The Cloister and the Square:  
Gender Dynamics in Renaissance Florence

MARY D. GARRARD

Female scholars have effectively unmasked the misogynist messages of the statues that occupy and patrol the main public square of Florence—most conspicuously, Benvenuto Cellini’s *Perseus Slaying Medusa* and Giovanni da Bologna’s *Rape of a Sabine Woman* (Figs. 1, 20). In groundbreaking essays on those statues, Yael Even and Margaret Carroll brought to light the absolutist patriarchal control that was expressed through images of sexual violence. The purpose of art, in this way of thinking, was to bolster power by demonstrating its effect. Discussing Cellini’s brutal representation of the decapitated Medusa, Even connected the artist’s gratuitous inclusion of the dismembered body with his psychosexual concerns, and the display of Medusa’s gory head with a terrifying female archetype that is now seen to be under masculine control. Indeed, Cellini’s need to restage the patriarchal execution might be said to express a subconscious response to threat from the female, which he met through psychological reversal, by converting the dangerous female chimera into a feminine victim.

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Figure 1: Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus Slaying Medusa*, 1545–54. Bronze, 320 cm (height of statue). Florence, Loggia dei Lanzi, Piazza della Signoria. Photo: Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY.
But what prompted Cellini’s violent and vicious assault on the feminine? Even and Carroll convincingly linked the commissions with Medici ducal politics and power, yet their studies do not fully account for the sudden and sustained eruption of unusually misogynist art in this highly charged public setting. We scholars often regard the control and repression of women as a given, something that simply happens in a patriarchal society. Yet political history shows that repression is often a dominator’s response to assertion by the dominated, which produces further assertion. Moreover, as postcolonial scholars have observed, repressed groups evoke anxiety in their dominators, whose unconscious ambivalence about their exercise of power threatens that power from inside.³ To maintain power, the dominant entity must police the Other, a tense relationship that initiates a cycle: insecurity calls for a show of force, which produces resistance, which in turn produces insecurity.

Such principles can be applied to the political forces of gender. Feminist scholarship in recent decades has revealed that early modern women wielded considerable cultural agency as artists, patrons, and consumers of art, and their achievements and activities are now taking a place alongside those of men, who were previously considered to represent culture as a whole. In Renaissance Italy, masculine and feminine cultures, largely identified with the public and private spheres respectively, coexisted and in many ways flourished independently. But how did they intersect? What was the effect of women’s culture on men’s culture, and vice versa, conceived not simply as relations between men and women but as abstract gender entities that respond to each other psychologically? By and large, this is a terra incognita, and perhaps with good reason, those of a positivist mentality might say, because it is an approach not well suited to proof: who can document his unconscious motivations? Yet, as with a distant star, which we cannot see directly but whose presence can be inferred by measuring its effect on other bodies, so women’s response to masculinist oppression, or the masculine fear of the feminine, might be inferred from works of art that unconsciously express it.

One scholar who has brought a consideration of gender to the study of public art is Adrian Randolph. In Engaging Symbols, Randolph examines images that deploy gender as metaphor for the political in the cultural imaginary—e.g., the

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³ Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 2004).
state as a wife — and that can express masculine insecurities and ambivalences.\(^4\) Yet “gender” appears in this book as an abstraction of the feminine, whether as virtue or chimera — in other words, as a projection of masculine fantasies about and fears of women, to the almost complete exclusion of real women, and the values they might actually have promoted and stood for. Masculine projection is one piece of the puzzle, but it needs to be understood against the complement of historical reality. Here is where the wealth of scholarship on women in the Renaissance needs to be set into play. What happens when a real toad appears in an imaginary garden?\(^5\)

Let me introduce a real toad, so to speak. Suor Plautilla Nelli, the first woman artist in Renaissance Florence with an identifiable oeuvre, had a very different understanding of art and its function from that projected in the Piazza della Signoria. She was a nun, attached to the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina da Siena. In c.1550, roughly contemporary with Cellini’s *Perseus*, Nelli painted a *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (Fig. 2) for the convent’s public church, where it stood on a prominent altar, nearly ten feet high, and comparable in size to Cellini’s *Perseus*.\(^6\)

Nelli’s art has consistently been described in terms of its limitations. Vasari said that her best works were copied from other artists, and writers since the eighteenth century have pointed to a set of models for Nelli’s painting in Lamentations by Perugino, Fra Bartolommeo, and Andrea del Sarto.\(^7\) In fact,


\(^5\) The image has been traced to Marianne Moore’s poem, “Poetry.”


Figure 2: Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation*, c.1550. Oil on panel, 288 × 192 cm. Florence, Museo Nazionale di San Marco. Photo: Polo Museale Regionale della Toscana, su concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo.
only a few details of Nelli’s *Lamentation* recall Fra Bartolommeo’s *Lamentation*, and her painting resembles Sarto’s version (Fig. 3) even less. Yet these faint echoes have been sufficient to persuade scholars that Nelli was an unoriginal copyist and
an artistic dilettante. Originality was not quite the point, however, since images produced for monastic environments were generally valued for their devotional efficacy, not for the creator’s originality: their function was to support meditation by inducing emotional empathy. Images of saints did their work best if they were shown, not performing a momentary or distracting action, but as serene, enduring essences.

Artistic taste in the convents was conservative by the standards of the “progressive,” yet such conservatism had its own values, which include a sense of timeless continuity with exempla of the past. Considering that nuns had a different perception of time, which they measured by abbbacies, rather than by dates or reigns of governments, it seems likely that Nelli was not copying, but invoking the paintings of Perugino, Fra Bartolommeo, and Andrea del Sarto, all several decades old. Not surprisingly, Nelli’s Lamentation most closely resembles the oldest of her models (Fig. 4), in the static poses and calm gestures of its protagonists. By joining her Lamentation to these works, Nelli probably intended to add a link to a chain of lineage within a monastic community, for each of the three precedents, like Nelli’s, was painted for a local convent or monastery.

