

“Quella importanza di materia”: Women and saints in Francesco Pona’s Galeria delle Donne Celebri

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Article abstract

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“QUELLA IMPORTANZA DI MATERIA”: WOMEN AND SAINTS IN FRANCESCO PONA’S *GALERIA DELLE DONNE CELEBRI**

MAGDALENA MARIA KUBAS

Abstract: In his *Galeria delle Donne Celebri*, a collection of twelve short stories about famous female figures, Francesco Pona “depicts” four lascivious women and four chaste women from classical antiquity, and four saints from the early and medieval Christian era. Pona, a writer and medical doctor, rationally studied the Other, that is, women; his narrator in *Galeria* analyzes the characters’ bodies and behaviours, but almost never their psychology. In this essay, I examine the “portraits” of saints in Pona’s *Galeria* (Magdalene, Barbara, Monica, and Elisabeth of Hungary) and the observation of otherness by a collector who studied both the natural and miraculous aspects of female sanctity. As interest in the ancient and medieval saints was typical of the period following the Council of Trent, I investigate Pona’s short stories within the framework of the decree on saints and relics issued in 1563. I also consider the misogynistic controversy that took place in Italy between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as Pona’s treatise *Della Eccellenza et Perfettione ammirabile della Donna*.

Brief Introduction to Pona’s *Galeria*

The last of the eleven editions (Fabrizio-Costa 179) of Francesco Pona’s *Galeria delle Donne Celebri* was published in Rome in 1892.¹ As the editor observes in the preface, “[l’editore] volle offrirlo al pubblico italiano per mezzo della nostra

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¹ The quote used in the title of this essay, “Quella importanza di materia,” is from the preface of this 1892 edition of the book. All the quotations included here are also from this edition. The book was first published, however, in 1633, and the original spelling and wording of the title was *La Galeria delle Donne Celebri di Francesco Pona*. Francesco Pona (Verona, 1595–1655) was

Biblioteca, perchè con una ristampa si potesse venire nuovamente in possesso di questo gioiello dimenticato della nostra letteratura” (“[the publisher] wanted to offer [this book] to the Italian public through our editorial series. Thanks to the reprint, this forgotten jewel of our literature has come back into our possession”; Pona, *Galleria* 6.² The late nineteenth-century editor also reminds readers of Pona’s period and of his most well-known works, “la *Lucerna* dialogo, la *Cleopatra* tragedia, l’*Ormondo* e la *Messalina* storie romantiche ecc.” (“the dialogue *Lucerna*, the tragedy *Cleopatra*, the romantic stories *Ormondo* and *Messalina*”; Pona, *Galleria* 6), and refers to his literary advisor, who proposed Pona’s work be re-published, as an “[l]esumatore” (“exhumer”; Pona, *Galleria* 6). Is it possible that both Pona and his works had slipped into oblivion by that time? In the period following the first publication of *Galeria delle Donne Celebri*, Pona had numerous readers (Buccini 124), and until the end of the nineteenth century there were studies on this author, such as Pietro Rossi’s *Francesco Pona nella vita e nelle opere* published in 1897. We assume that the history of literature never forgot Pona—see, for instance, *Storia dell’età barocca in Italia* by Benedetto Croce (Bondi 12)—but at the same time, it seems that the general public had (and continued to have) little familiarity with him.³ Nowadays, it seems worth returning to *Galeria*, one of Pona’s so-called minor works, which reveals something about the religious and scientific culture of the period and how this culture influenced the literary representation of women at that time.

The contemporary scholar Stefania Buccini has divided the life of Francesco Pona into multiple periods. The chapter titles of her study, *Francesco Pona: L’ozio lecito della scrittura*, correspond to the stages of Pona’s life: “Beginning,” “Transgression,” “Conformism,” and “Epilogue.” *Lucerna* is the most important of Pona’s works from the earliest two periods, and indeed this book was included in the 1626 *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Nay 179). It was then revised and republished in 1627, the same year Pona started work on the *Galeria delle Donne*

a doctor, a historian, and a prolific writer of poetry, short stories, treatises, and dramas. He is most famous for his collection entitled *Lucerna*, published in 1625.

² All translations are my own. The modern spelling (*Galleria*) is used to indicate fragments from the quoted nineteenth century edition. Where I address the work by Pona (including the title) or by Marino I use the seventeenth century spelling *Galeria*.

³ The problem is more complex, but Quondam (xxiv–xxvi) and Cox (21–25) speak about ideological reasons (“strongly anticlerical,” Cox 24) for the critical oblivion of the post-Tridentine spiritual literature after the Unification of Italy.

