusses the value of gold brocades during the Renaissance.

² A summary of “honourable” criteria was set out by Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists*, 18–84. For a discussion on the “honour elite” see Trexler, “Charity in the Defense of Urban Elites.” For a discussion on virtue versus fortune see Wittkower, “Time and Virtue.”

costumi forte d'amicizie, copioso di favori e grazia fra' suoi cittadini. Niuno sara piu in alta e piu ferma e salda gloria, che costui el quale ara se stessi dedicato ad aumentare con fama e memoria la patria sua, e' cittadini el la famiglia sua. Costui solo meritera avere il nome suo apresso de' nipoti suoi pien di lode e famosa e immortale, el qual d'ogn' altra cosa fragile e caduca ne giudichera quanto si debba, da nolla curare e da spregiarla, solo amera la virtu solo seguira la sapienza, solo desiderra intera e corretta gloria.³

The highest and most “solid honour” being accorded to “he who dedicates himself to the renown and lasting fame of his country, his fellow citizens and his family” (Alberti/Watkins, 45). Alongside this list of qualities, some of which are governed by fate rather than the individual, the author also outlines attributes associated with a second, less prestigious route to moral glory that could not only convey honour on the *cittadini*, but also provided a realistically attainable moral target for males from the middle and artisan classes. The directive is simple and relies more on mortal bearing than on Fortune's fickle wheel⁴—“[appear] virtuous in conduct, strong in friendships [and abound] in the favour and affection of [your] fellow citizens” and you will be “blessed” (Alberti/Watkins, 164–165). Whether Alberti's humanist discourse, which owes much to the writings of Cicero, was intended for the instruction of the artisan classes remains a moot point, although Alan F. Nagal insists that its vernacular nature “inscribe[s] the more particular and local relation of writer to patron ... while arguing for an openness of text or message to a diverse public.”⁵ Alfred von Martin, on the other hand, considers fifteenth-century humanists as belonging to a “class between classes,” whose writings were often created in order to address the societal dilemmas and familial problems more

³ Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, 26. Subsequent references to Alberti's Italian original and Renee Neu Watkin's English translation of this work as *The Family in Renaissance Florence* will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

⁴ See Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, 178 for the discourse in Italian. Giannozzo opens a discourse on this particular subject during the course of book three when he asks, “la fortuna puo ella a ogni sua posta torci moglie, figliuoli, robe e simile cosa? Lionardo replies in the affirmative while Giannozzo continues to explain that, “adunque sono elle piu sue che nostre. E quello che a te mai puo essere tolto in modo alcuno, di chi sara?” Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 164–165 provides the following English translation:

“Giannozzo: But fortune can always, at her whim, take your wife, your children, your property and such?

Lionardo: Certainly she can yes...

Giannozzo: Can the power of love, to desire, to wish, to disdain and so forth according to your will, can this be taken from you?

Lionardo: Certainly not.

Giannozzo: These things, then, are truly yours.”

⁵ Nagal, “Rhetoric Value and Action in Alberti,” 41.

specific to the upper classes.⁶ John Najemy however, believes that Alberti was removed from his characters and their opinions and often left the reader unable to homogenise the myriad of judgements and notions proffered into unfailing advice.⁷ Nancy Struever, for her part, has recently established that Albertian texts were fundamentally tools of “self-reflection and comparison ... practical means of knowledge and judgement.”⁸ Struever’s perception of Alberti’s works brings to mind the Latin dictum to which Nagal refers in order to illustrate that there was “no primacy in [literary] originality” in many Renaissance texts—“nihil dictum quin prius dictum.” If this Terencian phrase is accepted in its most literal sense though, we are informed that “nothing is ever said that has not been said before” and Alberti, in his writing of *I libri della famiglia* is not attempting to introduce new, fresh arguments and solutions, but discussing current societal practice and concerns using the philosophical rhetoric that was revived and readopted during the Renaissance.⁹

If Alberti was in fact involved in a discourse concerned with the socio/political machinations of his fifteenth-century contemporaries, then the sense that his writings flagged up areas of social concern, proposed solutions, suggested conduct and also admonished the reader, makes them remarkably similar in form to the Buonomini frescoes.¹⁰

Founded in 1442 by Antonio Pierozzi (1389–1459), Archbishop of Florence, better known today as St. Antoninus, and aided by the munificence of Cosimo “the Elder” de’ Medici (1389–1464), the confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino (The good men of St Martin) brought relief to those who had fallen upon hard times but were considered too honourable to beg for themselves. Their oratory is situated inconspicuously, halfway between Florence’s Piazza della Signoria and the Duomo. Historically a private space, given over to the activities of the twelve good men, the oratory has only recently been opened to the public for viewing.¹¹ It is not, however, just a public gallery.¹² The current Buonomini continue the charitable activities

⁶ Von Martin quoted in Nagal, “Rhetoric Value and Action in Alberti,” 41.

⁷ Najemy, “Alberti on Love,” 135, 149.

⁸ Nagal, “Rhetoric Value and Action in Alberti,” 57.

⁹ Nagal, “Rhetoric Value and Action in Alberti,” 57 on Nancy Struever.

¹⁰ For a discussion on “The Period Eye” see Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 29–109. Najemy, “Alberti on Love,” 149 mentions that Albertian characters “warn of the traps and pitfalls of love.”

¹¹ For further information on the history of the Buonomini’s oratory and the ancient church of San Martino del Vescovo see Richa, *Notizie istoriche delle chiese fiorentine* and Busignori and Bencini, *Le chiese di Firenze Quartiere di Santa Croce*. For information on the historical archives in particular see Fatichi, *The Confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino*.

¹² Given that the oratory remains a working environment for the twelve procurators of the shamed poor, I would like to thank the current Buonomini for allowing me access to the precious archive at San Martino. I extend special gratitude to Dr Ugo Silli for sacrificing his spare time in order to accompany me and patiently answering my many questions.

begun by their fifteenth-century predecessors and carry them out in much the same way.¹³ The oratory's fresco decoration consists of a cycle of ten painted lunettes depicting two scenes from the life of Saint Martin,¹⁴ the remainder illustrating acts of charity performed by the Buonomini, based on the seven corporal works of mercy.¹⁵ The depictions appear barely to have been mentioned in art historical circles, let alone analysed to any degree, despite the cursory acknowledgement of scholars since the nineteenth century.¹⁶ This is not to say that the painted decorations attributed to the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–94) are unimportant, but simply that in connoisseurial terms they are not of the same quality as the murals of the Sassetti and Tornabuoni chapels.¹⁷

Often lacking the hand of the master and suffering from a low budget, workshop projects such as the Buonomini frescoes have at times been overlooked, yet they can provide a mine of information for the attentive researcher.¹⁸ Having previously conducted an interdisciplinary study of the Buonomini's *Releasing the Debtor from Gaol* fresco (fig. 1), which considers the form and function of the painting in tandem with previously unpublished archival data, I quickly became aware of the surprising complexity of this particular visual text.¹⁹ The rhetoric therein is comparable to Albertian literature as it illustrates the following: a problem (the spiritual and temporal damage caused to society through debt), a proposed solution (the intervention of a charitable body), recommended conduct (through pose, gesture and dress) and, finally, a warning. The painting's setting (outside of the Stinche prison) serves as an anti-magnate symbol and the likenesses of the dead Giuliano de' Medici, present at an event that actually took place eighteen months after his assassination, cautions those who would upset the republic's civic stability.²⁰

¹³ Francesco Poccianti is quoted in Bradburne, *Hidden Voices*, 47, as saying, "the whole thing's run in exactly the same way as it was back then."

