

# The *Poveri Vergognosi*: Fallen Nobility or an Ethical Abstraction Operating within the Boundaries Set by Poverty?

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Summary: *Despite the emergence of various studies focussing on, and tangential to the poveri vergognosi (shamed or shame-faced poor, as they are otherwise referred to), this ambiguous, yet well-known locution has managed to evade satisfactory explanation. This is not to say that previous studies have been lacking in academic rigour, quite the contrary. Investigations addressing this term have been constantly hindered by the phrase's lack of qualification in Renaissance primary source manuscripts. Accordingly, this paper seeks to analyse the term in its original context in order to seek further clarification. In other words, by conducting an examination of various primary sources relating directly to the poveri vergognosi (paying particular attention to documents produced during the fifteenth century by the lay confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino, in Florence, whose main beneficiaries were the shamed poor) and by further scrutinising the phrase within the conditions and terms set by poverty, this short study should provide an understanding of how the shamed poor were deemed, by their contemporary society, to be just that.*

“The poor are always present, in any society at any time, but their absence in documents makes it difficult to learn anything about them.”<sup>1</sup> If one holds with this statement by the twentieth-century historian Richard Goldthwaite, that the poor are obscured by lack of surviving written authentication, then the *poveri vergognosi* (shamed or shamed-faced poor) who operate within the boundaries set by poverty will arguably be even more problematic in their identification and evaluation. This article will therefore allow for an examination of the most pertinent primary and secondary sources pertaining to the shamed poor. Furthermore, rather than isolating this phrase for the purpose of remote scrutiny, other terms relating to poverty in general will also be brought to bear since this investigation will likely be best served if it is conducted in circumstances that will contribute to, and encourage a fuller understanding of the meaning of the locution, “the shamed poor.”

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<sup>1</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 570.

The term ‘shamed poor’ was a short phrase used widely throughout Christendom, and beyond, during the medieval and early modern periods<sup>2</sup> to describe a particular group of unfortunate individuals within society.<sup>3</sup> Fifteenth-century written sources furnish us with some information on the shamed poor, although there is rarely any accompanying description or explanation to further inform our understanding (not that there should be, since the various authors of fifteenth-century documents did not create them in order to facilitate our investigations). The foundation deeds of the Casa del Ceppo (the trust that controlled the Ospedale degli Innocenti prior to the Arte della Seta), for example, mention that the hospital was not allowed to sell its immovable goods “so that for eternity Christ’s poor may be fed and nourished.”<sup>4</sup> They also go on to say that if anything did happen to be sold, then the proceeds should be distributed “among the poor of Jesus Christ ... the public poor (*poveri publichi*) [...] [and] to the secret and shame-faced poor (*poveri vergognosi*).”<sup>5</sup> Thus, in this document there are three orders of the poor mentioned, yet only the shamed poor are qualified with a dual description, namely that they are ‘shame-faced’ and also ‘secret’. In another confraternal document, which was created in the city of Turin during the sixteenth century, the poor were similarly described:

“The city [Turin] has no wine, salt, wheat, or firewood for the maintenance of the poor and needy beggars and the shamed poor.”<sup>6</sup>

The Florentine *catasti* (tax rolls), on the other hand, make no mention of the shamed poor although they do provide legal categories for the poor in general.<sup>7</sup> For example, the *miserabili* have been identified within these documents by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber as including “the infirm, the aged, minor orphans and above all, widows [...] usually destitute.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, “common to miserable households everywhere was the absence of an adult male.”<sup>9</sup> The Buonomini, however, given

<sup>2</sup> The Bible, as an ancient primary source has not been ignored by the researcher although this source does not make mention of the shamed poor. For mentions of charity in general see Exodus 22:22, Hebrews 13:2–3, Deuteronomy 24:14 and John 5:3. With regard to the deserving poor see Matthew 5:42 and Timothy 5:9–10.

<sup>3</sup> See Cohen, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages* and Trexler, “Charity in the Defense of Urban Elites,” 70–78.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Gavitt, *Charity and Children*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Gavitt, *Charity and Children*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Cavallo, *Charity and Power in Early Modern Italy*, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Spiccianni, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 120, states that in the 1427 *catasto*, which included 10,171 returns, 2924 of people listed were paupers.