Celebri (Bondi 18). The later stages of Pona’s life and work are known to have been marked by traditionalism and fervent Catholicism. As Buccini notes,

[i]l recupero del prestigio sociale e professionale, consolidato dal conferimento della carica di storico ufficiale della peste e dall’ammissione al collegio dei medici, marca la completa liquidazione di ogni residuo di dissidenza. Pur volgendosi alla letteratura con la consueta vitalità inventiva, Pona punta adesso sui temi convenzionali e sul raffinamento delle tecniche compositive sia nel settore narrativo che teatrale. (121)

The recuperation of social and professional prestige, consolidated by the appointment as the official historian of the plague and admission to the board of city doctors, marks the complete liquidation of any residual dissidence. While turning to literature with the usual inventive vitality, Pona now focuses on conventional themes and the refinement of compositional techniques in both the narrative and theatrical sectors.

From the early 1630s onwards, Pona embarked on the third stage of his life and work in an attempt to reconcile his medical expertise with orthodox Catholicism (116). As in other points in his career, Pona officially clarified his position—in this case towards the ecclesiastic institutions—starting from the literature.

Religious conformism: Pona’s *Galeria* and female sanctity

The year 1636 marked an important event in Pona’s life: it was the “anno della formula di abiura sottoposta alla Sacra Congregazione dell’Indice” (“the year of the formula of abjuration submitted to the Sacred Congregation of the Index”; Nay 159). *Lucerna* would remain in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* for almost three hundred years (Nay 179), but at that time, the writer publically pledged to change his image “proclamando l’ineccepibile adesione all’ortodossia cattolica e avviando un costruttivo dialogo con intellettuali ed ecclesiastici influenti, sia in ambito scaligero che romano” (“by proclaiming his unexceptionable adherence to Catholic orthodoxy and initiating a constructive dialogue with influential intellectuals and ecclesiastics of the circles of both Della Scala from Verona and others from Rome”; 159). He set the stage for this break throughout his literary work. As Buccini reminds us, *Galeria delle Donne Celebri* had excellent predecessors, such as

Giovanni Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*.⁴ Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this genre of hagiographic tales was quite popular in the seventeenth century—among other, see the success of *Leggendario delle santissime vergini, le quali volsero morire per il nostro signore Giesu Christo* by Leandro Bassi. Giovan Battista Marino's *Galeria* was undoubtedly another important point of reference for Pona.⁵ As far as Pona's sources are concerned, the most important at that time was of course *Leggenda aurea* by Jacopo da Varazze; in this respect, Francesco Pona did not constitute an exception, but he may also have based his text on other works available in his epoch. The above-mentioned *Leggendario* was reprinted numerous times in Venice: in that period, the city served as a publishing hub, giving rise to movements of cultural renewal that then spread throughout La Serenissima.

The Council of Trent was held between 1545 and 1563 in northern Italy (see Prosperi; Jedin; Sarpi). The Council, which saw bishops convened by the Pope in both Trent and Bologna, was called for in response to the spread of Protestantism. The Council decided on multiple issues that ended up changing Catholicism, including allowed/prohibited lectures, the canon of the Scripture, the doctrine of justification, and the veneration of saints (Prosperi 51–87). Debates and decisions on the problem of saints took place during the Council of Trent's last session. In 1563, the decree entitled *De invocatione, veneratione et reliquiis sanctorum et sacris imaginibus* was promulgated with the *placet* of the entire assembly (Roggero 160). Going against the Protestants' position, this decree reaffirmed and normalized the veneration of saints and the question of both relics and sacred images. Moreover, in the introduction of this decree, the bishops also pointed out the existence of civil forms of cult. The crux of the matter was the rule of the “doceant episcopi” (“bishops who teach”) with its most important characteristic, that is, “duplice fine culturale e pedagogico-didattico” (“a dual, cultural and pedagogical-didactic purpose”; Roggero 161). A passage from the decree reads as follows: “Ma a che servono le immagini quando abbiamo gli originali? Servono per conservare in noi, che siamo sensibili, la memoria di Gesù Cristo e de' santi, i quali c'insegnano le virtù che dobbiam praticare ed insieme ci ricordano d'invocarli nelle nostre necessità”

⁴ Other works of Pona devoted to the history of the pestilence in Verona in 1630 present direct links with Boccaccio (Rossi 122).

⁵ The aim and rhetorical figures are different, however. For instance, Pona's sources had to be textual, while Marino prevalingly based his portraits on visual works. The mechanism of the ekphrastic representations in Marino's *Galeria* is described in Torre. In fact, Pona's *pitture* (“pictures”) are *stories*.