The stylistic relationship between the Lamentation and the exempla it evokes reveals a great deal about Nelli’s aesthetic preferences. Ironically, her affirmation of models no longer stylish in Florence opposed the values of those very models. Attuned to the avant-garde propelled by Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael, Fra Bartolommeo and Sarto changed their styles almost annually in the direction of heroic monumentality. Sarto upstaged Fra Bartolommeo in his more

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8 On Nelli as an unoriginal dilettante, see Andrea Muzzi in Nelson, Plautilla Nelli.
10 K. J. P. Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40.
12 Perugino’s Lamentation of 1495 was painted for the Florentine convent of Santa Chiara; Fra Bartolommeo’s Lamentation for the monastic church of San Gallo; and Sarto’s Lamentation for the convent of San Piero a Luco in Borgo San Lorenzo.
dramatic and urgent compositional rhythms. His prominent virilization of Saint Andrew, with muscular chest and dramatically foreshortened hand, bespeaks knowledge of Raphael's theatrical late works, such as the Tapestry Cartoons, in which the male body assumes dignity and power through prominent musculature and emphatic gestures, and moral authority is equated with physical strength.

Figure 4: Pietro Perugino, Lamentation, 1495. Oil on panel, 220 × 195 cm. Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti. Photo: Alinari / Art Resource, NY.
Nelli conspicuously avoided going in that direction. In her *Lamentation*, the expressive locus is three women who weep, equal in size and emphasis (Fig. 5). One comforts another, as tears stream from their swollen, reddened eyes, indexing an anguish of long duration. Suor Plautilla’s focus is not the singular heroic demeanor of Christ’s mother, but the collective mourning of the women, reminding us that the Italian name for the Lamentation theme is *compianto*, a grieving together. The women’s grieving diminishes the men’s behavior. John gazes away blankly, as if he would rather be elsewhere. Joseph of Arimathea looks uncertainly to Nicodemus for a cue, but Nicodemus is no hero, just a diminutive fellow mourner. Nelli’s version may not have been intended as a critique of her male predecessors, but it functions as one. To those who say that her figures lack heroic monumentality, we might reply that what they lack is bombast. She has cast a cold eye on figures who flaunt their *contrapposto* and strut their power at the highly inappropriate moment of the Savior’s death. She has replaced dry-eyed women.
who pose rhetorically with drapery-swaddled mourners whose bodies are subordi-
ated to their flowing tears, which speak directly of the heart.

Models for Nelli’s intensely grieving women are found in Northern
European paintings of a century earlier, when women and their tears carried the
emotion freight of religious paintings (Fig. 6). The connection is strengthened
by the information given by early modern writers that Nelli’s pictures were
admired by noblemen, women, the devout, and Northern Europeans. The
latter three groups constituted a category of Otherness for progressive Italian
artists. Michelangelo allegedly rebuked his friend Vittoria Colonna for liking
the “devoutness” of Northern art, explaining to her that Flemish painting lacked
reason, boldness, and vigor, and appealed to women, monks, nuns, and others not
responsive to true harmony and proportions. In a single stroke, this assertion
feminized both Northern and religious art, while decreeing certain formal values
to be universal.

But the heroic individualism of High Renaissance art would not have served
the interests of the nuns of Santa Caterina. Theirs was a communal society, a sis-
terhood, whose goal of communal harmony was supported by the images they
placed around them. Since its founding in 1496 by a female disciple of the pow-
erful Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola, the convent of Santa Caterina
da Siena had been a major center of Savonarola’s spiritual legacy, one facet of
which was the importance of art. In a painting such as Nelli’s Lamentation, we
see expressed the values that he taught, and believed that art could teach. From

13 Information from the separate accounts of Vasari, his Northern counterpart Karel van
Mander, the Dominican friar Serafino Razzi, and the Florentine art chronicler Francesco Bocchi.
For details, see Fredrika Jacobs, Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language
14 Reported by Francisco de Holanda, reputedly from conversations with Michelangelo
in 1538–40. See Philip Sohm, “Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to
Virtuosa.
15 Plautilla did not work in creative isolation, as Vasari described her, but as part of a vital
artistic community that she guided. She personally trained a group of artists at Santa Caterina;
on these and other artist-nuns in the convent, see the individual essays by Catherine Turrill, Gary
Radke, and Sally Quin in Nelson, Suor Plautilla Nelli.
16 Savonarola’s denunciation of immodesty and advocacy of spirituality was frequently
aimed at artists: e.g., from a sermon of 1496: “what am I to say of you, Christian painters, who make
those shameless figures there, which is not proper? . . . You put all the vanities in the churches. Do
you believe the Virgin Mary went dressed this way, as you paint her? I tell you she went dressed as a
her cloistered position, Plautilla Nelli might have looked down on the Sartos and Cellinis who struggled to compete and please patrons. Nuns enjoyed substantial control of their environments, and were often both the producers and consumers

Figure 6: Rogier van der Weyden, *Deposition*, c. 1435, detail. Wood panel, 220 × 262 cm (whole painting). Madrid, Museo del Prado. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

of convent art. Although their sphere of social agency was circumscribed, they exercised power in the spiritual realm, which they believed to be superior to the material world. From that perspective, Plautilla Nelli’s *Lamentation* is a corrective, offered by a skilled and knowledgeable artist, from an alternative site of power.

If Suor Plautilla had pointedly resisted the mild masculinism of Andrea del Sarto, what did she make of Cellini’s arrogant nude male who boastfully displays a decapitated female head? And what did the secular art world make of her *Lamentation*, which speaks of another world, in which gentle women tearfully grieve? The records don’t tell us, but we can well imagine, for the values projected by each monument establish clearly what its maker might have thought of the other’s creation. There was of course a widening division between religious and secular art in Florence that transcended gender, but among male artists, spirituality was increasingly entwined with “art for art’s sake” values. At mid-century, for example, the masculine Florentine art world was absorbed in a quasi-public debate about the relative merits of painting and sculpture, prompted by the academician and art connoisseur Benedetto Varchi. The separate spheres that produced Cellini and Nelli were more coherently diverse and, as I shall argue, they affected one another in unexpected ways.