¹⁴ The first scene from the life of Saint Martin depicts him parting his cloak for a beggar; the second shows the dream of Saint Martin.

¹⁵ The Seven Corporal Works of Mercy consist of feeding the hungry, providing drink for the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the incarcerated and burying the dead. The first six works come from Matthew 25.31–46 and the last from the Book of Tobit 1.17–19.

¹⁶ Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, 153–173.

¹⁷ Unlike other decorative projects carried out by Ghirlandaio and his workshop there are no formal contracts of works pertaining to the Buonomini frescoes.

¹⁸ Wisch, "Re-viewing the Image of Confraternities in Renaissance Visual Culture," discusses the current state of art historical studies into confraternal art and the benefits of such investigations.

¹⁹ Hughes-Johnson, "Early Medici Patronage."

²⁰ Rubin, *Images and Identity*, 56 describes some *Quattrocento* paintings as "operative fictions, versions of desired ends—not portrayals of actual conditions." Hughes-Johnson in "Early Medici Patronage," discusses anti-magnate symbols in fifteenth-century paintings.

Given that Alberti's written text and the Buonomini's visual texts have a common compositional form, they are ripe for comparison. Furthermore, the two institutions under discussion, family and confraternity, also beg for parallels to be drawn between them. Linked in the Renaissance psyche by concepts of love²¹ and honour, the friendships or more accurately kinships²² that were cultivated within lay confraternities depended on the same "honourable affection" that underscored the "love among members of the same family ... paternal or fraternal as the case may be" (Alberti, 101). Accordingly, Alberti's concept of honour will be examined in conjunction to figures from the Buonomini frescoes in order to reveal whether the visualisation of family honour in Albertian literature is similar to that shown in the oratory's visual texts. Additionally, in order to illustrate that the honourable behaviour that Alberti propounded was commonly acknowledged as acceptable during the *Quattrocento*, observations and recommendations from other pertinent contemporary literary and visual sources will also be brought to bear.

Although honour is traditionally associated with the Renaissance male, in this instance it is the females of the period that are of interest to us, specifically those present within the Buonomini frescoes. What then does Alberti have to say about female honour and how different is it from its male counterpart? If we begin by examining what Alberti has to say about virtue, traditionally the female equivalent of male honour, it soon becomes apparent that the qualities associated with this neo-platonic concept are analogous to the moral and social standards expected from the *Quattrocento* Florentine female.

Nella virtù tutto contra, lieta, graziosa e amena, sempre ti contenta, mai ti duole, mai ti sazia, ogni di piu e piu t'è grata e utile. E quanto in te seranno buoni costumi e intere ragioni,

²¹ The type of love referred to by Alberti was the pure love set out by Saint Paul in *Corinthians* 13. Najemy in "Alberti on Love," refers to this type of love that Alberti calls "*amicizia*." Unlike sexual love, this higher, purer form of affection was governed "by reason and on the basis of solid judgement, serves the needs of the poor, delights the prosperous, pleases the rich and is necessary to families, to principalities, and to republics." Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, ed. Romano, 111–112, 119–119: 101, 106, quoted in Najemy, "Alberti on Love," 143.

²² Alberti makes the distinction between "outsiders" who consist of "strangers," "foreigners and slaves" and a further group, "kinsmen." "Kinsmen" should not be confused with family members as although they could be related by blood or marriage, they also include wider associates from an individual's patronage network. Alberti explains that should you come to the aid your kin before all others then they will reciprocate in the following manner. "Your own kinsman, benefitting from association with you, will admit his obligation and retain a memory that makes him eager to help your own children in a similar way. Even if he should fail to be grateful and recognize your beneficence, if you are good and just you would sooner see your own kinsman enjoy prosperity than any outsider whatsoever. This is something you never need fear anyway as you should realize, if only you are diligent in making a careful choice of agent and watchful to keep him from slipping." Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, 114 and *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 200.

tanto sarai pregiato e lodato, e da' buoni ben voluto, e godera' ne fra te stesso. (Alberti, 24).

According to Alberti, virtue is “happy gracious and gentle, virtue will always satisfy you. It will never bring sorrow, never satiation [and] from day to day it grows more pleasant and useful” (Alberti/Watkins, 42). Similarly a woman's virtue was assessed using the following criteria that Alberti advances throughout book two of *I libri della famiglia*:

Così stimo le bellezze in una femmina si possono guidicare non pure ne' vezzi e gentilezza del viso, ma più nella persona formosa e atta portare e produrti in copia bellissimi figliuoli...e primi costumi in una donna lodatissimi sono modestia e nettezza. (Alberti, 113–116).

Lodano i fisici filosofi...vogliono ancora sia la donna di natura ben lieta, ben fresca, ben viva di sangue e d'ogni spirito...e sempre prepongono l'età fanciullesca per più loro, dei quali teste non accade dire, rispetti, come a conformarsi insieme massime l'animo. Sono le fanciulle per età pure, per uso non maliziose, per natura vergognose e senza interna alcuna malizia; con buona affezione presto imprendono, e senza contumacia seguitano i costumi e voglie del marito. (Alberti, 116–117)

The two concepts of virtue that Alberti proffers are clearly soft, moderate, and compliant. More crucially, they are malleable through frequent use, in the case of the neo-platonic abstraction, and by the way of a patriarch's guidance in the case of a woman's virtue. Furthermore, the outward appearance of a woman's honour and integrity depends on her demonstrating a “highly respectable” and virtuous appearance in public and “modesty, serenity, tranquillity and peace” in private (Alberti/Watkins, 211–213). It does not, however, appear to depend entirely on social class, as Alberti clearly informs us that during the search for a future wife one should select not only the well-born maidens, but also those who were raised well.

Queste scelgano tutte le ben nate e bene alleviate fanciulle, e quale numero porgano al nuovo che sarà marito. (Alberti, 115)

Having discussed the relationship between male honour and female virtue in Alberti's *I libri della famiglia* and recognising the similarities in form between this literary text and the Buonomini's visual documents, it is now necessary to establish a working definition, for the sake of analysis—one that relates to the outward appearance of honour and virtue and transcends sexual and social boundaries. This definition can then be applied equally to both texts so that we can ascertain whether the women present in the Buonomini frescoes have

been prized enough by the confraternity and the paintings' authors to convey a series of important narratives to a variety of viewers.²³ This working definition, which will be forthwith known as "familial honour," can be expressed as the demonstration of virtue or honour, according to gender, that is governed by conduct and unaffected by social status or fiscal considerations.