<sup>8</sup> Herlihy/Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Herlihy/Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, 19.

that they encouraged the “conjugal household”<sup>10</sup> and bestowed a large percentage of charity on women in childbed rather than to orphans and the aged, are generally considered as tending to a section of the poor that did not normally include the *miserabili*.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, given the wide range of poor people mentioned as charitable recipients in the confraternity’s ledgers during religious festivals, one cannot rule out that, at various times, this group (the *miserabili*) was aided by the Buonomini.<sup>12</sup> The *miserabili* or pauper families, according to Raymond de Roover, made up 28% of the city’s households between 1457 and 1458, all of which earned so little that they were exempt from even the lowest tax payment.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, our understanding of this point, in addition to an awareness of the juridical terms within the *catasto*, “does not necessarily bring us closer to the reality of fifteenth-century poverty” and, likewise, to a clearer understanding of who the shamed poor were.<sup>14</sup>

Medieval and Renaissance clerics also produced documentation in which they mention and, more importantly, describe the poor. Antoninus of Florence, for instance, used *pauper* in his *Summa moralis* to describe the “salaried indigent” positions and trades that he assessed.<sup>15</sup> Bernardino of Siena also mentions three categories of the poor in his writings: the non-conformist poor such as “thieves and impatient paupers,” those who are rich only in spirituality, and those “who gladly accept poverty” or are poor “for the love of God.”<sup>16</sup> Bernardino also spoke of the concept of involuntary poverty, admonishing that “the reverse of fortune, made [individuals] fall into poverty [they] who in time had been rich or at least well looked after.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise the fifteenth-century polymath Leon Battista Alberti de-

<sup>10</sup> Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, 394.

<sup>11</sup> See ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, fol. 134<sup>v</sup>, (1.2.1.0.2.); the document contains thirteen entries, eight of which pertain to women in childbed. ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, fol. 130<sup>v</sup>, (1.2.1.0.2.); the document contains fourteen entries, ten of which pertain to women in childbed. ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, fol. 131<sup>v</sup> (1.2.1.0.2.); the document contains ten entries and six of them concern women in childbed.

<sup>12</sup> ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1469–1478*, fol. 131<sup>r</sup>, (1.2.1.0.1.). Despite recording various purchases including large quantities of grain, meat and wine for the Easter feasts of 1478, the confraternity does not detail the individual recipients of this festive charity as it does other beneficiaries at other times of the year; I suspect this is because the food and drink was distributed among the “poor of the earth and of the county” who are mentioned within this same set of entries.

<sup>13</sup> de Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Gavitt, *Charity and Children*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Antoninus cited in Gavitt, *Charity and Children*, 5. The Latin word *pauper* also turns up in a fourteenth-century will. Kuehn, *Heirs, Kin, and Creditors*, 96, informs us that in 1379 Piero di Bernardo, of the rural parish of San Donato in Poggio, was described as a “poor and needy” person or “pauper et egena persona.”

<sup>16</sup> Bernardino of Siena cited in Spicciiani, *Capitale e interesse*, 116.

<sup>17</sup> Bernardino of Siena cited in Spicciiani, *Capitale e interesse*, 116.

scribes the way that, as fortune's wheel turns, poverty can reach in and "strike [a man] down or he suffers some accident," which forces him into penury. Accordingly, it is this type of unfortunate individual that the term *poveri vergognosi* encompasses.<sup>18</sup>

In their archived sources from the fifteenth century, the Florentine confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino presents the poor in a variety of ways: as *poveri di Dio* (poor of God), *poveri della terra* (poor of the earth), *poveri detti* (said poor),<sup>19</sup> and *poveri vergognosi* (shamed poor). As one would expect, they do not elaborate on any of these phrases, which are so problematic for the researcher, yet would likely have been self-explanatory to members of the confraternity.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, one would assume that the names and professions of the individuals listed below each description of poor class would work to aid the search for clarity.