“But what do we need the images for when we have the originals? They serve to preserve in us, who are sensitive, the memory of Jesus Christ and the saints, who teach us the virtues we must practice and, at the same time, remind us to invoke them in our moments of need”; Session XXV of the Council of Trent). The cultural proposal formulated by the Council began to spread in literature about ten years after the conclusion of the last session (Dionisotti 324), that is, in the mid-1570s. It is also worth noting that a complex matter of sanctity was delayed during the Council’s activity: for fifty years, no canonizations were carried out (Zarri 203). It was only in the seventeenth century that new saints were elevated to the glory of the altars. It was only in the seventeenth century that several new saints were elevated to the glory of the altars; so Ditchfield can speak about the new and “broader cultural work” (555) of the cult of saints during the Counter-Reformation.

In light of these premises, Pona appears to have constructed his *Galeria* by absorbing the post-Tridentine culture of sanctity. His *Galeria* distinguishes very clearly among types of women, dividing them into three sequences. Each sequence is composed of four *pitture* (“pictures” or “portraits”), namely depictions of lascivious women (*Lascive*), chaste women (*Caste*), and saints (*Sante*), with the first two sequences including only pre-Christian women. The Council of Trent’s twenty-fifth session affirmed the idea of people being instructed in an understanding of God through “analogies” and “similitudes” thanks to the model of the saints, and Pona’s examples are chosen to be unequivocally either condemnable or redeemable. On this subject, the only redeemable sinner is Magdalene, the figure whose story opens the *Sante* sequence.⁶ It should be recalled that Pona was hoping to secure the endorsement of the heads of the Roman Church in the early 1630s, so his choice avoided touching on certain delicate matters such as the possibility of redemption described in the acts of the Council’s sixth session (*De iustificazione*, 1547).⁷ Similar problems affect the *Caste* as well, although in this second sequence the interpretation is more complex—the virtuous lives of these women make their tales more similar to those of the *Sante*. The chaste women are virtuous, but their lives are entirely delimited by their origins and education. Although they must sacrifice their lives to save their virtue, they do not enjoy moments of epiphany

⁶ Augustine is another character who went from being a sinner to being a saint; he appears in the short story devoted to Monica, but his story is not a direct object of our interest here. At any rate, Augustine’s sins, at least those cited by Pona, are not related to the sexual sphere.

⁷ The problem of purgatory was one of the key points of the dogmatic opposition to Protestants. The Council returned to discussion of this subject twice, during sessions six and twenty-five.

or miracles, even when accomplishing great things. The order of the short stories devoted to the *Caste* women seems to have a teleological character. Several of the women chosen for inclusion display some of the same elements as the married saints. Nevertheless, a lack of divine grace clearly prevents the former from transcending the limits of their condition. The only possibility for the *Caste* is earthly life, and they are “condemned” to a violent death.

The arrangement of the *Lascive* and *Caste* short stories can be interpreted as leading to a climax. Firstly, this progression is chronological, reflecting the dates of the protagonists’ lives. Secondly, the women’s attitudes can also be seen as progressing: Lucrezia and Penelope, who come first among the chaste women, are passive, with the former paying for her virtues with her life. In the next portrait, Artemisia consumes the ashes of her husband Mausolus and becomes the ruler of Caria. As a girl, she was educated to be a queen and warrior, and after Mausolus’s death she builds the first mausoleum and conquers the island of Rhodes, even though its reluctant population was opposed to being ruled by a woman. The last portrait of a chaste woman depicts Hypsicratea, another warrior, who faced off against her immoral husband in battle. In some of the short stories in this sequence we see elements of the civil cult dedicated to the women,⁸ that is, practices related to Lucrezia’s funeral or Artemisia’s veneration of her husband’s ashes. But the important difference between the chaste women and the saints lies in the fact that the latter were granted the power to change their own lives and those of their loved ones (their husbands, their sons, and so on). Magdalene serves as a connecting thread in terms of both chronology and plot, bringing us from classical antiquity to Christianity and from any possible pagan virtue to one inspired by divine grace. The *Sante* sequence can also be interpreted as a progression towards a climax: we begin with Magdalene, who has to be converted herself to become Christian and (later) a saint, before progressing to Barbara, who does not convert anyone, and then Monica, whose patience and prayer aids in converting her husband and then her son. We finish with Elisabeth, who was born in a Christianized world and offered her faith to the Christian community.