The first fresco under discussion is *Giving Food to the Hungry and Drink to the Thirsty* (fig. 2). Here the audience are privy to a scene that is set within the confraternity's vaulted space where a single window pierces the wall. Central to the composition is a Buonomo in the act of filling a woman's flask with red wine while she struggles to hold two loaves of bread that have evidently come from the great pile behind her. To the right of this duo is another brother, standing behind a large vat brimming with deep red liquor. He is decanting wine into a flask for a male beneficiary, who appears to have already had one flask filled and is looking expectantly at the second. To the left of the scene stands a group of three Buonomini, positioned around a counter groaning with loaves of bread. While two from the group are busy stacking the loaves, the third is shown serving two young children.²⁴

In order to bring to the fore the moral concepts associated with the female figures in the scene, these figures must first be isolated from the mesh of themes woven into the murals by the artists so that our attention might be aimed at the apparel, poses, gestures, facial expressions of these women and to their positions within the paintings' organisational space. When compared with advice from Medieval and Renaissance conduct books and a variety of other pertinent primary sources, these visual signifiers will allow us to form a short, but informative profile of each of the women depicted.

The anonymous woman shown collecting bread and wine is clearly over seventeen years old and has likely been married, given that she is wearing a full length cloak while out in public.²⁵ The mantle or *fuori* completely covers her gown and is capacious enough to convey the idea that it was expensive. Its colour, which originally would have been black or at least dark, also suggests that she is now a widow.²⁶ Her left foot is just visible from beneath the cloak. She appears to be wearing leather soled hose that were often custom made and therefore an expensive piece of apparel. They lacked, however, the high fashion

²³ For more information on the potential audiences for the Buonomini murals see Hughes-Johnson, "Early Medici Patronage." Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, 153–173 lists a historiography of attributions for the Buonomini murals.

²⁴ The Buonomini ledgers are full of entries regarding the purchase of grain. In November 1482 for example, it was proposed that three florins worth of grain would be purchased for bread that was to be made at the bakers in San Lorenzo. ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita* (1468–1477).

²⁵ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 154.

²⁶ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 175. A further source on Renaissance mourning clothes is Strocchia, *Death and Ritual*, 10. See Strocchia, *Burials in Renaissance Florence*, 193 for the 1473 statutes governing funerals. These laws state that a widow was at liberty to wear her mourning cloak indefinitely.

status of the platform clogs or *chopine*, often donned by contemporary patrician women and thus appear to be a more suitable choice of footwear for a widow or a matron.²⁷ On her head she wears a white cowl, or *cappucco*, which would perhaps allude to her honourable nature since female integrity during the fifteenth century was partly dependent on a woman's body, and often on her face as well, being covered or concealed when in public view.²⁸ Without attempting to merge the Buonomini female into the genre of donor portraiture, this woman is not unlike a Renaissance benefactress with regard to her demeanour. Clearly she is not kneeling in prayer like the figure of Nera de' Corsi (fig. 3), depicted in the Sassetti chapel murals, however, her subdued, customary dress affords her a similar measure of humility to the genuflecting wife of Francesco Sassetti. According to Alberti, proper reverence also relied on a woman's "self-restraint" and on her "air of discretion." If we thus examine the facial expression of our anonymous woman it is clear that in this respect she conforms to Alberti's view (Alberti/Watkins, 229). The artist has ensured that she is neither making eye contact with the brother serving her nor with the painting's viewer. Her eyes are downcast in a modest manner and her face has an air of serenity about it. She is a paradigm of modesty and is unlikely to "go leaping about in the piazza, nor stand telling stories."²⁹ This woman is like Francesco da Barberino's archetypal young widow who, we can imagine, eschewed cosmetics and "washed in water and wore a veil."³⁰ She is an example of pious beauty. Her fairness encouraged only by her plain guise and devotion.

Looking again at the entire scene we notice also that there are two children present in the oratorio. Given that one of them, a bare-legged boy in blue, appears to be looking up towards the female beneficiary, it is possible that he is her son. The general scene would, in fact, make sense only if this were so, as it would be preposterous to suggest that toddlers were sent to collect wine and bread alone, especially given the way in which the Buonomini operated. Amleto Spicciani has shown in his study of the confraternity's early activities that each family needing aid was listed under the name of the head of the household and that the names and ages of dependents were written alongside. Beside this a Buonomini scribe would also indicate the number of "mouths" to feed and the serial number of the *polizza*, or token, that on Wednesdays the recipient could redeem for bread.³¹ Spicciani has also calculated that on average each "mouth" received two loaves of bread, a quantity that is corroborated by the painting as it shows the woman and child each

²⁷ Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, 29–32 gathers evidence from antiquity and Medieval and Renaissance literature that illustrates how European widows should conduct all aspects of their lives.

²⁸ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 157.

²⁹ Antoninus quoted in King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, 28.

³⁰ Barberino paraphrased in King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, 30.

³¹ Spicciani, "The 'Poveri Vergognosi,'" 125.

holding two loaves.³² The woman thus appears to have assumed a portion of the family duties that would normally have been allocated to the male. Her absent husband is unable to “stock the [family] cupboard”³³ for her so she has resorted to charity in order to carry out a traditionally masculine chore while remaining an “exemplar of virtue,” not unlike the mantled patrician females in Ghirlandaio’s *Birth of John the Baptist*.³⁴

Being mindful of the complex mesh of information often woven into Renaissance works of art, it would perhaps also be judicious to briefly consider the function of the Buonomini frescoes in relation to their form. Apart from the two scenes from the life of Saint Martin of Tours, the other images show a range of charitable acts performed by confraternity members, all based on the seven corporal works of mercy. At first glance, the frescoes not only celebrate the good works of this lay confraternity, but are also instructive on more than one level. Their most elementary vein concerns the depiction of some of the Buonomini’s more notable activities: providing food and drink to the hungry, clothing the naked, taking in pilgrims, releasing prisoners, attending to the needs of women in childbed, conducting initial visits to families in need, burying the dead, and providing dowries. There exists however, a second level, discernible to the informed viewer. Here, the narratives contained in the frescoes depict a complex moral code of contemporary ideals and values. With respect to the women in the frescoes, we have already begun to establish their moral apotheosis, but as yet we have ignored their admonitions. For instance, the woman depicted in *Giving Food to the Hungry and Drink to the Thirsty* is, with the Buonomini’s help, able to look after her children in the manner her contemporaries would have expected of her and to raise them to be “friends of reason and justice, and walk in the way of God.”³⁵ Yet, the woman also has her back turned towards the two boys and the microcosmic narrative that is taking place in their portion of the illusionary plane provides a stark warning of what would transpire should charity fail to reach out to the young and vulnerable. Given that time has not been kind to this particular part of the painting, the detail is a little difficult, but not impossible to discern.³⁶ Clearly both children are reaching out to a Buonomo who doles out their ration of bread, but, unfortunately, the loaves that he has proffered have fallen through the children’s outstretched hands and are toppling to the floor. We view the bread now just as a *Quattrocento* audience would have done—suspended awkwardly

³² Spicciani, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 137.