The Buonomini's *Entrata e Uscita* 1478–1482, fol.131<sup>v</sup> begins with the phrase "said poor I undertake 20 May 1478 [...]" and then, below, lists various charitable donations they made.<sup>21</sup> It is surprising to note that the fifth entry refers to a member of the Peruzzi family, whose occupation, unlike the other males identified on this sheet, is not listed, nor does the entry explain what the 17 soldi, 5 denari bestowed on Peruzzi were for. I would therefore suggest that, since the Peruzzi clan had provided the Florentine republic with no less than ten *gonfalonieri* and fifty-four priors of the city's governing body,<sup>22</sup> this man's name alone was sufficient as a means of identification and the reasons why he needed cash from the Buonomini were nobody's business, except the Buonomini's, who chose not to record them.

Following this entry there are five instances of beneficence to women in childbed, two instances of help given to ill women, one gift of clothing and 5 lire, 15 soldi given to Francesco di Conte in order "to extract from prison" Francesco di Profane. If Amleto Spicciani is correct in his perception of the elevated status of individuals who were released from the Stinche prison through the Buonomini's charity, then one may assume that Francesco di Profane is in fact a notable person.<sup>23</sup> He is certainly worthy of

<sup>18</sup> Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 146.

<sup>19</sup> The confraternity often begins a set of ledger entries with the term *poveri detti* (said poor). This description does not usually refer to or qualify earlier text. For instance, ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita* 1478–1482, fol. 130<sup>v</sup>, (1.2.1.0.2.) refers to *poveri detti* throughout. The exception to this rule is when the term is found midway down the page and refers back to a different phrase. For example, ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita* 1478–1482, fol. 131<sup>r</sup>, (1.2.1.0.2.) begins with *poveri di Dio* and refers to the *poveri detti* for all but one of the subsequent entries.

<sup>20</sup> For the particular entries that I refer to see ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita* 1469–1478, fol. 134<sup>r–v</sup>, (1.2.1.0.1.), and ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita* 1478–1482, fol. 8<sup>v</sup>, (1.2.1.0.2.).

<sup>21</sup> ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita* 1469–1478, fol. 131<sup>v</sup>, (1.2.1.0.1.) reads: "Poveri detta adi 20 di Maggio 1478 y quarto þ8 dati a ma madelena di pagolo di [X] inparto [...]"

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Peruzzi-family>

<sup>23</sup> Spicciani, "L'archivio fiorentino dei Buonomini di San Martino," 427–436, in this instance 424.

not having a profession recorded alongside his name and also of the sum paid for his freedom.<sup>24</sup> Not all of those people liberated by the Buonomini were remarkable enough not to have a profession ascribed to them in the confraternity's ledgers. For instance, in June 1478 "Filippo of Madonna Dialta woodcutter" was given money to extract "Giovanni Borsi shoemaker" from prison.<sup>25</sup> If this treatment of surnames is an unwritten rule regarding the confraternity's ledger keeping, the previously mentioned women in childbed and the two women suffering from illness mentioned on folio 131<sup>r</sup> are clearly not well-known, given that their addresses and the professions of the heads of their families were included within each ledger entry. Furthermore, if one were inclined to opine on their economic status, it could safely be said that these undistinguished individuals could at best be described as *popolo minuto*<sup>26</sup> or that they could equally as well be considered to be the wives of "lower guildsmen."<sup>27</sup> That the group described is made up of the wives of men who laboured as kiln workers, cloth workers, and the like, places them within a stratum of society within which "there were gradations based on wealth, occupation and status. Many lived from hand to mouth, moving from employer [to employer], from one rented hovel to another, and in and out of the *catasto* records."<sup>28</sup> Others however, were not classed amongst the "oafs" and "the rabble"<sup>29</sup> but were literate and able to keep accounts.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, there was social disparity among those the Procurators of the Shamed Poor of Florence considered to be *poveri detti*. The individuals in the group labelled "said poor" and recorded as having received help in May 1478 did not share a common economic or social level.

Similarly, the confraternity's use of the term *poveri di Dio* cannot be used as a tool to readily ascribe individuals to a certain economic level of society since the meaning of this term appears to lack specificity. For example, the Buonomini's *Entrata e Uscita 1469–1478*, fol. 132<sup>r</sup> begins "the poor of God I undertake on 27 June 1478 [...]" and subsequently lists payments for excise duty on milled grain, payments for goods and services to invalids from obscure families, help given to non-notable women in childbed, and monies bestowed in order to extract a man from prison.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1469–1478*, fol. 131v, (1.2.1.0.1.) reads: "Poveri detti adi 4 di detto y cinque ß15 dati a Francesco di conte per trarre di prigione Francesco di profane [...]"