Female sanctity: between natural and miraculous

Francesco Pona was both a medical professional and a man of letters. Laura Nay argues that, as he was not able to step down from either of his two professions,

⁸ This cult was recognized in the decree of the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent.

he spent his life using one to justify the other (179). In this section, I show that Pona’s portraits bear the mark of scientific language, as well as a scientific point of view. In addition, we must not forget the culture of sanctity that prevailed in Pona’s period. According to Fabrizio-Costa, even before the Council of Trent the Renaissance had changed the common approach to venerating the saints and, consequently, their images, because “*érudition plus exigeante et une piété plus austère, méfiante à l’égard d’un surnaturel trop stupéfiant et hostile à l’exubérance de l’imagination populaire, contribuent à éliminer les bizarreries et les exagérations de la religion médiévale*” (“a more demanding erudition and more austere piety, wary of an overly stupefying supernatural and hostile to the exuberance of the popular imagination, help[ed] to eradicate the oddities and exaggerations of medieval religion”; 174–75). Additionally, Ditchfield speaks about “the evolution of hagiography from the miracle-laden tales of the late-thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* [*Leggenda aurea*] to the protoscientific, philological rigour of the Bollandists *Acta Sanctorum* (begun in 1643)” (560). Striking a balance between the miraculous and the rational, Pona focused first on the human aspects of his saints. His wish to be officially accepted as a Christian writer and to demonstrate his adherence to conservative values (Fabrizio-Costa 180) may have simplified his choice of characters, all of them highborn women.⁹ Those conservative values were at play in the context of post-Tridentine artistic and religious culture.

The sequence of the *Sante* begins with Magdalene, who certainly creates a *trait d’union* between the ancient and Christian worlds. Magdalene is also one of the most popular saints: she represents the “*corps privilégié du siècle du Baroque ... qui autorisait règles et pratiques*” (“body that was privileged during the Baroque century ... which authorized certain rules and practices”; 178). As Fabrizio-Costa notes, Pona does not analyze the psychological factors of Magdalene’s conversion in depth (184); rather, “*C’est l’oeil, la vue qui marque cette biographie de Madeleine*” (“It is the eye, the [sense of] sight that marks this biography of Magdalene”; 185). The French scholar repeatedly references painting, and indeed Pona’s narrator bases his portrait of Magdalene on sensory perceptions, sounds, and visual elements. We also find a medical gaze in the text, perhaps deriving from the author’s second profession. Pona focuses on Magdalene’s body—as he had with Lucrezia, one of the *Caste*—and her uncommon beauty. In Pona’s time, representations of Magdalene were characterized by exceptional social

⁹ As we will see, this was also true of the exemplary women chosen for the treatise *Della Eccellenza et Perfezione ammirabile della Donna*, written by Pona twenty years later.

(and sexual) freedom, within the framework of erotic luxury, as Fabrizio-Costa observes (188). According to the Council of Trent guidelines, artists were to avoid lascivious representations of the saints (Roggero 161–62), but there is no doubt that seventeenth-century representations of Magdalene violate such guidelines. In Pona's short story, it is only Magdalene's life as a sinner that is described in this manner. The narrator does not search for any underlying meaning or justification in the woman's life; he only records, describes, and condemns.

As mentioned above, Pona's observing gaze is distant and medical. In fact, when Magdalene leaves the city of Magdala, Pona remarks that "si risolse a infettar Gerusalemme" ("she decided to infect Jerusalem"; *Galleria* 128). The word "infect" in this case means "to corrupt," "to spread" her sins throughout Jerusalem as well. Such corruption is opposed to salvation, and the latter remains an implied semantic element in the text, thereby generating the thematic axis of the story. Magdalene's retinue and toilette in Jerusalem are first described in rich detail, as was common practice for several writers of the period.¹⁰ This scene is then followed by a two-page fragment narrating the moment of her conversion, with only one or two sentences conveying Magdalene's insight: "Questo le fece vedere a un punto il caos delle sue vanità, e lo intelletto le suggerì che in un istante esser quello gli eccitamenti alla libidine" ("This obliged her to see at one point the chaos of her vanities, and her intellect suggested to her that in an instant all of that was the excitement of lust"; Pona, *Galleria* 130). As Fabrizio-Costa notes, the description of Magdalene's conversion involves theatrical aspects (191), and this fragment is followed by a soliloquy in which the protagonist recognizes her body as the source of the "infection" and scratches her cheeks to the point of drawing blood. This episode is another element of medical culture—a punishment and, why not, a kind of cure¹¹—that the narrator introduces into the tale. Fabrizio-Costa notes that similar descriptions of sadistic pleasure were not uncommon in baroque art. Brignole Sale's *Maria Maddalena peccatrice, e convertita*, for instance, uses the same source as Pona, specifically the *Leggenda aurea*. Compared to Pona's character, however, Brignole Sale's Magdalene is more introspective, and she does not engage in self-harming behaviours. The infection = sin correspondence previously constructed in *Galeria* displays these overtones of pleasure stemming from a description of a pathologic physiological phenomenon applied to spiritual discourse. If sin is the

¹⁰ See, for example, Brignole Sale's novel *Maria Maddalena peccatrice, e convertita*.