When fourteen-year-old Plautilla Nelli entered the convent of Santa Caterina in 1537, two statues flanked the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio: the original version of Michelangelo’s *David*, now in the Accademia (ironically, the Accademia is housed in the building that was Nelli’s convent), and Baccio Bandinelli’s *Hercules and Cacus*, which had joined *David* in 1534 (Fig. 7). Over the course of

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18 On the absence of evidence for women’s reactions to public works of art, see Johnson, “Idol or Ideal?,” 222–23.

19 E.g., Pontormo’s early rebellion against *machismo* resulted in a more spiritual art, yet one that merely foregrounded a different kind of male. See Garrard, *Brunelleschi’s Egg*, 247–66.

20 For discussion of the Varchi debate and relevant bibliography, see Garrard, *Brunelleschi’s Egg*, 258.

21 When the convent was suppressed in 1812, the building became part of the Accademia di Belle Arti. Nelli’s *Lamentation* was first displayed in the gallery of the Accademia, and later transported to the refectory of the Museum of San Marco.
the sixteenth century, a band of brothers appeared in the Piazza della Signoria, with the additions of Cellini’s *Perseus* in 1554, the *Neptune* by Bartolommeo Ammanati in 1565, and in 1583, five years before Nelli’s death, the *Rape of the Sabines*, by Giovanni da Bologna (Fig. 8). This cohort of muscular nude male statues has been celebrated by art historians and tour guides alike, as the heroic guardians of Florentine liberty and the sentinels of Medici power. What is called the High Renaissance began with and is emblematized by Michelangelo’s *David* (Fig. 9), which presented a new model of masculinity at a time of need.

As in the French Revolution, there was a critical moment in the Italian Renaissance when masculinity became the public ideal, a moment for the revival of classical style and Roman civic virtue. In the Florentine instance, this occurred around 1503, when the *David* was completed, and a new republican government had been installed in Florence, replacing the now-hated Medici family. Medici rule had effectively ended a decade earlier, with the death of Lorenzo Magnifico in 1492, the French invasion of 1494, and the political rise of Savonarola. As the
young Plautilla Nelli well knew, her spiritual model Savonarola had held power in Florence until he was hanged and burned in this square in 1498 (Fig. 10). Plautilla’s mother would have heard about these dramatic events as a child, and her grandmother would have remembered the golden age of the Quattrocento Medici court.

In 1504, major art commissions were now centered at the Piazza della Signoria, site of the new government in the Palazzo Vecchio (which was called the Palazzo della Signoria at that time). Michelangelo’s David, originally intended to be placed on a buttress of the Cathedral, was moved to the civic square — a move whose symbolic importance is reflected in the debate about its location. Several alternatives were advanced within an advisory committee that included government officials and artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Piero di Cosimo, and Sandro...
Figure 9: Michelangelo, *David*, 1501–04. Marble, 517 cm (height of statue). Florence, Galleria dell’Accademia. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.
Botticelli. The winning faction wanted it placed at the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio; another faction voted to put it in the center of the adjacent Loggia dei Lanzi. Both were prime spots: the Loggia dei Lanzi, the triple-arched site of civic ceremonies, would have created a heraldic setting for the colossal David. Yet the Palazzo Vecchio was a more potent location for proclaiming republican control of the government, for here, at left of the entrance, a venerated civic emblem of Florentine liberty had stood since 1495: Donatello’s Judith Slaying Holofernes (Fig. 11).

Figure 11: Donatello, Judith and Holofernes, c. 1455. Bronze, 236 cm (height of statue). Florence, Palazzo Vecchio. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.
David could have joined Judith at the entrance to the city hall since the other side of the doorway was vacant. But the winning decision was to have David replace Judith because, as one official argued, the image of a woman killing a man was not a proper emblem for Florence, and also had brought bad luck to the city. Yael Even exposed the misogyny involved in the Judith’s displacement and subsequent moves, and in Cellini’s cancellation of a disturbing image of androcide with one of gynocide. Yet Even’s identification of misogyny in the Piazza della Signoria with Medici autocratic rule, which she contrasted with the courageous republican values embodied by the Judith and the David, passes over an important distinction between the two statues. Donatello’s Judith had represented the republican spirit and Florentine liberty when it was earlier owned by the Medici, and her gender was not a liability then. Nor did gender inhibit the Judith’s repatriation as a civic emblem by the Savonarolan republican regime in 1495. What was different in the first years of the new century?

Geraldine Johnson connected the demotion of Judith’s importance in the Piazza della Signoria with the increasing control and limiting of Florentine women’s public lives over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a phenomenon consonant with Joan Kelly’s account of women’s gradual loss of public power during the so-called Renaissance. Johnson discusses the growing masculinization of Florence’s key public spaces in this period, pointing to the Duomo, which saw the progressive elimination of images of the Virgin, and the Baptistery, where statues of the Cardinal Virtues were replaced by an infamous Salome. Johnson accounts broadly, though not specifically, for the new assertive masculinity that came forth boldly around 1504, announced by unprecedented phallic display.

23 Francesco Filarete, the first herald, connected the Judith with the Medici family who owned it, and also with the bad luck that resulted in Florence’s military loss of Pisa. See Paoletti, Michelangelo’s David, 39 ff., for the diverse arguments and other sites proposed.

24 The Judith was first moved to the east arch of the Loggia dei Lanzi, then displaced by Cellini’s Perseus to the west arch. In 1582 it was displaced to the southeast arch to make room for Giambologna’s Rape of the Sabines.


26 Randolph, Engaging Symbols, chap. 6, esp. 244–45, traces the changing political meanings attached to the Judith. As Geraldine Johnson points out (“Idol or Ideal?,” 228), inscriptions attached to the Judith in the Savonarolan period helped support its new metaphorical identity as a civic rather than Medicean symbol, with Judith linked typologically to the Madonna, and Holofernes representing (Medicean) tyranny.