³³ Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 26. For more on the father being the provider of food see 242.

³⁴ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 210 discusses mantled women. See Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 36 for a father’s duties, which included providing food for his family and a suitable wet nurse for his wife and baby.

³⁵ Barberino quoted in King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, 30.

³⁶ The Buonomini frescoes underwent a sympathetic restoration program in 2011 although large portions of paint that have been missing for some years have not been reinstated.

in mid air for all eternity. The loaves, thus, are not only symbolic of Christian charity that has bypassed the children, but they also remind us of the importance of piety and the Eucharist. It was Jesus himself who explained: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). The narrative, however, does not end there—if we turn our attention to the boys' lowered hands we can distinguish that each of them appears to be holding onto the tatty remnants of a toy lion (fig. 4). The boy in yellow holds the apparently plush body with its tufted tail while the child dressed in blue holds the head. It is as if the two have fought over a single toy and the altercation has resulted in a grotesque dichotomy. The lion could well be symbolic of the Florentine republic which, without the order that, in this instance, is provided under the auspices of Christian charity, would be torn asunder like the boys' toy lion.³⁷

Moving on to the fresco of *Giving Clothes to the Naked* (fig. 5), which also depicts a scene in the Buonomini's oratory, we see once again the raised carrel that, in the previous image, was piled high with bread; now, however, it has been moved to another part of the oratory where it has become a station for the distribution of cloth and garments. In this semblance of realistic space the artists have depicted a Buonomo and his helper allocating lengths of linen and apparel while another brother sits and records what has been and what will be administered to the six various beneficiaries.

The first recipient of alms that we will consider in this image is the young lady to the right of the composition who seems to be accompanied by an older male relative, perhaps her father. Although this bearded gentleman is dressed in Florence's "civic uniform" not unlike the Buonomini, we cannot consider him to be one of their number given that he has a protective arm around the shoulder of the female beneficiary, an unthinkable gesture if performed by a stranger.³⁸ Perhaps, then, the young lady has been accompanied through the Florentine streets by a close member of her male kin so that she might collect a gown or a cape from the Buonomini in anticipation of winter,

³⁷ For the tale of how the lion came to be the symbol of Florence see della Torre, *I Medici*.

³⁸ Sebregondi, "The Congregation and the Fresco Cycle," 84 also maintains the theory that the elderly gentleman in not one of the Buonomini although she does not elucidate why. Nevertheless, in her article, "Clothes and Teenagers," 27–51, she does mention that the old man is probably from one of the more lofty social echelons as he wears a black cloak (*lucco*) that was "reserved for the higher social classes." Kent, "The Buonomini di San Martino," 56 mentions the Buonomini as sometime recipients of their own charity. Correspondingly, if the elderly gentleman is one of the brothers—he is actually embracing the concept of charity and shielding it with his cloak, which is perhaps related to the protection that *Madonna della Misericordia* accords. Also, as Sebregondi suggest in "Clothes and Teenagers," the old man likely represents one of the ages of man and one of the three social classes—the wealthy. See also Niccolini di Camugliano, *The Chronicles*, 142, for a short discussion on the colors associated with the three theological virtues. The colour red appears in the tricolor dress worn by Beatrice when she appeared to Dante in Purgatory and can signify either charity or love.

as various girls are recorded to have done in the summer of 1488.³⁹ The suggestion that the scene is set in summer is substantiated not only by archival evidence but also by the clothing that the female beneficiary is wearing. She wears a dress, or *gamura*, and on top of this she is sporting a *cotta*, that is, a sleeveless overdress, often worn by women during the summer.⁴⁰ The fact that she is not wearing a cloak in public also suggests that she has not yet reached her age of majority.⁴¹ Evidently, the young lady is well dressed as her hose and gown show no signs of wear and her sleeves are slit to reveal the fine linen *camicia* that she dons as an undergarment—a practice that became fashionably popular during the mid *Quattrocento*.⁴² Her hair, too, is styled in a manner that attests to her middle-class status, as her forehead is customarily bare while the majority of her elaborately curled hair is arranged beneath a small *cappellina*, a type of headgear commonly worn by both girls and women during this period.⁴³ Not quite the “icon of female perfection,” a status that Paola Tinagli accurately accords the young Tornabuoni women in the choir frescoes of Santa Maria Novella, the Buonomini female is nonetheless a virtuous young woman.⁴⁴ She has managed to refrain from showing any sign of impropriety as far as her clothing and behaviour are concerned and appears to the viewer as chaste and “perfectly balanced” in spirit, and not at all “vain and foolish” (Alberti/Watkins, 213). Furthermore, her gaze acts as evidence of her purity, which according to Alberti was “part of the dowry [a mother] passes on to her daughter” (Alberti/Watkins, 213). Accordingly, then, the girl’s face is beautiful in its serenity and her chaste eyes are downcast in what would be considered a respectable pose (Alberti/Watkins, 213). Likewise, the blush on her cheeks adds to the outward appearance of innocence while simultane-

³⁹ ABSM *Entrata e Uscita* in June 1488 record that Lisa daughter of x was given a gown costing 12B and in September of the same year, Girolamea, daughter of y was given more money towards paying for a cloak. “Suo manto ... piu monette ... pezo dello debito.” Due to water damage the pages on this section of the ledger are not numbered. Likewise, in March 1478, the daughter of the San Bartolomeo baker was given a new gown. ABSM 1.2.4.0.1 *Entrata et Uscita del Proposto* (March 1479–1481).

⁴⁰ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 309.

⁴¹ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 154. See also Sebreghondi, “Clothes and Teenagers,” 27–50. Sebreghondi makes the distinction between “*robe larghe per di sopra* (loose garments worn on top)” and “*vestu stricti per di sotto* (tight garments worn underneath).” Young women and men can be identified in Renaissance art as they are more often than not, portrayed wearing the latter with little reference to the former. Young men would wear the tighter clothing in order to “display and accentuate their manly attributes” and young women likewise would “reveal they had a body and a physical constitution for procreation.” Sebreghondi, “Clothes and Teenagers,” 27.

⁴² Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 192.

⁴³ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 304. Woods, “Portrait of the Lady 1430–1520,” 65 states that virgins were portrayed with mostly loose hair while married women had theirs “decorously bound.” She also maintains that a plucked hairline made a cultivated appearance. Woods, “Portrait of the Lady,” 67.