¹¹ Bloodletting, for instance, represented an important treatment in the history of medicine.

same as disease, it suggests, conversion is a promise of health. After Magdalene’s conversion, the mundane details of her person or life are no longer interesting to the narrator. A similar phenomenon can be seen in Pona’s descriptive use of the anatomical details of a decaying body in the scene of the resurrection of Lazarus, whose “naso era nella punta corrotto, e gli occhi pareano due vetri torbidi” (“nose was already corrupted at the tip, and his eyes looked like two turbid glasses”; Pona, *Galleria* 135–6). Lazarus came back to life because Christ looked him in the eye: “il calore della presenza divina riscaldò tosto le sue freddezze” (“The heat of the divine presence soon warmed his coldness”; 136). It can thus be argued that the first element constituting isotopy is not sin but the lack of Jesus’s presence in a person’s life, an absence that implies a state of illness in both body and soul.

The second portrait of a saint features the third-century martyr Barbara, and Pona’s short story in this case is set in Nicomedia. Before analyzing the tale itself, it is worth noting that Barbara is one of the saints whose historical existence lacked sufficient proof to justify her being included in the modern calendar of the Roman Church.¹² Nevertheless, Barbara does appear in the *Leggenda aurea*. Although Barbara is a dubious figure, she was and continues to be a very popular patron saint and her feast day (4 December) is celebrated by the armed forces, miners, and people who work with explosives. At this point, Pona progresses from a short story not centred around miraculous elements—there is only one miracle in Magdalene’s story, that of Christ resurrecting Lazarus—to a universe built almost exclusively on fantastic elements. This account offers an interestingly nonlinear point of view on Barbara’s hagiography, in that it describes the scene of her death and inserts a retrospective recounting of her life into this description. The narrator introduces Barbara as if he were an anonymous observer, part of the throng standing at the site of her martyrdom: “[il popolo] solo poteva figurare essere una persona ignuda, piuttosto femina che uomo, perché si vedeva indistintamente, come si vede uno che cammini” (“[the people] could only imagine a naked person, more a woman than a man, because she was visible only indistinctly, as one sees a person walking”; Pona, *Galleria* 139–40). The unknown young woman was conducted at the site of her martyrdom by Baron Dioscorus, who held a huge sword on the woman’s shoulder, and “un volume sferico d’atomi aurei fatto velo al corpo di quella, di maniera gliene copriva, che solo la signatura delle membra in confuso, senza distinguersi lineamenti, potea conoscersi ... La novità di quest’iride (per così dirlo) che ammantava costei” (“a spherical volume

¹² Saint Barbara was officially removed from the Roman Calendar in 1969.

of golden atoms made a veil around the woman's body and covered it ... Only the outline of the body, in confusion, without its features distinguished, could be recognized"; 140). The haze then dissipates, "solo a celar dal seno al ginocchio con ufficio di veste" ("[this only served] to conceal her from the breast to the knee, as if it were a robe"; 140–1) to partially reveal the beautiful girl at the moment of her martyrdom. As this passage illustrates, Pona describes a miraculous situation using terminology from the sciences, including both "atom" and "iris."¹³

Pona displays a consistent interest in female beauty. We can suppose he was familiar with the fine arts, as the narrator compares Barbara's face to certain depictions of angels by "pittori celebri" ("famous painters"; 141). When the narrator yields the floor to Barbara's adoptive father, he describes the young martyr by citing her pious behaviour. Only this second-degree narrator, this time a good, Christian father, is privy to the girl's desires and thoughts; in fact, he knows what motivations were behind the first miracle performed by Barbara, her drawing a cross with water on a marble surface in the private bathhouse. The return of the first-degree narration once again presents us with a report of pure facts: at the end of the short story, we discover that an exceptional climatic phenomenon took place, which killed Dioscorus. During her life as a sinner, Magdalene's body is described in detail, as are the bodies of certain other lascivious and chaste women, but Barbara is barely presented in this manner. Her features are sketched as if the narrator were viewing a canvas in that the gorgeous, baroque description of the martyr is all lights and colours: "eran tuttavia così liete le luci che miravano il cielo che superava la loro serenità le squallidezze e i pallori delle guance smarrite" ("nevertheless, the lights [the eyes] that looked at the sky were so happy that their serenity surpassed the dismalness and pallor of her bewildered cheeks"; 141). The violence of the following two scenes is more strikingly opposed to this angelic image. Pona's narrator does not himself feel empathy for the young martyr, but he does try to imagine what the public, the category to which he belongs, is feeling. He then listens to the account of a second-degree narrator, that is, the beheaded girl's adoptive father.