27 Johnson, “Idol or Ideal?,” 233–36.
Questioning Johnson’s “teleological” framework, Adrian Randolph suggested that the Judith’s dislocation bespoke anxieties about the role of women in the newly republican Florence. He argued that the Judith was an unstable Florentine political symbol, because its dangerous inversion of gender roles invoked the topos of “woman-on-top,” an image that, as Natalie Zemon Davis had observed, could sanction women’s disobedience. When the newly elected gonfaloniere Piero Soderini moved into the Palazzo Vecchio in 1502, he was joined by his wife, a novelty that provoked a critique: the very sight of women going up and down the steps caused “great unrest in the people.” Randolph speculated that since women had been barred by statute from the town hall since 1415, the presence of real women in the building, combined with the symbolic gender power of Donatello’s Judith, might have been too much, threatening to feminize “masculine” republicanism. The move of the Judith, he concludes, “rather than necessarily mirroring women’s progressive erasure from the public sphere, might instead register a response to a situation of perceived threat.”

But these two factors are not necessarily contradictory, since change over time is undoubtedly propelled by incidents and situations. Moreover, feminine threat seems to have preceded, not followed, the establishment of the new republican government. Gender tensions surrounded Savonarola: there was open anxiety that he would give women too much power, following his proposal in 1496 that women be given an unprecedented voice in religious reform. Feeding this anxiety was the growing number of female Savonarolans. Inspired by the friar’s sermons, women entered religious life in such numbers that temporary shelters had to be found and convents enlarged to house them — a phenomenon indirectly reflected in woodcuts illustrating the friar’s preachings (Fig. 12). Under criti-

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29 Randolph, Engaging Symbols, 281, cites the contemporary account of Bartolommeo Cerretani. See also Paoletti, Michelangelo’s David, 156–57.

30 Randolph, Engaging Symbols, 247, 281.

cism, Savonarola retracted his proposal, which led to stricter reforms; and male Savonarolan leaders, particularly the Dominicans of San Marco, doubled down on their efforts to modify women’s behavior (what was meant here by “reform”) and control the convents. But some of the nuns, inspired by Savonarola’s earlier


At the time of Savonarola’s execution in 1498, nuns were a rebellious lot in Florence. Immediately after his capture, about a third of the nuns in the strongly Savonarolan convent of Santa Lucia began to display “irrational” behavior, indulging in blasphemy, descriptions of their erotic visions, and physical violence. They were accused of demonic possession, but exorcism failed to control their continuing deviant behavior. Other nuns resisted the reforms more openly. The Annalena convent petitioned the pope to release it from the control of San Marco, an independence finally granted in 1501; and even Plautilla Nelli’s convent, Santa Caterina da Siena, despite its special status among Savonarola’s followers, sought to distance itself from the friars at adjacent San Marco.\footnote{These examples are given by Polizzotto, “Saints,” 508–10, 512–13.} Although nuns were his greatest support group, Savonarola had anxieties of his own about their activities. In a sermon of 1495, he excoriated the convent of Le Murate for its conspicuously successful and lucrative production of embroidery and music, and called for its strict cloistering.\footnote{In his sermon of May 10, 1495, Savonarola attacked the convent for its “satanic” polyphonic singing, and ridiculed the nuns’ production of embroidery. Girolamo Savonarola, Prediche sopra i salmi, ed. Vincenzo Romano (Rome: A. Belardetti, 1969–74), 1:182. On the artistic production and patronage of the convents, see Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles, chap. 8.} As Francis Kent and Kate Lowe have independently speculated, these efforts to silence the nuns of Le Murate indirectly reflected their political and cultural prominence.\footnote{Francis Kent argued that in his call for strict cloistering, effectively separating the nuns from civic life, Savonarola indirectly acknowledged their political power. Francis Kent, “Lorenzo de’ Medici, Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli e la politica di mecenatismo architettonico nel convento delle Murate a Firenze (1471–72),” Arte, committenza ed economia a Roma e nelle corti del rinascimento (1420–1530), ed. A. Esch and Ch. L. Frommel (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 357–58. Kate Lowe suggested that Savonarola and other church fathers resented the worldly success of Le Murate and its deviation from the preferred model of female passivity. K. J. P. Lowe, “Female Strategies for Success in a Male-Ordered World: The Benedictine Convent of Le Murate in Florence in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries,” Studies in Church History 27 (1990), 217–18.}
Considering the large population of nuns in Florence at the end of the fifteenth century and their prominence among Savonarolan supporters, it is surprising that women are almost entirely absent in contemporary paintings of Savonarola’s execution in the Piazza della Signoria (see Fig. 10).\(^\text{37}\) Perhaps the nuns stayed home, or were present but not included in the documentary images, yet either way their absence in the visual record is telling. A substantive and possibly threatening entity has been rendered invisible.

Yet nuns were an increasingly visible presence in the city from the mid-fifteenth through sixteenth centuries. In 1500, Florence had about 2000 nuns, a fourfold increase from the fourteenth century. Four new convents were founded in Florence between 1500 and 1520, to accommodate the burgeoning demand. Convent growth was exponential due to social pressures that governed females but not males, and consequently, monasticism “changed sex,” as Richard Trexler put it.\(^\text{38}\) In the fourteenth century, Florence had twice as many male religious as female; by the mid-sixteenth century, females outnumbered males nearly five to one.\(^\text{39}\)

Nuns were not an entirely different category of womanhood in Renaissance Florence, for there was considerable female interaction and cultural continuity within and outside convents. Because Florentine public spaces were “hypermasculine,” Sharon Strocchia explains, “the all-female worlds of convents [were] crucial hubs of sociability for laywomen.”\(^\text{40}\) Moreover, although we must distinguish between the soft repression of patriarchal marriage and the harsher repression of enforced clausura, it is a fact that all Florentine women endured strict social con-

\(^{37}\) In the two most frequently reproduced depictions of the event, I discern no distinctly female figures among the groups of male citizens and friars. See an anonymous painting of c. 1500 in the Museo di San Marco, Florence (Fig. 6.16 in Randolph, Engaging Symbols); and Fig. 10 above, in which two possibly female figures emerge from a house at far right.