⁴⁴ Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, 67.

ously suggesting that such a fine specimen of virtue, fashioned in part by her parent's honour, will inevitably become a good wife (Alberti/Watkins, 211). It is her pose, however, that informs the viewer exactly why she is present in the oratorio. Her hands clasped together as if in prayer and her feet positioned as if she were stepping into a curtsy reveal, without words, that a need for charity brings her to the confraternity.⁴⁵

Two other female beneficiaries are also present in this scene. Although they are partially obscured by the gentleman in the yellow *farsetto* in the mid forefront of the composition, we can still determine that the pair comprise a mature, mantled woman and a nubile young girl who are being given a length of linen cloth by one of the brothers. It is unfortunate that this particular part of the mural has deteriorated with time and much of the original colour is missing from around the head and torso of the young girl (fig. 7). What is striking, however, despite the decay and the less than dextrous execution of the figure, are the similarities between her appearance and that of the woman considered to be Ludovica Tornabuoni in *The Birth of Mary* frescoes in the Cappella Maggiore in Santa Maria Novella (fig. 6). While I am not for a moment suggesting that the figure in the Buonomini fresco is Ludovica Tornabuoni, I would like to suggest that Ghirlandaio may well have allowed either compositional ideas from workshop pattern books or even cartoons that were designed for previous fresco cycles to be re-used and adapted to fit this particular project.⁴⁶ The similarity between the two women is striking—they share the same hairstyle, analogous long, curved noses, thin lips, and chins that jut out in an identical manner. What they do not share, however, is the same artistic hand.⁴⁷ Notwithstanding the differences in location and social status, both Ludovica Tornabuoni and our anonymous young beneficiary are meant to convey a uniform message. These women, then, not only accord to the fifteenth century notion of “fashionable beauty” with their blond locks, plucked hairline to reveal high foreheads, and pale skin, but they are also

⁴⁵ A small ivory sculpture in the Bargello museum shows Charity in the form of a female and her pose is identical to both the female beneficiary in the Buonomini's *Giving Clothes to the Naked* mural and the woman pilgrim in the *Taking in Pilgrims* mural.

⁴⁶ This theory derives mainly from my study of the Buonomini frescoes in relation to Ghirlandaio's Santa Maria Novella paintings. Of particular interest is his rendering of the *Birth of Saint John the Baptist* in the Tornabuoni/Tornaquinci chapel. There are though other motifs that are apparent from Ghirlandaio's earlier works, for example the Santa Fina frescoes. Similarities between objects and groupings within this cycle and the Buonomini cycle suggest the continued use of workshop pattern books. Also O'Malley, “Finding Fame,” 9 mentions how Perugino perhaps used drawings made from existing cartoons in order to fulfill commissions executed for moderate fees. Perugino, of course, also worked on several prestigious commissions with Ghirlandaio including the Sistine Chapel and the Sala dei Gigli.

⁴⁷ Marchini, “The Frescoes of the Choir of Santa Maria Novella,” 320. The evidence of many hands, some of very poor quality has been noted by Marchini in the Tornabuoni chapel.

paradigms of virginity.⁴⁸ Both are included within their respective frescoes in order to visually articulate a specific “component of the city’s honour”—the virtue of its women.⁴⁹ Ludovica Tornabuoni’s presence in the choir frescoes of Santa Maria Novella attests to this as she is representative of Florence’s nubile yet chaste female “capital” that, like any other asset, could be traded and exchanged.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Ghirlandaio and his contemporaries acknowledged the idea that outer beauty reflected inner morality. His earlier portrait of Ludovica’s sister-in-law, Giovanna, which was probably used to aid the artist’s depiction of her in the Tornabuoni chapel, bears the inscription, “O that it were possible to reflect morality in a painting, for if it were then this would be the loveliest picture in the world.”⁵¹ Accordingly, then, the young female in the Buonomini mural is an investment in the making and her worth, already evident from her apparent rectitude, will increase with assistance from the confraternity who will provide her with clothes and, in so doing, retract the veil of poverty that obscures her virtue so that she, too, can be seen as a credible example of female familial honour as her patrician counterpart (Alberti/Watkins, 250).

The concept of poverty hiding virtue is also present in the Buonomini’s *Making an Inventory* fresco (fig. 8). This scene has been subject to a number of diverse interpretations including the inventorying of a legacy, cataloguing the trousseau of an impoverished maiden and recording the possessions of vulnerable wards.⁵² Given that an entire family, consisting of father, mother, two daughters, a son, and a toddler are present within the home while two Buonomini carry out the inventory procedure, it is likely that the Buonomini are in fact performing an initial visit in the home of a decent family whose poverty and therefore vulnerability has been brought to their attention.⁵³

⁴⁸ Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, 70. Brown, *Virtue and Beauty Leonardo’s Ginevra de’ Benci*, 12–13 also discusses female paradigms, virtue and how concepts of female beauty during the Renaissance were often derived from literature.

⁴⁹ Bryce, “Performing for Strangers,” 1083.

⁵⁰ Bryce, “Performing for Strangers,” 1083–84.

⁵¹ See Manca, “Moral Stance in Italian Renaissance Art,” 53 for the inscription on Domenico Ghirlandaio’s *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*. Marchini, “The Frescoes of Santa Maria Novella,” 320 is helpful with regard to Ghirlandaio’s use of existing panel paintings as a guide for portraits in the Tornabuoni chapel frescoes.

⁵² Wisch, “Incorporating Images,” 248 mentions two interpretations, “recording detailed bequests” or “tallying the possessions of vulnerable wards.” Bargellini, *I Buonomini di San Martino*, 31–32 refers also to two interpretations: the first an “inventory of a legacy” and the second, the recording of a prospective bride’s trousseau, which he believes is the correct analysis. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, 212 however, mentions “instruction of the ignorant ... the inventorying of donations... [and] most likely ... the inventorying of possessions of vulnerable wards.” Sebegondi, “The Congregation and the Fresco Cycle,” 78 states that the mural depicts the initial visit by the Buonomini to a family in need.

⁵³ Sebegondi, “The Congregation,” 78 informs us that this visiting procedure has not changed through the centuries and still takes place today.