<sup>25</sup> ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1469–1478*, fol. 132v, (1.2.1.0.1.) reads: "Poveri detti adi detto y dieci dati a Filippo di ma dialta legnauolo p[er] trarll di prigione e p[er] lui a Giovanni borsi laniauolo porto Francesco minatore p[er] partito di tutti."

<sup>26</sup> Brucker, "Florentine Voices From the Catasto, 1427–1480," 16.

<sup>27</sup> Brucker, "Florentine Voices From the Catasto, 1427–1480," 17.

<sup>28</sup> Brucker, "Florentine Voices From the Catasto, 1427–1480," 16.

<sup>29</sup> Brucker, "Florentine Voices From the Catasto, 1427–1480," 16.

<sup>30</sup> Brucker, "Florentine Voices From the Catasto, 1427–1480," 17.

<sup>31</sup> ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1469–1478*, fol. 132v, (1.2.1.0.1.).

Furthermore, 4 lire and 6 soldi changed hands between the Procurators of the Shamed Poor and Piero di Betto Gherardini so that the recipient could pay for “suo piato” (his litigation or effort).<sup>32</sup>

During Easter 1478 the confraternity’s records refer once again to the *poveri di Dio* in addition to the *poveri* and the *poveri della terra et di contado* (the poor of the earth and of the district) on the same ledger page.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as the majority of entries recorded on this particular leaf refer to considerable donations of flour, bread, wine, meat and monies, which were widely distributed throughout Florence during the paschal festival, one can safely assume that, in this instance, the Buonomini’s charity extended to each and every impoverished individual in the city.

The final term pertaining to the penurious and used, albeit selectively, by the Buonomini is the expression currently under scrutiny, the *poveri vergognosi*. Given that the other designation for the confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino is The Procurators of the Shamed Poor of Florence and their title deeds claim that the lay brotherhood was set up, in part, for “the utility of the shamed poor of the said city,” one would expect their account ledgers to be peppered with mentions of the shame faced poor. Surprisingly however, this phrase, used so liberally in the sodality’s *Capitoli* (statutes) rarely occurs in their registers, one notable exception being the *Entrata e Uscita 1482–1489* which mentions the *poveri vergognosi* in relation to a grain donation.<sup>34</sup> The preamble to the confraternity’s *Capitoli* does, however, explain that, because there was a famine in the region, there was a “large number of poor of the city and district of Florence” and of these, the “said shamed poor” were described as “those who usually do not beg,” “the inauspicious that suffer many passes” but must “live by God from which the divine desire and the right results are advanced.”<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly, the confraternity’s seemingly unspecific use of various terms to describe those who benefited from their charity, when considered alongside their own description of the *poveri vergognosi* in the sodality’s *Capitoli*, would further suggest and support our own modern view that the term *poveri vergognosi* transcends social classes and exists as a moral concept that operates within the boundaries of poverty.

In the twentieth century the term has been further defined by historians as “those who had once helped themselves but could no longer,

<sup>32</sup> ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1469–1478*, fol. 132v, (1.2.1.0.1.) reads: “Poveri detti adi 9 di detto y quarto ß6 dati a piero di berto gherardini p[er] dare a ß[er] Zanobi del pace nots[notaio] p[er] suo piato di licentia d andrea bambagliaio et Domenico mazinghi.”

<sup>33</sup> ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1469–1478*, fol. 131r, (1.2.1.0.1.).

<sup>34</sup> ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1482–1489*, fol. 24v, (1.2.1.0.3.).