\(^{38}\) Richard C. Trexler, Power and Dependence in Renaissance Florence: vol. 2, The Women of Renaissance Florence (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1993), chap. 7. Sharon T. Strocchia, Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 28–35, explains the explosive growth of convents and nuns in Florence after 1480 as the result of several factors. Marital strategies for patrilineal households changed as dowry costs rose, because convent dowries cost much less than marriage dowries. Foreign invasions, political unrest, and social violence in the 1490s led many fathers to place their daughters in convents for safety. Growing religiosity in the city in the wake of Savonarola’s preaching was yet another factor.

\(^{39}\) According to Trexler (Women of Renaissance Florence, 28), in 1552, there were about 750 males and 3419 females.

\(^{40}\) Strocchia, Nuns and Nunneries, 40.
control by men. As an aggregate of females similarly dressed, nuns formed a palpable entity, the visible face of womanhood under patriarchal control.

Similarly, the cloister was a coherent antipode to the square, a spatial site that exercised an exaggerated influence upon the visual imaginary. As physical spaces that were closed and relatively off-limits to men, convents symbolically resembled the *hortus conclusus* of the Virgin Mary, a virginal sealed garden, protected and untouchable.\(^{41}\) Women religious, moreover, served an apotropaic function for the city. Spiritual intercession was an official role of nuns, who, as holy virgins who had failed to do their duty as intercessors, were sometimes blamed for military defeats.\(^ {42}\) And the striking concentration of convents near city gates may have had a talismanic purpose, to support divine protection of the city (an annual Florentine ritual was the exorcising of demons from each city gate).\(^ {43}\) By 1500, convents were the predominant institutional buildings in Italian cities, taking up great amounts of space.\(^ {44}\) In Florence, these large and numerous peripheral structures provided a semiotic foil to the central Piazza della Signoria, complementing the public sphere with the spiritual one, opposing a visually open space uninviting to women with a closed space inaccessible to men. It is tempting to imagine that, as the convents grew, the town square was steadily masculinized in psychic compensation.

Religious women — the architecture and art they produced, and the political agency they exercised — presented a distinctly gendered counter-culture in Florence. In the tumultuous 1490s and the decades beyond, many different political and social factors were at play in Florentine history. But, in Renaissance Florence, no kind of difference had so deep an imprint on the human psyche as gender and no category of women raised so audible an oppositional voice as did nuns. Without meaning to imply it as the sole cause, I suggest that a critical factor in the sudden eruption of masculinism was a newly emergent fear of the feminine, triggered and exacerbated by the unusual political and cultural agency of nuns, whose growing visible presence provoked a fearful reaction.

\(^{41}\) On the rules for nuns’ enclosure, which became much stricter under Tridentine reforms, see Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 155. Family visits were limited to the intermediary space of the parlor, and though convent walls theoretically protected the nuns’ sexual purity, they were sometimes breached, which led to stricter controls.

\(^ {42}\) Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 184.


\(^ {44}\) Strocchia, ibid.
This brings us to the form that fear took, in the creation and reception of Michelangelo’s *David*—paradoxical as that may sound. Many writers have celebrated the politically effective symbolism of *Judith’s* replacement by *David*. According to a recent description, *David* stood for “the vital masculine spirit of the Republic. . . . Here was a man, and nothing but a man. Freed from the dishonesty of clothes, standing without shame . . . he could display his manhood as he took up arms, replacing the malign feminine black magic of deathly Judith.”45 Elevating associations have supported the iconicity of Michelangelo’s *David*: he has been linked in his majestic nudity with Hercules, Adam, and the Colossus of Rhodes; and his naked (male) body has been said to personify the longstanding civic metaphor of the body politic, whose harmony of parts represent a healthy state. 46

But let us be clear about it: apart from signifying physical strength, the main point of male nudity is the display of the penis or, to use its more exalted name, the phallus. If the male body is the metaphoric basis of patriarchal ideology, the phallus is its chief signifier. The colossal white hero, *homo magnus et albus* (as he was described in the records), signaled the return to patriarchal values with an extraordinary display of phallic potency. So novel and awe-inspiring was *David*’s gigantic penis, at once organic and idealized, that the city fathers kept the statue hidden until a girdle of gilded bronze leaves to cover the genitals could be made, which *David* wore for a while. 47 The anxiety about exposing the *David* was first signaled in the debate about its placement in the square, in which the speakers were, in one writer’s view, “coy” about the issues of the genitals. 48 Some wanted the statue situated at the back of the Loggia dei Lanzi; others recommended the courtyard inside the Palazzo Vecchio — in both cases so that it would be “covered”


47 Paoletti, ibid, 53, considered the girdle to have been still in place when Pietro Aretino mentioned the gold leaves in a letter to Michelangelo of 1545. But Geraldine Johnson (“Idol or Ideal?,” 243–44) doubts that Aretino was describing the statue’s present appearance.

from the elements (and from full view), and protected from vandalism, which was anticipated and in fact did occur the first night it was placed in the square.\footnote{Luca Landucci recorded in his diary that stones were thrown at the statue. Paoletti (Michelangelo’s David, 51–52) suggests that the vandals were Medici supporters; others have thought the damage was provoked by shock at the flagrant nudity (e.g., Margaret Walters, The Nude Male: A New Perspective [New York and London: Paddington Press, 1978], 99).}