¹³ The literary language of previous periods presents few attestations of this lemma. See, for example, the dictionaries *TLIO* or *Tommaseo Online*. The word "atom" is also used by Pona to speak of the air in his short treatise from 1630 entitled *La Remora ouero de' mezzi naturali per curare e fermare la pestilenza*.

Pona’s third *pittura* of a saintly woman is devoted to Monica of Hippo, Saint Augustine’s mother.¹⁴ Monica’s hagiography is caught up with that of her son, one of the Fathers of the Church. As mentioned above, there were no new canonizations for decades after the Council of Trent. New models of saints were not offered until the sixteenth century, with the female ones including Therese of Avila and Francesca de’ Ponziani, a Roman noblewoman, wife, and mother. These figures, connected to new institutions, such as the *Congregatio Rituum* established in 1588,¹⁵ and new canonization procedural norms, shaped the spiritual culture of that age. The effects of this ecclesiastical policy were felt right up to the twentieth century and the era of the Second Vatican Council. Fewer miracles, but more virtues—this was the saintly model asserted by the Tridentine decrees (Zarri 219–20). On these bases, Monica can be compared to Francesca de’ Ponziani (Frances of Rome).

In his short story, Pona chose sobbing and tears as the main feature of his Monica. In a study devoted to Monica, Giulietta Saginario quotes two passages from Augustine’s *Confessions* in which the author remembers his mother crying for him. Such behaviour is referenced only twice in Bougaud’s classical work on Monica, one instance of which is presented in a positive light (Bougaud 21–23). Drawing on Fabio Boni’s analysis, the main function of Pona’s Monica is to convert first her husband and then her son (Boni 263). Boni argues that Pona’s Monica lacks spiritual tension when compared to Augustine’s representation of her (262). The scholar also remarks that Monica is described through her monotonous, one-dimensional, and almost meddlesome behaviour (264). Let us examine the way Pona’s narrator observes Monica. He confers on her “lo scudo della prudenza” (“the shield of prudence”; *Galleria* 152), and her reaction to her husband’s barbarian way of life is constituted by respect and obedience. She continuously prays in compassion for her son (Pona, *Galleria* 155) and waits for a miracle. She often cries, either alone, in public, or in front of Augustine. On only one occasion does the narrator feel empathy for the woman, when he compares her anguish to that of a lioness returning to the cave with her kill only to find that her cubs have gone missing, an interesting example of how behaviour from the natural realm can be used to illustrate human behaviour. Pona’s empathy is

¹⁴ The name “Monnica” appears frequently in the literature, as this spelling with the double “n” is used in Augustine’s works (Sagarino 11).

¹⁵ In 1969 it was replaced by the *Congregatio de Causis Sanctorum*: the period is remarkable, as the new culture of sanctity was being founded in those years after the Second Vatican Council.

always directed towards the external appearance of the woman rather than her internal feelings. Once again, the narrator acts coherently as a scientific observer. In fact, when Augustine departs Hippo, Pona's Monica is described as turning pale and standing still (157–58); the reader is not provided with any account of her feelings. Monica then stages a theatrical reaction in Pona's short story, in the sense that both her cries of pain and the narrator's comments evoke the theatre, and the latter's bluntness is reminiscent of stage directions.¹⁶ After achieving her entire life's purpose, Monica devotes her remaining time to Christian perfection. At this point, Pona dwells on the second miracle performed by a saint: Monica levitates her body during her ecstatic prayers:

si compiacque Dio dare attestati pubblici ... E col far vedere agli occhi mortali una qualità in lei delle beatifiche: conciosiachè il peso del suo corpo da terra innalzandosi, mentr'ella orava, stava equilibrato sovra l'ali dell'anima, ch'era verso il cielo già indirizzata in un'estasi felicissima. (162–64)

God was pleased to confirm it publicly ... And by making visible to mortal eyes her qualities as a blessed one: the weight of her body rose from the ground, while she was praying, and remained balanced over the wings of the soul, which was already stretched out in ecstasy towards heaven.

The miracle appears rationalized; that is, it is described as a well-thought-out decision on the part of God. Finally, Monica falls ill, a fact reported in Augustine's *Confessions* and taken up by Pona. The vocabulary used here reminds readers of the author's scientific background as he briefly outlines the progress of the ultimately fatal fever.