<sup>35</sup> ABSM, *Codice dei Capitoli*, fols. 3r–4r, (1.1.1.0.1.), found in Appendix II, reads: “Considerando la carestia presente et la moltitudine de poveri della citta et contado di Firenze: maximamente di quegli che non sono consueti a mendicare et il sinistro che patiscono molti colle loro famiglia, spirati da dio dal quale i sancti desideri et le giuste operationi procedono.”

through no fault of their own,” do so,<sup>36</sup> “the needy who did not beg,”<sup>37</sup> and respectable people “capable of shame.”<sup>38</sup> The same scholars who provide these basic explanations of who the shamed poor are simultaneously express reservations with regard to the difficulties encountered when attempting to define this popular phrase. For instance, Richard Trexler qualifies his simple definition of the *poveri vergognosi* by stating that “documents using the term in a practical context do not explicitly identify the *vergognosi* as belonging to any particular class.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Christopher Black, despite saying that the *poveri vergognosi* could include “poor nobles,” does not expand his definition beyond including “others of respectability.”<sup>40</sup> Amleto Spicciani, too, supplements his basic definition of the shamed poor with assertions that the *poveri vergognosi* were “contrasted in the literary sources of the time [the fifteenth century] to the public poor”<sup>41</sup> and that poverty was a “structural phenomenon tied up [...] to a certain type of economy.”<sup>42</sup> A common misconception, however, is that the *poveri vergognosi* were exclusively the patrician and merchant classes and that “such persons were impoverished noblemen and citizens, not beggars.”<sup>43</sup> However, if the previously mentioned ledgers of the Buonomini di San Martino are once more brought to bear on the question, it becomes clear that it, in the main, is not members of the patrician classes who are being helped. In the fifteenth century, the majority of Buonomini aid went to families and individuals from other strata of society.<sup>44</sup> One also notices that the administrative class (notaries, lawyers etc.)<sup>45</sup> is conspicuous by its complete absence<sup>46</sup> and that those who fell from the moneyed classes<sup>47</sup> do not really feature in the registers until after 1472, when the confraternity’s

<sup>36</sup> Spicciani, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 121.

<sup>37</sup> Trexler, “Charity in the Defense of Urban Elites,” 75.

<sup>38</sup> Black, “The Development of Confraternity Studies,” 24.

<sup>39</sup> Trexler, “Charity in the Defense of Urban Elites,” 75.

<sup>40</sup> Black, “The Development of Confraternity Studies,” 24.

<sup>41</sup> Spicciani, “L’archivio fiorentino dei Buonomini di San Martino,” 428.

<sup>42</sup> Spicciani, “L’archivio fiorentino dei Buonomini di San Martino,” 428.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 467.

<sup>44</sup> See ABSM, *Entrata e Uscita 1469–1478*, (1.2.1.0.1.) and *Entrata e Uscita 1478–1482*, (1.2.1.0.2.). See also Spicciani, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 121–123 and 131–132.

<sup>45</sup> The administrative class as described by Spicciani, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 121–123 and 131–132 corresponds to the professional class described by Brucker, “Florentine Voices From the Catasto,” 21. This class was subject to internal ranking with university doctors at the top and notaries at the bottom.

<sup>46</sup> Spicciani, “The ‘Poveri Vergognosi,’” 138–139.

<sup>47</sup> By moneyed classes I am referring to the top ranking citizens of Florence, including wealthy merchants. Brucker, “Florentine Voices From the Catasto,” 19 describes them as the “elite: *nobili, uomini principali, huomini grandi, huomini di buone cose, gente di qualità*.”



bonds with the Medici become more marked; but even then mentions of individuals from this class are few.<sup>48</sup>

The *miserabili*, who were often considered to be the architects of their own financial and moral downfall, rather than the victims of fortune, cannot necessarily be considered to be *poveri vergognosi* because they had perhaps fallen too far, in spiritual terms, to benefit from the Buonomini's charitable intervention. Among this group of destitute individuals there were the "outcast poor," who were described by Brian Pullan in 1996 as "the feckless, habitual sinners in need of redemption such as vagrants and common prostitutes."<sup>49</sup> Notable exceptions to this rule are the instances when the Procurators of the Shamed Poor aided harlots to atone for their vices by encouraging them to convert to Christ once more.<sup>50</sup>

Because of the manner in which he describes the descent from security into poverty, Pullan does provide the clearest vision of this plunge into penury: "For the poor were not a social class or a uniform mass, but a pool formed partly by people descending from various social levels and retaining when they did, something of their previous social identity."<sup>51</sup> He goes further in separating the shamed poor from his 'pool' of general poor people by explaining that "The *poveri vergognosi* [...] were faced not with loss of life, but rather with loss of honour or respect if their inability to live as their rank demanded became known."<sup>52</sup>