The stories of the siting and the girdle lays bare the huge risk now taken. In Florence, representations of the unclothed male body had not been seen in public before on such a scale. David’s leading precedent, Donatello’s bronze David (Fig. 13), is credited as being the first freestanding male nude statue since antiquity.\footnote{See Paoletti, Michelangelo’s David, 51, for eyewitness accounts.} Yet this little sculpture was tucked away in the Medici Palace until political disruption brought it inside the Palazzo Vecchio. And Donatello’s David did not obtrude itself so aggressively on the surrounding space — the little bronze is only about as tall as the marble David’s knee. Over four days in May 1504, Michelangelo’s David was rolled into the Piazza della Signoria over fourteen logs, suspended upright in a wooden frame.\footnote{Colossal statues of nude male heroes were only to be seen in Rome. In Florence, David’s nude male precedents, such as the Hercules on the Cathedral’s Porta della Mandorla, or statuettes in the hands of humanists and antiquarians, were small in scale.} The risk was that, if the colossal statue were not seen to be armed with invisible power as he entered the square he would be merely, and obscenely, naked.\footnote{Minimizing the novelty of Michelangelo’s David, Paoletti (Michelangelo’s David, 186–87), adduces examples of public nudity, such as the shaming rituals of naked men running through streets during civic festivals. These signified as images of scorn, however, not power.} The emperor would, literally, have no clothes. Yet somehow David’s nudity was effectively cloaked in symbolic power, and the ice was broken. Beginning in the 1530s, the next entries to the Piazza della Signoria sported full monties. David’s nudity became the model for all the other statues in the square and, indeed, for nude male statues elsewhere for centuries to come.

The colossal David’s manifest virility derives in part from comparison with Donatello’s bronze precedent, which in its time presented an intricate androgyny and a calculated homoerotic appeal, as Adrian Randolph has shown.\footnote{Randolph, Engaging Symbols, chap. 4.} Clearly, Michelangelo’s David also holds erotic appeal, yet an important distinction is elided by those who focus on its sexiness, for unlike its Donatellian precedent, the David’s eroticism is inseparable from the erotics of gender power.\footnote{Paoletti (Michelangelo’s David, 179–83) defines the statue’s masculine potency largely in (homo)erotic terms. Nowhere in his long discussion of the David’s naked body is the masculinity}
Figure 13: Donatello *David*, c.1450. Bronze, 158 cm. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.
is to masculine solidarity, or what Eve Sedgwick described as the “homosocial continuum,” and the sexual potency that is mystically conferred to every member of the brotherhood who imagines himself standing with, and as, this homo magnus et albus. David now comes forth, not as the object of masculine desire, but as the embodied subject of masculine aspiration. This manly ideal hero makes Donatello’s boy seem childish and feminine.

In one fell swoop, Michelangelo’s David feminized all that came before. Donatello’s David now joined Botticelli’s paintings in symbolizing the luxury and immorality of Lorenzo’s court, against which Savonarola had preached. Savonarola linked the pagan decadence of Medici-sponsored art, in which women visibly ruled, with the immorality of female dress in modern Florence. One might say that he brought a virile spiritual evangelism to sweep Florence clean of feminized corruption—something symbolically accomplished with the Bonfire of Vanities. The execution of Savonarola on the same spot a year later by the emergent republican forces, however, now effectively feminized Savonarola. His spiritual leadership and brief direction of the Florentine government were to be replaced with an aggressively secular government that established itself in the city in a new way, by expelling the symbolic female from the Piazza della Signoria.

The expulsion of the symbolic female continued inside the Palazzo Vecchio. Just after the David was set in place, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were commissioned to paint two large murals to celebrate Florence’s heroic past with two famous battles won by Florentine forces at Cascina and Anghiari. Little is preserved from those commissions, but a detailed copy of Michelangelo’s preliminary cartoon (Fig. 14) shows a departure from battle imagery. Rather than depicting the battle of Cascina itself, Michelangelo presented a scene of bathing soldiers called up to fight, which featured the nude male body in a variety of

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55 Eve Sedgwick (Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire [New York: Columbia University Press, 1985]) wrote of the continuum between homosexual and heterosexual under the broader rubric of homosocial, emphasizing continuity between masculine structures that exclude women.

56 For the relevant sermon, see Girolamo Savonarola, Girolamo Savonarola, Prediche Sopra Amos e Zaccaria, Paolo Ghiglieri, ed. (Rome: A. Belardetti, 1971–72), 25. Imagery of the court of Lorenzo de’ Medici that the republican generation would have seen as undoing masculine power includes Botticelli’s Venus and Mars and Pallas and the Centaur. See Randolph, Engaging Symbols, chap. 5, for other examples.
active poses. It is often said that Michelangelo used the theme as a pretext to display his mastery of anatomy, but this project was not simply personal. What is celebrated here is not a mere battle, but the rise to masculine duty. The men are shown as a tight, cohesive unit, in a display of heroic civic virility in which homosocial bonding is celebrated. They are united in their responsibility to the city/state, and their ability to fight for it.

Theorists of masculinity studies argue that the performance of masculinity is essential to its construction and its hegemony. According to Michael Kimmel, the notion of manhood is rooted in the public arena and marketplace competition, and must be proved, over and over again, constantly self-reinforcing. Constructed masculinity has long been understood as a flight from the feminine. According to Nancy Chodorow, a male becomes masculine by rejecting his early

Figure 14: Aristotile da Sangallo, attributed to. Copy of Michelangelo’s lost cartoon of 1504–05 for The Battle of Cascina. Oil on panel, 77 × 130 cm. Holkham Hall, Norfolk, Collection of the Earl of Leicester. Photo: © Holkham Estate.


intimate relation with the mother’s female body. According to Sigmund Freud, this is an entirely natural expunging of the feminine from himself, though it is propelled by the fear of being perceived as insufficiently masculine, which accounts for homophobia. Masculinity studies have shifted the emphasis to the anxiety brought by this effort, now denoting masculinity as something perpetually unstable, which the male must constantly perform through “homosocial enactment,” so that other men can approve his manhood. This perspective allows us to look at the Battle of Cascina in a different light, not as the heroic display of triumphant masculinity, but as an anxious performance to shore up an uncertain condition.