What perhaps has been overlooked in previous interpretations is a motif that joins the group and pronounces them a family unit: the appearance of poverty. One must also consider that young families with children were the exact demographic that made up the majority of Buonomini beneficiaries during their first thirty years of activity.⁵⁴ In addition to these observations, it is clear that there is an absence of decorative objects within the domestic interior, which is rather striking because even an interior as Spartan as a monk's cell or the home of a poor artisan would usually benefit from some sort of religious illustration, however small, cheap, or ephemeral.⁵⁵ Richard Trexler has suggested that the *poveri vergognosi* were the same people who pawned their possessions at the Monte, which is entirely credible; if this is the case in this image, it would appear that this family had nothing left of value to use as a collateral and so it has had to appeal to the Buonomini for help.⁵⁶

Despite relying on the Buonomini's charity, the women depicted in the *Making an Inventory* fresco are uncommon, possibly unique examples because not only are they shown dressed to go about their daily domestic duties, but they are simultaneously conducting themselves with a virtue and decorum that allows the viewer to appreciate their honour undeterred by their ragged appearance.⁵⁷ According to Leon Battista Alberti and Saint Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444), a good wife took care of the home and “details of housekeeping should [be committed] entirely into [her] hands.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, there should be “no household goods of which [she] had not learned both the place and the purpose” (Alberti/Watkins, 208). Accordingly, in the Buonomini fresco we are privy to this female domain. Central to the composition stands the matriarch of the household, dressed in a patched green gown, worn hose, and a veil. Her appearance, despite its shabbiness, is not dissimilar to other contemporary depictions of honourable matrons, although the colour of her aged garment alludes to times past. That her dress is green signifies the theological virtue Hope and reminds the viewer that

⁵⁴ Spicciani, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 156.

⁵⁵ Especially pertinent are the Buonomini's *Visiting the Sick* mural and Fra Angelico's paintings in the cells of San Marco, Florence.

⁵⁶ Trexler, “Charity and the Defense of Urban Elite,” 85.

⁵⁷ Trexler also suggests that the figures included within the Buonomini frescoes were not ragged. “Strikingly however, the aid recipients in these paintings are solid individuals. None is ragged, none miserable.” Trexler, “Charity and the Defense of Urban Elite,” 90. As the text was first published in 1973 and good quality images of the Buonomini have only recently become available this oversight could likely be due to the poor calibre of reproduced photographs. The high resolution images that I have managed to acquire have only recently been generously gifted to me by the Florentine fine art photographer, Antonio Quattrone. Additionally however, I have been allowed by the confraternity to be present in their oratory for extended periods of time while conducting formal visual analyses of each painting.

⁵⁸ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 86 for a discourse by San Bernardo of Siena and Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 208 for his notions on what constituted a good wife.

this old garment was perhaps purchased when the woman was younger.⁵⁹ Likewise the colour assures us of her former youthful chastity as green had been a colour associated with virginity at least from the time of Dante.⁶⁰ This leads us to believe that her “integrity, purity and the character of the perfect mistress of the household” is simply overshadowed by temporary poverty.⁶¹ Moreover, her stance and pose reflect a degree of familiarity and assurance regarding the running of a household. Her feet are parted squarely, more akin to the depictions of *cittadini* who, because of the “grave moral weight” that they carry, must be shown standing sure and firm. She is also looking directly at the notary while pointing out something that may be of interest to him.⁶² Alberti stated quite clearly that “the woman’s character is the jewel of her family” (Alberti/Watkins, 213); while the Buonomini matriarch may have lost some of her lustre, her dominant position at the centre of the composition reassures the viewer that she is the virtuous gem that crowns this perhaps temporarily jaded scene of domesticity.

Her daughters too, who seem to be conversing quietly just outside the doorway at the back of the room, appear to be reflections of an honourable upbringing. Both are dressed for chores in day gowns and headscarves and their downcast eyes and “honest and moderate” expressions that conform to the Renaissance ideal of female propriety, notwithstanding their heavily patched garments.⁶³ The two female siblings are, however, depicted standing at the edge of a portal and although they may at present be free from vice, poverty could well entice them through this symbolic opening and into a world of corruption.⁶⁴ Archbishop Antonino Pierozzi, advised women not to stand “murmuring in the doorway”⁶⁵ because gossip and dawdling were seen to be a spiritual threat to women.⁶⁶ From the parents’ point of view the daughters could be considered a greater encumbrance than their male offspring; parents not only would be expected to protect the girls’ innocence and purity but

⁵⁹ Niccolini di Camugliano, *The Chronicles*, 142.

⁶⁰ Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatory*, 30 “A virgin in my view appear’d, beneath Green mantle, rob’d in hue of living flame.”

⁶¹ Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 250. “Poverty, as anyone knows by experience, I won’t say wholly hinders a man, but keeps his virtue in the shade and often leaves it hidden away in obscure squalor, resembling some cloth which people say is good stuff under the dirt and grime.”

⁶² Manca, “Moral Stance,” 57.

⁶³ Welch, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 281–282.

⁶⁴ King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, 22 discusses public and private space using illustrations from the 14th century writings of Francesco da Barberino and the sixteenth-century texts of Nevizzano. Both writers agreed that public spaces could include courtyards, doorways, windows, balconies and some public rooms within the home itself.

⁶⁵ Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, 28.

⁶⁶ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 167.

they would also inevitably have to provide dowries.⁶⁷ Consequently, a family's poverty had the potential to affect not just the daughters' piety and chastity, but also their future as wives and mothers. In light of this, the Buonomini's efforts to preserve the spiritual and physical integrity of these young women is not simply an action implemented to maintain a family's honour, but an attempt to safeguard the *status quo* within the Florentine republic because "any transgression by women, brings about disorder through civil disruption and political upheaval."⁶⁸

If a young woman's misbehaviour could theoretically destroy a city's civic stability, equally exceptional conduct in relation to marriage could be considered "the very basis of civic morality."⁶⁹ Positioned directly to the right of the *Making an Inventory* scene is a fresco that depicts an espousal or betrothal (fig. 9).⁷⁰ Set outdoors under the cover of a small loggia, much of the pictorial space is taken up with the many figures of those attending the ceremony. To the left of the scene sits a notary writing on a sheet, perhaps the document detailing the dowry that will subsequently be sent to the groom for his perusal.⁷¹ There was after all a monetary estimation required from the bride's family of the worth of her dowry and this would be checked and recalculated by the groom's kin who are shown just beside the notary.⁷² The espoused couple are at the centre of the composition and the bride's mother and father are standing close to their daughter's side while the groom prepares to receive both his new wife and her dowry, represented by the coins that the Buonomo, who stands between the couple, is dropping into the groom's upturned palm.

The bride-to-be is the personification of virtue and everything that a proper fifteenth-century Florentine maiden should be.⁷³ She is pure, chaste,

⁶⁷ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 31. See also King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 25 for a short discussion on baby girls as the victims of abandonment and infanticide.

⁶⁸ King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, 40–42 illustrates that tales from antiquity that were often represented by Florentine art acted as admonitions against the transgressions of tyrannical, lascivious men and dishonourable women. For an analysis of the Buonomini's *Releasing the Debtor from Gaol* fresco and a discussions on anti-magnate symbolism and the visual promotion of civic stability, see Hughes-Johnson, "Early Medici Patronage."

⁶⁹ Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, 21.

⁷⁰ For a detailed view of an inventory made prior to an espousal and marriage see Dati, *Two Memoirs*, 114.

⁷¹ On the serious and varied considerations surrounding marriage alliances see Molho, *Marriage Alliance*, 13.