The last portrait is that of Elisabeth of Hungary. It begins as a hagiography in the classical style, with the narrator observing the entire life of the saint. He identifies all the virtues in her childhood that she went on to display and develop throughout her life. The model of sanctity in this case corresponds to the usual thirteenth-century legend: Elisabeth fasts and passes her nights in prayer. After her

¹⁶ In some cases, the narrator does try to explore both Monica's and Augustine's underlying reasoning for their actions, for instance when they attend Ambrose's sermons in Milan, each of them for a different purpose.

husband’s death, she forsakes all her worldly goods to live in poverty and, later, joins the Franciscan order. Considering the period, this was an early version of the Third Order. As a sign of her spiritual perfection, Elisabeth also levitates, just as Monica had done (172–73), and on her deathbed, the Holy Spirit delivers a sermon through her lips. Pona recounts her legend following the model of heroic virtues during the saint’s lifetime. Most of the miracles Elisabeth performed in life and after death as described in the *Leggenda aurea* (Da Varazze 935–45) are not reported in Pona’s portrait, and the same is true of the rest of the *Galleria* as well. In the last paragraph of the short story, the narrator briefly dwells on Elisabeth’s appearance: “Pareva concentrata in un dolce sonno, tanto era la freschezza e l’ilarità di quell’angelico sembiante: onde pareva dalla morte aver ricevuto fregio e non inguria” (“She seemed to be concentrated in a sweet sleep, such was the freshness and merriment of that angelic face, so that death seemed to have adorned her rather than doing her harm”; Pona, *Galleria* 175). This description once again brings to mind a picture of a dead beauty.¹⁷ This last portrait of a saint penned by Pona seems to be the weakest, as it appears to simply reutilize the main elements of the woman’s hagiography without searching for any particular “ritmo ... concettuale” (“conceptual ... rhythm”; Segre viii). The ideas and point of view are the same as those used in the previous short stories. Perhaps, as Fabrizio Bondi argues, Pona chose the figure of Elisabeth for political-poetic reasons, as a response to Giovan Battista Marino’s portrait of Elizabeth I of England (Bondi 20). In that case, it would have been more important for Pona to include the character in his collection of portraits of women than to work out an interesting point of view for her legend. In fact, certain representations were very “fashionable” in baroque literature and art, but that of Saint Elisabeth of Hungary was not one of these. While Magdalene or Lucrezia ended up featuring in gorgeous representations, perhaps because they offered artists the opportunity to focus on sensual aspects together with virtues, Elisabeth did not excite the imagination of our narrator in the same way.

Female saints, narrative performance, and miracles

As noted above, Pona’s narrator is a scientific observer with a largely impersonal gaze. At times, he can be identified as part of a concrete group, such as the

¹⁷ It could be interpreted as a moment of *ekphrasis* to be linked with a reminiscence of Marino’s *Galleria*. Compared to Marino’s portraits (with their textual-visual mechanism described by Torre), it remains a minor moment in the short story on Elisabeth.

group of bystanders witnessing Barbara's martyrdom. Drawing on Algirdas Julien Greimas's canonical narrative schema (Marchese 34–46), we can observe that all the short stories in the *Sante* sequence focus on a particular stage of the schema, namely the performance. The other elements of Greimas's model barely appear in Pona's tales. For Magdalene, Pona also includes a prior passage of the canonical narrative schema, namely her acquisition of competence. In the case of Monica, there are two similar performances, that is, two conversions of men, but the first is only a prelude to the second. Barbara was raised by adoptive parents who were Christians—in the narrative scheme this corresponds to the manipulation. Elisabeth of Hungary showed qualities of saintliness starting from early childhood. Together with Monica at the beginning of Pona's tales, they all have the competencies necessary to face the narrative trials.

Pona's narration gives priority to certain periods of the women's lives. Such narrative calculation allows the narrator to observe and study the female saints in action as they seek to achieve their 'object of value,' namely the salvation of both their own souls and those of others. To achieve this goal, they renounce both wealth and earthly love (Magdalene), life itself (Barbara), goods (Monica and Elisabeth of Hungary), power (Elisabeth), and an elevated new marriage and children (Elisabeth). It is in this framework that we come to the miracles: for Pona and, as outlined above, the culture of his time, miracles played a more limited role in the achievement of sanctity than they did in medieval hagiographical legend as exemplified, for instance, by Jacopo da Varazze's *Leggenda aurea*, Pona's most important source for *Galeria*. From the perspective of our narrator, miracles are a sign of divine grace or, to use Greimas's terminology, the sanction. The miracle is the final component of the narrative schema, but it does not hold a great deal of importance for narrative development: authors usually spend only a few sentences on princesses marrying princes. Similarly, Pona grants little space to the miracle as such; we are simply reminded that Monica and Elisabeth levitated. That which appears miraculous simply has the function of bringing the narrative to a close: in medieval legends, after Jesus's ascension, for instance, Magdalene becomes a hermit who speaks with angels. For Elisabeth of Hungary, the miracle lies both in the Holy Spirit's preaching issued through her mouth on her deathbed and her angelical aspect afterwards, as if death had beautified her face instead of corrupting it (Pona, *Galeria* 175). Only in the case of Barbara do both the narrative function and the importance of the miracle change. She has multiple helpers: (1) the two masons who build the bathroom with three windows (symbolizing the Trinity) instead of two as specified in the plan drafted by Barbara's birth father, and (2) the

haze of golden atoms that covers her naked body. The sanction in this case is also a miraculous event, but it does not concern the saint directly: it appears in the form of the lightning, a “celeste saetta” (“celestial arrow”; 149), that kills Dioscorus after Barbara’s martyrdom.