This forfeiture of moral rectitude can be attested from contemporary early modern chroniclers. For example, Giovanni Corsini, a member of a distinguished family who had fallen upon hard times, was described as "so immersed in a brimming expanse of misery and poverty that [...] he was even despised by his own relatives."<sup>53</sup> Alberti also had a harsh view of how need transformed an individual. "Begging," he wrote, "those bitter words, those words most hateful to a free man's mind 'I beg.'"<sup>54</sup> He then states that poverty and begging were "a kind of slavery" and so changed honourable freemen into vassals lacking moral rectitude.<sup>55</sup>

In his study of 1979, however, Giovanni Ricci explains that "the ashamed poor in fact don't necessarily make up part of any subordinate classes [...] they are not marginal, rather they express an extreme wish [...] to stay among the ranks of the [class into which they are] best integrated."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Spicciari, "The 'Poveri Vergognosi,'" 123.

<sup>49</sup> Pullen, "Charity and Poor Relief in Early Modern Italy," 49.

<sup>50</sup> Spicciari, "Aspetti finanziari," 321–346.

<sup>51</sup> Pullen, "Charity and Poor Relief in Early Modern Italy," 49.

<sup>52</sup> Pullen, "Charity and Poor Relief in Early Modern Italy," 49.

<sup>53</sup> Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 106.

<sup>54</sup> Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 68.

<sup>55</sup> Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 148.

<sup>56</sup> Ricci, "Povertà, vergogna e povertà vergognosa," 307–308 states: "La storiografia sociale degli ultimi decenni invece ha massicciamente (e giustamente) trascurato questo tipo di



He thus allows us to further separate the shamed poor from the collective of general poor people by explaining that their “right to assistance derives [because] the applicant is not able to handle his own job, the needs of his [...] own family” and that civilisation “is lost” if these individuals are forced to act in a manner that conflicts with their social circumstances or if they are left to “live indecorously.”<sup>57</sup> He also explains that the reason for this apparent conflict of actions and emotions within certain poor individuals has nothing to do with who they were or what stratum of society they came from, but depended solely on the notion of honour. As Ricci states, they were “in need of [an] honourable life” because they were “impoverished from a state of precedent comfort,” whatever social echelon they belonged to.<sup>58</sup> Mark Cohen, too, is aware that honour is the quality that separates the general poor from the shamed poor when he writes that the *poveri vergognosi* “resist turning to others for help, let alone resorting to the embarrassment of the public dole or beggary.”<sup>59</sup>

Writing in 1991, Olga Pugliese, hands us the key to the criteria by which the Buonomini di San Martino judged those who required their help. In an explanatory note within her paper she writes a one-line statement informing the reader that it was perhaps Saint Ambrose’s *De officiis* that provided the confraternity’s guidelines when choosing prospective beneficiaries.<sup>60</sup> She does not elaborate further, but if we follow her suggestion and return *ad fontes* to Saint Ambrose we find him instructing his readers as follows:

First we must always see that we help those of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10). It is a serious fault if a believer is in want, and you know it [...] that he is without means, that he is

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ottica «assistenziale» della povertà vergognosa, ma ha anche riservato un’attenzione assai limitata alle figure individuali di questi poveri e al significato sociale della loro esistenza; e questo per una serie di motive di ordine vario. La moda innanzitutto: i poveri vergognosi infatti non fanno parte necessariamente delle classi subalterne, il più delle volte anzi non ne fanno parte affatto; non sono degli emarginati, anzi esprimono un’estrema volontà, spesso coronata da successo, di restare fra i ranghi dei meglio integrati.”

<sup>57</sup> Ricci, “Povertà, vergogna e povertà vergognosa,” 336–337 states: “Si ribadisce tuttavia che «la condizione di povero vergognoso [...] deve risultare dalla coesistenza nel richiedente del duplice requisito della condizione civile e della decadenza da uno stato di agiatezza»; e si precisa che la «civiltà» può essere persa «per essersi dedicati in modo continuativo ed abituale a una forma di attività non compatibile con tale condizione sociale o abbandonati ad un modo di vivere indecoroso».”