⁷² Welch, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 281–282.

⁷³ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 40 quotes Francesco Barbero who describes an ideal woman's comportment. "preserve an evenness and restraint in the movements of the eyes, in their walking, and in the movement of their bodies; for the wandering of the eyes, a hasty gait, and excessive movement of the hands and other parts of the body cannot be done without loss of dignity, and such actions are always joined to vanity"

and in obeisance of her parents. According to Alberti, such qualities in a young woman would make her perfect marriage material because they would allow her husband to easily transform the already acquiescent maiden into a conforming wife (Alberti/Watkins, 115–120). The girl bends to the will of her parents by allowing her father to “give her away” by holding her hand and guiding it towards the ring about to be placed on her finger. Her mother, standing directly behind her, lays a comforting hand on the girl’s left arm as if holding her in place, ready to receive the betrothal. The mother’s face is not discernible due to the deterioration of this part of the fresco and the girl’s features have been somewhat affected by the loss of paint and plaster over the years. Nonetheless, the impression that emanates from the figural organisation of this small family group is that the bride is a pure and virtuous girl, unaccustomed to being outside the family fold and to what is now happening to her. The positioning of the young woman’s head and neck seem to reveal the tension and uncertainty of a new experience. Her father’s grief stricken face adds to the discomfort present in the scene, an indication that he will miss his virtuous daughter when she leaves his home and joins her new kin. The fact that the mother is actually holding her daughter in position reveals both a sense of reassurance and firmness, as if she would actually push the girl into position if she felt she had to. It also alerts the viewer to the fact that mother and daughter are acting in a manner that is both morally acceptable and customary.⁷⁴ Almost as revealing as the various clothes, poses, gestures, and facial expressions present in this fresco, is one solitary object held by the young woman—a white handkerchief that, as we may have learned from its inclusion in Shakespearean literature, can bear meanings both symbolic and literal.⁷⁵ In a literal sense, the object would certainly be useful at such an emotional moment, although its fine linen and lace form would indicate that it would also have been quite a vanity.⁷⁶ In the years when the fresco was painted, sumptuary laws were relaxed for brides.⁷⁷ Perhaps it is correct that a young girl should be depicted with such a fine object because, despite the fact that her parents had to get help for a dowry from the Buonomini, they do appear to have maintained their ability to dress their daughter in a good quality gown with bright yellow sleeves fashionably slit to reveal a linen *camicia*.⁷⁸ The fact that the handkerchief is white reminds us of the theological virtue,

⁷⁴ King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, 23.

⁷⁵ Dati, *Two Memoirs*, 114.

⁷⁶ Landini and Bulgarella, “Costume in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Portraits of Women,” 91 mention a handkerchief belonging to Nannina de’ Medici that was given to her as a wedding gift. Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, 5 also mentions in his diary during July 1466 that his new bride, Salvestra, had amongst her trousseau, “twenty-four handkerchiefs of hand-woven linen.”

⁷⁷ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 88.

⁷⁸ Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 192.

Faith. The colour also alludes to the girl's virginity and to the white sheets that will be stained with her blood when the couple consummate their union.⁷⁹

If marriage was the bedrock upon which Renaissance Florentine society was built, the live issue of such a prestigious union conferred a transient yet "unparalleled honour; upon childbearing women."⁸⁰ Opulent scenes that convey the mothers' prestige following the birth of their children are, without exception, confined to the genres of the lives of saints and nativities. The Buonomini, however, appear to have adopted some of the visual traditions customarily associated with religious representations of birth and gently adapted them to convey a more secular message. Their woman in childbed scene (fig. 10) takes place in the chamber of a woman who presumably has not long since given birth. Much of the pictorial space is taken up by a large bed positioned on a raised platform and the only decoration in the room is provided by a small painting of the crucifixion and a niche alongside that contains a carafe of wine, a container of sweetmeats, a glass and a piece of fruit. Reclined on the bed and covered partially with a red blanket is a veiled woman, strikingly similar in pose and physiognomy to Saint Anne, represented by Ghirlandaio in the Tornabuoni chapel frescoes. In bed beside her is her baby. Attending to the woman are two Buonomini, one on either side of the bed, while to the right of this trio is another Buonomo handing a capon and a flask of wine to a female dressed for household chores.⁸¹ Ludovica Sebegondi describes the standing woman as a "maidservant," which is one possible reading of the figure although this female could equally well be kin to the woman in childbed. Although she is dressed in a cap and an apron, the woman's attire bears a striking similarity to Sandro Botticelli's *Portrait of a Woman* who is not a domestic servant but a woman dressed in the appropriate manner for conducting household duties.⁸²

The scene is unusual in the sense that three men are present in an environment that was exclusively the domain of women. This would lead us to suspect that the narrative the confraternity wished to convey is an "operative fiction," as Rubin terms it, "versions of desired ends—not portrayals of actual

⁷⁹ For an in-depth discussion on the complexities and traditions surrounding Florentine marriage and espousal ceremonies see Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna*.

⁸⁰ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 14.

⁸¹ Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 186 informs us that "pheasant and capon and partridge or other delicacies...are prepared for the sick." Various entries in the Buonomini ledgers show that chickens were often provided for the infirm. For example ABSM 1.2.1.0.2 *Entrata e Uscita* (1478–1482), fols. 132^r–133^v have entries that report respectively "uno pollo buono ecco ... porto" and a chicken for the "infirmo" at a cost of 10 denari. Likewise in October 1483, a woman from the Borgo was given "pane, pollo [and] vino" by the brothers. ABSM 1.2.1.0.1 *Entrata e Uscita* (1468–1477), fol. 110^r.

⁸² Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 86. Equally the notion that the woman could be a *Guardedonna*, retained in order to aid the mother and child recover from the birth cannot be eliminated from this discourse. For more information the role of the *Guardedonna* see Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, 43.

conditions.”⁸³ In other words, it is a perpetual tableau created to show the kind of help available from the confraternity to honourable women in childbed. Like the other virtuous, married women depicted in the Buonomini murals, this *donna del parto* is appropriately veiled and averts her gaze from the two Buonomini aiding her. Her baby, snuggled by her side, appears naked, which would explain why one of the brothers is proffering swaddling bands. The fact that the child is in bed with its mother and not being attended to by a wet nurse suggests that the family either could not afford to employ such a woman or that the mother was, as the Venetian humanist Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454) recommends, nourishing the child in the most “proper ... [and] wholesome” way.⁸⁴ This, Barbaro informs us, “lends itself to shaping the properties of body and mind to the character of the seed”—in this case, the absent father.⁸⁵ It is not clear whether the absent father has failed in his paternal duty to find and secure a wet nurse, although Alberti, despite appearing on the one hand to endorse this type of surrogacy, does in fact accommodate those who cannot find a wet nurse who meets stringent moral and hygiene requirements. “You must admit also” he says, “that the mother herself ... offers more suitable and much more practical nourishment to her own children” (Alberti/Watkins, 151–154). San Bernardino of Siena, however, would have considered the Buonomini’s *donna del parto* as sin free in respect her nursing habits.⁸⁶

Despite the father’s absence, which is not unusual when we compare the Buonomini scene to similar hagiographical representations, the woman appears to belong to a household that at one time benefitted from disposable income.⁸⁷ Her bed is a testament to conspicuous consumption—the enormous red coverlet draped upon it indicates an outlay of considerable expense, given the cost of red dye stuffs. The cover also suggests that this woman, and by extension her family, are honourable. “The better [things] are, the longer they last, and they do you more honour,” states Alberti (Alberti/Watkins, 194–195). The crucifixion painting on the back wall, although relatively inexpensive when compared to what the bed cover must have cost, suggests that this family, although receiving help from the Buonomini, are not yet in dire straits.⁸⁸ The room may be sparsely decorated, but it is not empty. It is likely,

⁸³ Rubin, *Images and Identity*, 56.