Female virtues and seventeenth-century misogyny

In 1653, Pona published a treatise entitled *Della Eccellenza et Perfettione ammirabile della Donna*. In so doing, he took part in the lengthy debate (Boni 27–132) fuelled by the misogyny that had developed in Italy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Men and women participated in this debate with writings both for and against women, and Pona had several eminent predecessors in this field (e.g., Giuseppe Passi, Torquato Tasso, Moderata Fonte, and Arcangela Tarabotti). Fabio Boni (building on the work of Lucinda Spera) suggests that Pona’s *Della Eccellenza* was an act of conformism, as he dedicated this work to the wealthy arts patron Christina, Queen of Sweden (162). Nevertheless, quoting Saint Paul, who banned women from teaching in the Church, Pona reminds readers that Magdalene used to preach just like the apostles (Pona, *Della Eccellenza* 24–25), which suggests that Pona would not have posed such an argument in *Galeria*. In *Della Eccellenza*, as in his earlier *Galeria*, Pona’s argumentation is based on several stories of heroic women chosen from among Biblical figures, princesses, and saints. After using a medical lexicon and argumentative style to examine male and female “construction” during prenatal development, Pona cites, for example, Caterina Sforza, Judith, Susanna, and Maria Magdalene (26–31). The tales in this text are certainly shorter than those included in the *Galeria*, and the narrative focus is less sophisticated. At the same time, however, it is possible to detect a link with the *Galeria* published twenty years earlier. Pona expresses his admiration of Judith and Caterina Sforza’s *gestae* (“achievements”) (23), and such appreciation does not seem religious in nature.¹⁸ From a thematic point of view, the narration of Judith’s courage and Susanna’s determination is similar to several of the portraits in the *Galeria*. The tale about Susanna and the old men is reminiscent of the portraits of both Lucrezia (the thematization of an object, the knife, links the two stories) and Barbara (here,

¹⁸ For the epic spiritual poetry, Virginia Cox postulates a reconfiguration: “strength, courage, and valor, the traditional attributes of the epic hero, are transformed from martial virtues, with a powerful physical component, to spiritual virtues” (35); such insightful observation can be applied to Pona’s female figures as well.

the topic of man and divine justice acts as a link). As for the relationship between the protagonist and her children, the tales about Caterina Sforza and Elisabeth of Hungary show similarities. All of the stories in the treatise are very short, as mentioned, and the author does not dwell on these figures in the same way he does the women featured in the *Galeria*. At the same time, however, this later text also privileges the moment of the performance, while almost wholly neglecting other stages of Greimas's canonical narrative schema (although the tale about Susanna is more articulated in terms of narrative structure). It is also worth adding that there is more empathy in the way this treatise's narrator presents the women to his readers.

Conclusion

In choosing four saints for his *Galeria*, Pona traverses the story of Christianity, passing from a Gospel character through the legendary third-century martyr, Augustine's mother, to arrive at the late medieval saint who represents an early-Franciscan model of both spirituality and life. This choice is part and parcel of the culture inaugurated by the Council of Trent: the saints hail from distant times, and there is varying evidence that they did actually exist in documents, scripture, Augustine's *Confessions*, and hagiographies.¹⁹ On the one side, Pona shows both artistic and cultural autonomy; on the other, he follows the consolidated, traditional manner of recounting these women's stories.

Pona's female model of both perfection and sanctity is related to post-Tridentine culture based on virtues manifested during the person's lifetime. Miraculous aspects and the extraordinary play limited roles in Pona's short stories. There is also another, significant extra-literary element: the fact that, as a scientist, the author was a rationalist. The otherness of the women in Pona's tales is a product of this gaze, in that the saints are observed by a narrator-collector attentive to both natural and miraculous aspects. The clear mark of a scientific point of view and the use of scientific language are the most important elements in constructing this narrative perspective. For both the saints in the *Galeria* and the exemplary women in the treatise *Della Eccellenza*, Pona's goal is to explain models of behaviour and life and bring them closer to readers, whether male or female.

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¹⁹ Well-founded doubts as to the existence of Saint Barbara are quite new. As previously mentioned, her feast day was removed from the Roman Calendar in 1969.

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