<sup>58</sup> Ricci, “Povertà, vergogna e povertà vergognosa,” states: “I poveri vergognosi vi sono definiti in modo non troppo diverso da quella dei testi più antichi: «cittadini bolognesi, cattolici, bisognosi, di vita onorata di civile condizione e che siano decaduti da uno stato di precedente agiatezza».”

<sup>59</sup> Cohen, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages*, 33.

<sup>60</sup> Pugliese, “The Good Works of the Florentine ‘Buonomini di San Martino,’” 120.

hungry, that he suffers distress, especially if he is ashamed of his need. It is a great fault if he is overwhelmed by the imprisonment or false accusation of his family [...] if he is in prison and—upright though he is—he has to suffer pain and punishment for some debt [...] (we ought to show [mercy] especially in an upright man).<sup>61</sup>

In this passage, Ambrose is, in effect, raising those of a certain position and spiritual disposition out of the mire of general poverty by setting up the following principles: insisting that individuals must be pious; identifying the possibility or impact of emotional distress caused by poverty or incarceration; recognising whether an individual is discountenanced by privation or imprisonment, and finally by the vague notion (repeated twice in quick succession) that individuals should be “upright.”<sup>62</sup>

It is Spicciani, however, who gives the greatest clue to how the lay confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino hold the key to our understanding of who the shamed poor were. In his article on the brotherhood’s archived materials,<sup>63</sup> Spicciani first identifies that the various funds constituted a ‘source of primary importance’ for the study of “Florentine poverty as a structural phenomenon, tied up that is to a certain type of economy.”<sup>64</sup> He then goes on to divide historical documents produced by the confraternity into two funds of his own creation, rather than those set out in the catalogues of the National Library of Florence and the Archive of the Good Men of Saint Martin. These two new funds he calls the *fonti archivistiche*, made up of literary sources from the two aforementioned repositories and the *fonti iconografiche*,<sup>65</sup> which refers to eight of the ten frescoes in the Buonomini’s oratory: the ones based on the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy. Spicciani also warns the reader not to treat these paintings as “generic depictions,” but to regard them along with the paper files as two sources that “illuminate each other.”<sup>66</sup>

Without resorting to Spicciani’s advice on this occasion, what can be gleaned from the Buonomini’s *fonti archivistiche* and the various other sources employed for this article is that no single source provides the reader with all of the attributes that an individual should manifest in order to be designated as shamed poor. Nevertheless, by pooling the most crucial sources pertaining to the *poveri vergognosi* and weaving their various threads into a

<sup>61</sup> Ambrose, “*De Officiis*” chapt. 30, par. 148.

<sup>62</sup> Ambrose, “*De Officiis*” chapt. 30, par. 148.

<sup>63</sup> Spicciani, “L’archivio fiorentino dei Buonomini di San Martino,” 427–436.

<sup>64</sup> Spicciani, “L’archivio fiorentino dei Buonomini di San Martino,” 428.

<sup>65</sup> Spicciani, “L’archivio fiorentino dei Buonomini di San Martino,” 429.

<sup>66</sup> Spicciani, “L’archivio fiorentino dei Buonomini di San Martino,” 436. For a further study that seeks to identify the shamed poor using the two fonds suggested by Spicciani, see Hughes Johnson, “Fashioning Family Honour in Renaissance Florence.”

single, readable tapestry, we can discern that the shamed poor were not simply temporarily impoverished members of the nobility or moneyed classes. As this short study has illustrated, the social status of the shamed poor was not an issue, except perhaps for the *miserabili*, since the Buonomini ostensibly caught the worthy before they fell that low. Furthermore, an analysis of the term within the conditions and circumstances set by poverty illustrates that in order to be classed as shamed poor individuals had to meet the following specific criteria: their need must be kept secret; they faced a loss of honour; they had to be pious; they may experience psychological consequences due to hardship, and they should be “upright” citizens. Accordingly, when considered alongside the lack of specificity accorded to the phrase by various ancient authors and scribes, our findings suggest that, rather than being an explicit fiscal classification or a tangible social sub-genre, the *poveri vergognosi* functioned as an ethical abstraction that operated within the boundaries set by poverty. Paradoxically, this abstruse concept of *poveri vergognosi*, though accommodated by the parameters of penury, cannot be perceived as being entirely subservient to them.

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