⁸⁴ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 13.

⁸⁵ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 13.

⁸⁶ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 13.

⁸⁷ Haas, *The Renaissance Man and his Children*, 30–40 mentions that “Renaissance paintings depicting the birth of the Virgin or of Saint John commonly place the expectant father outside of the room in which the birth had occurred. Domenico Beccafumi’s *Birth of the Virgin* (1540–43) shows the father seen through a doorway sitting head in hands waiting for the birth of his child.” Haas also recounts the tale that Benvenuto Cellini tells about his own birth, at which the artist’s father was absent from the birthing chamber.

⁸⁸ Spicciiani, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 132. “I have found that up until March 1472, at least 40 women in childbed received this type of assistance. They were almost all wives of workers, some

then, that this family are struggling, but not desperate like the family depicted in *Making an Inventory*. The woman in childbed could well make up part of the demographic discussed by Amleto Spicciani—a young family whose growth temporarily exceeds their income.⁸⁹ The painting also indicates that the *donna del parto* is aware of contemporary philosophy regarding the spiritual and thaumaturgical qualities of religious imagery. The image of Christ crucified adds a revealing touch to the scene: the sacred image has clearly not been chosen in order to instruct and mould the newborn child, but to serve as a reminder to the woman that she must accept and endure the pain of childbirth much as the Saviour accepted his own suffering.⁹⁰

Having isolated and studied some of the female beneficiaries depicted in the Buonomini frescoes, it is clear that this exercise, although somewhat artificial, has brought to light the emphasis the confraternity placed on the array of concepts and criteria that I have gathered under the term “familial honour.” Equally clear is the role that women from the middle and artisan classes played in communicating these notions. In reality, women would have made up only around a fifth of those helped by the confraternity, yet there are females present in all but two of the eight frescoes based on the Corporal Works of Mercy and the Buonomini’s own good works.⁹¹ As for any other portraits, Renaissance or otherwise, viewers are privy only to what patrons and artists wish them to see.⁹² Nevertheless, the artistic texts we are allowed to read relatively unhindered, give a voice to non-patrician women, specifically those classed as *povere vergognose* albeit under the supervision of the Buonomini as charitable patriarchs.⁹³ Furthermore the voices we discern can be considered authentic because they comply with the ideals of female familial honour that were addressed in contemporary literature and reproduced in the poses and expressions of women in Renaissance art.⁹⁴ Like the painted figures in the *Madonna della Misericordia*, “the space [the women of the Buonomini frescoes] occupy and the air they breathe has all the properties of an everyday

of whom turn out to have been inscribed in the Quaderno as well.”

⁸⁹ Spicciani, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 156. “The poor assisted by the Buonomini from 1466 to 1470 ... were all reasonably young, had often been married only a few years, and so had young children ... It seems that they had not always been poor. Rather they had been in difficulty, often only temporarily.”

⁹⁰ King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*, 24 quotes Fra Dominici’s examples of which paintings to use for the instruction of children. These include various depictions of the Virgin and Child, various female saints and even the Massacre of the Innocents.

⁹¹ John Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 389–390.

⁹² Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 10.

⁹³ Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, 3 states that “in the fifteenth century painting was still too important to be left to the painters.”

⁹⁴ For contemporary views on pose, gesture etc.; see Alberti and Filarete in Manca, “Moral Stance,” 53.

world.”⁹⁵ Their role, however, as emissaries of virtue and respectability, expressed as it is by non-patrician females depicted in both public and private settings, is unique, innovative, and highly informative.

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⁹⁵ Becker, “Aspects of Lay Piety in Early Renaissance Florence”, 192.

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Fig. 1. The workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, "Releasing the Debtor from Gaol" (1486–90). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Florence).



Fig. 2. The workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, "Feeding the Hungry and Giving Drink to the Thirsty" (1486–1490). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Florence)



Fig. 3. Domenico Ghirlandaio, “Donor Portrait of Nera de’ Corsi” (1483–1485). Santa Trinita, Florence. (Public domain image reproduced courtesy of The Yorck Project: *10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei*. DVD-ROM, 2002. ISBN 3936122202. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH).



Fig. 4. Detail from The workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, “Feeding the Hungry and Giving Drink to the Thirsty” (1486–1490). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Florence)



Fig. 5. The workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio "Giving Clothes to the Naked" (1486-1490). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Florence).



Fig. 6. Detail from Domenico Ghirlandaio "The Birth of the Virgin" (1486-1490). Santa Trinita, Florence. (Public domain image reproduced courtesy of The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002. ISBN 3936122202. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH).

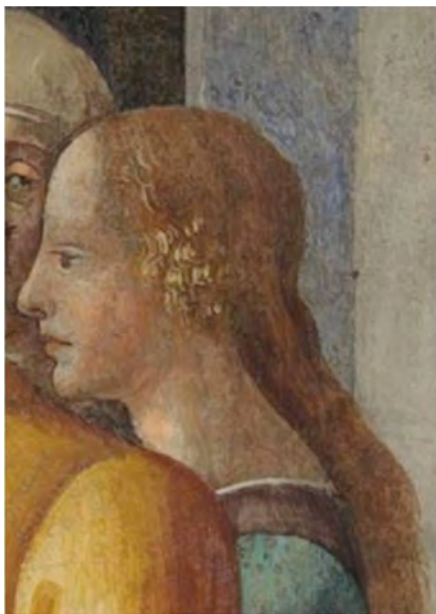


Fig. 7. Detail from The workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio “Giving Clothes to the Naked” (1486–1490). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Florence).



Fig. 8. The workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio “Making an Inventory” (1486–1490). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Firenze).



Fig. 9. The workshop of Domenic Ghirlandaio “The Betrothal” (1486–1490). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Florence).



Fig. 10. The workshop of Domenic Ghirlandaio “Woman in Childbed” (1486–1490). Oratorio dei Buonomini di San Martino, Florence. (By permission of Antonio Quattrone, Florence).