Considering the perspective of a woman also helps to denaturalize this show of masculine force. Women were not citizens of the republic, and they had no political voice. The battle scenes intended to form the centerpiece of the main room in Florence’s town hall were not only not addressed to Plautilla Nelli’s mother, they denied her very existence, even though women made up half the population. (If the imagery within the Palazzo Vecchio were to express the wholeness of the living city, all its members would be present, as they are in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Allegory of Good Government, in Siena’s town hall of two centuries earlier. Here, both men and women populate the Good City, their divergent activities reflecting the commune’s commercial reality.) When women appear in High Renaissance art, even in non-civic commissions, they too are enjoined to perform masculinity. In Michelangelo’s Doni Tondo (Fig. 15), an anatomically virile Virgin twists and contorts her body just as do the male nudes in the Battle of Cascina, subsumed into a patriarchal Holy Family that is no longer headed by Christ’s mother, but by Joseph.

The willful insistence of High Renaissance art on a masculine universal is very strange. So absolute a denial of the feminine produces a palpable absence,

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60 Freud expressed these views in various texts, which are discussed by R. W. Connell, “Psychoanalysis on Masculinity,” Brod and Kaufman, Theorizing Masculinities, 11–38.


62 See Garrard, Brunelleschi’s Egg, 244–47.
a silence, a vacuum, which in a psychological sense can be as powerful as female political assertion. Breaking that silence is the repeated visual boast that power is masculine, and is visually differentiated from the feminine. So successful has been this masculinist boast, we have been slow to recognize its pathological dimensions. Michelangelo’s mildly anxious affirmation of virility in the David morphed quickly into hypervirility. In the Sistine Ceiling, a few years later, we encounter super-muscular nude males (Fig. 16). It was an entirely different iconographic context, under a different patron, yet the bodybuilding continued. A little later, Michelangelo was asked to make a Hercules to match his David but, for
complicated reasons, Baccio Bandinelli wound up making the statue instead (Fig. 17). Bandinelli’s Hercules is almost a parody of the muscle-bound goon, and was ridiculed even in its time for its caricatural dimensions. David’s supple, organic musculature has indeed become a “sack full of melons,” as Cellini described the statue. This hypervirile hero is stiff and rigid, locked within his own anatomy, as if the artist were conscious of the absurdity of this rampant masculinism, and his only recourse was to exaggerate it.

Bandinelli’s Hercules was commissioned by a new Medici duke, Alessandro. Now the Medici, against whom aggressive masculinity was first used, have reclaimed it as their own instrument and sign of power. The Hercules was explicitly meant to surpass Michelangelo’s David, with its republican associations, and as Bandinelli’s own revisions of his statue indicated, the more muscular, the more powerful. The mad performance of ever more brutish masculinism continued under Medici rule. Cellini’s Perseus was commissioned by Cosimo I de’ Medici,

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63 Paoletti, Michelangelo’s David, 160–62, summarizes the history.
65 According to Vasari, after completing his Hercules, Bandinelli considered the muscles to be “troppo dolci” and went back in to deepen them, so as to compete effectively with Michelangelo. See John Pope-Hennessy, High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture (London: Phaidon, 1963),
Figure 17: Baccio Bandinelli, *Hercules and Cacus*, 1534. Marble, 505 cm. Florence, Piazza della Signoria. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.
The first Grand Duke of Tuscany. And Ammanati’s *Neptune* fountain (Fig. 18) was commissioned by Cosimo’s son Francesco, who also ordered Giambologna’s *Rape of the Sabines*. Ammanati’s *Neptune* is as crudely virile as Bandinelli’s *Hercules*, yet positioned as he is, in a lineup with *David* and *Hercules* (Fig. 19), he seems to gaze anxiously toward the other male nude statues, perhaps a victim of performance anxiety.

Someone is laughing at him, but it’s not the other men. Maybe it’s the nuns. Of course I cannot confirm that Renaissance nuns laughed at the statues’ crude display of machismo. But I have heard modern women do so, and I know that there can be no more effective way to disarm a desperate power grab than a roll of the eyes and a chuckle.

Over the course of the sixteenth century, the gendered worlds became increasingly separate. Escalating efforts by church authorities to enforce the enclosure of nuns, which began in 1500, culminated in the strict *clausura* adopted by the Council of Trent at mid-century. In Florence, under both Medicean and Tridentine supervision, convent walls were built higher, windows sealed up and veiled, well-latticed iron grates replaced more permeable wooden ones in convent parlors, to separate nuns more fully from the outside world. Their activities and letters were carefully monitored. Effectively, they were prisoners. Although the nuns periodically resisted the tightening controls, their isolation was increasingly extreme. At the same time, the extraordinary rise in convent populations drained more and more women from secular to spiritual life, and to public invisibility.

In the year 1579, three-quarters of a century after Michelangelo’s *David* entered the Piazza della Signoria, the Archbishop of Florence was complaining of the continuing resistance of the nuns of Le Murate, and Grand Duke Francesco I de’ Medici was overseeing the completion of a new statue for the

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63–64. It has been suggested that Bandinelli would have had Hellenistic models in mind, but a more proximate exemplum was found in Michelangelo’s Sistine Ceiling nudes.


67 These developments are described by Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, chap. 5.

68 On the nuns’ resistance to reform, see Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 190–204, and for the Archbishop’s correspondence with the abbess and nuns of Le Murate, 201–2.
piazza (Fig. 20). Giovanni da Bologna had been commissioned to make a sculp-
ture that would replace the ever-expendable Judith of Donatello, now in a shad-
owy side arch of the Loggia de’ Lanzi. He was assigned no specific subject, and
said that he composed the three-figure group merely to demonstrate his skill in
art. When required to produce a name (in part to deflect rising Tridentine criti-
cism of artistic nudity), the artist and his advisor Raffaello Borghini settled on the
Rape of a Sabine Woman.69 As Margaret Carroll has discussed, the Sabine narra-
tive, a founding myth of marriage’s roots in rape, served as an effective metaphor
for the Medici subjugation of the city of Florence and subject territories, while the

69 Pope-Hennessy, High Renaissance, 82–83; and Cole, Ambitious Form, chap. 3.
statue group’s fetishistic display of a female trophy nicely complemented Cellini’s display of Medusa by Perseus in the northeast arch.\textsuperscript{70}

The idea that the subject did not matter was disingenuous, of course, for any theme would serve as a pretext, as long as the image could speak for itself — a man assaults a woman — and take its triumphalizing place in a square devoted to a gender warfare that had never been openly acknowledged, and had simply been “disappeared.” Though certainly not with conscious intent, the image might well stand for the women of Florence, perhaps a third of whom were imprisoned in convents,\textsuperscript{71} their capture and futile resistance immortalized in this iconic statue.

The images of muscle-flexing, murder, and rape in the Piazza della Signoria were meant to be understood as metaphors for the successful Medici domination of subject territories and Florentine enemies. In feminist readings of the statues earlier cited, sex and gender are metaphoric tools, the domination of women standing in for political domination, with misogyny a casually cruel byproduct. But what if this masculinist assault on the female is not secondary, but primary? What if the targets of decapitation, dismemberment, and rape are not metaphors at all but, subconsciously, the real targets? And if an excessive display of power reflects, not confidence, but anxiety, what is this anxiety about?

In the postcolonialist discourse of power, it arises from the unconscious of the dominators, who are threatened from inside by those they suppress. This kind of analysis has not to my knowledge been applied to the repetitive display of virility in the Piazza della Signoria, though it seems infinitely apt. It may be that this virility virus — let’s call it \textit{virilitis} — fed on itself, its rampant growth spurred by its own achievements. Or it may be that the force of the feminine became stronger in its absence, as internal guilt built and the stakes grew higher. Read in this way, the nude heroes of the Piazza della Signoria enact the dominant masculine culture’s unhealthy relationship with its feminine counterpart, attesting in their very bluster and denial the solid reality of an oppositional world.

\textsuperscript{70} Margaret D. Carroll, “The Erotics of Absolutism: Rubens and the Mystification of Sexual Violence,” Broude and Garrard, \textit{Expanding Discourse}, 139–59. See also Geraldine Johnson’s illuminating discussion of Giambologna’s sculpture group in “Idol or Ideal?,” 240–44.

\textsuperscript{71} My estimate is based on information given by Trexler (\textit{Women of Renaissance Florence}, 16) that in 1552, 11.5% of the Florentine female population were nuns, who “overwhelmingly” came from patrician families, and by Strocchia (\textit{Nuns and Nunneries}, 1–3) that by the seventeenth century, nearly half the daughters of patrician Florentine families and over half their counterparts in Venice were in convents.
Now, this drama is not quite as black and white as I have described it, for in real life, the same performers played more than one role. Foremost is Michelangelo, who bridged the divide between the public and the spiritual through his art. The intense spirituality of the Vatican Pietà (1498–99), which reflects Michelangelo’s early devotion to the preaching of Savonarola, resurfaced decades later in his drawings for Vittoria Colonna and in his deeply emotional Duomo Pietà (1547–53, contemporary with Nelli’s Lamentation), to parallel the nuns’ quiet tending of Savonarola’s flame. Then there is Bartolommeo Ammanati, who late in life renounced his pagan nude statues like the Neptune, and followed his wife, the poet Laura Battiferri, into a pious spiritual retreat. But Michelangelo and Ammanati belonged to the brotherhood, and despite their personal spiritual journeys they did not pose to the art world an opposition of gender.

Plautilla Nelli herself was a hybrid who connected the spiritual and secular worlds. Growing evidence points to her engagement with Florentine aristocrats and literary circles, and her probable acquaintance with artists like Agnolo Bronzino and connoisseurs such as Benedetto Varchi. And there are signs that her spiritual orientation was widely shared in Florentine households, for she successfully marketed her paintings outside the convent, probably to the Florentine noblemen who, Vasari said, owned many of her works. It was likely the women of the households most favored Nelli’s art, considering that two of three patrons named by Vasari are women, and since Florentine women were markedly more “spiritual” than the men in the families. Such patrons, as part of the larger cohort

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72 Cole, Ambitious Form, chap. 6.
74 On Nelli’s sales of what were undoubtedly religious pictures, some of them quite large, see Murphy, “Plautilla Nelli.”
75 Vasari named (1) a Marietta de Fedini, (2) the wife of a Spaniard named Mondragone (who each owned an Annunciation by Nelli), and (3) Filippo Salviati; and reported that the prominent Florentine Costanza Doni modeled for Nelli. On the pronounced spirituality of prominent Medici women such as Lucrezia Tornabuoni, see Stefanie Solum, Women, Patronage, and Salvation in Renaissance Florence: Lucrezia Tornabuoni and the Chapel of the Medici Palace (New York: Routledge, 2015).
of aristocratic and educated Florentine secular women, should also be examined as an entity that helped to constitute the female imaginary in men’s minds.76

Individuals may interact in complicated ways, yet absolutes often rule in the psyche. My proposal here is that the eruption of virilitis at the turn of the sixteenth century was a sign of gender anxiety, initially a reaction against two feminized predecessors—the Laurentian Medici court and the Savonarolan female following—that was fed over time by the quiet yet steadily escalating cultural agency of the convents. When Plautilla Nelli’s Lamentation was put on public display, it joined a discourse and articulated a position. Shall we grant her the power to render virilitis absurd?

76 E.g., the poet and devoutly religious Laura Battiferri, who married the sculptor Bartolommeo Ammanati, and art patron Eleonora of Toledo, wife of Cosimo I, who left a bequest to her favorite convent. Barker, “Painting and Humanism,” 116–20, discusses ties between the convents and members of the Medici court, including the effect of convent growth upon the high literacy of women in Florence.