

Da santa Chiara a suor Francesca Farnese: Il francescanesimo femminile e il monastero di Fara in Sabina. Sofia Boesch Gajano and Tersilio Leggio, eds. Sacro/Santo 21. Rome: Viella, 2013. 286 pp. €27.

The Cult of St. Clare of Assisi in Early Modern Italy. Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby. Visual Culture in Early Modernity. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. xii + 170 pp. \$104.95.

On the evening of Palm Sunday, 28 March 1211, young Chiara Scifi (1194–1253) stole down the hill from Assisi to the little church in the valley, Santa Maria degli Angeli (the Porziuncola). Her elite parents were arranging a suitable marriage for her, but she wanted to join a fellow resident of Assisi, Francesco di Pietro di Bernardone, who with his followers was preaching a message that had made an enormous impression on her and other women. The rest, as they say, is history — or legend, in the original sense of that word. Francis immediately cut Clare's hair as a sign of her conversion. Soon he gave her a rule for women penitents, which she later modified and perfected. Her group, first called the Poor Ladies or Damianite (after San Damiano, their original convent in Assisi), became known eventually as Clarisse or Poor Clares. Although some early female followers of Francis pursued an itinerant apostolate, Clare and her contingent were not among them: from the beginning, they lived in strict enclosure, committed to poverty, chastity, obedience, and silence.

Da santa Chiara a suor Francesca Farnese comprises the proceedings of a conference held in May 2012 at the convent of the Clarisse Eremite in Fara in Sabina (province of Rieti), to celebrate the 800th anniversary of Clare's conversion. It is volume 21 in the second series of *Sacro/Santo*, a publication project inaugurated by the eminent historian of holiness Sofia Boesch Gajano in 1996, still under her direction, and now totaling thirty-three titles. *The Cult of St. Claire of Assisi in Early Modern Italy* is the most recent monograph by a prolific art historian, Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, whose particular interest is the relationship between verbal and artistic production.

The two books exhibit several common features. Both cover a broad chronological spectrum, from Clare's time to ours. Both — in the first section of the former (see

especially the lead essay by Felice Accrocca) and more explicitly and at greater length throughout Debby's study — aim to bring Clare out of the shadow of her mentor Francis. Both pay attention to an *in vita* miracle of political-military import attributed to Clare. In June 1241 the emperor Frederick II's troops commanded by Vitale d'Aversa, including fighters generically termed Saracens, laid siege to Assisi. (No one in either book under review probes the provenance of these fearsome Others. They were surely among the 20,000 Muslims whom the emperor had deported from western Sicily to Lucera, near Foggia, a decade earlier.) When Clare ventured out of her convent and held up a monstrance containing the consecrated Host, the attackers desisted. Attention to material objects constitutes yet another common emphasis.

The last two sections of *Da santa Chiara a suor Francesca Farnese* will particularly interest readers of *Renaissance Quarterly*. Part 3 shifts the focus from Clare to Francesca, born Isabella (1583–1651). Stefano Andretta's essay (135–49) reprises his earlier study *La Venerabile Superbia: Ortodossia e trasgressione nella vita di Suor Francesca Farnese* (1995) — as its title indicates, by no means a hagiography. Following two disfiguring experiences that disqualified her for marriage, she professed in San Lorenzo in Panisperna, a Clarisse convent in Rome. In 1618 this strong-minded, inflexible aristocrat founded the first of four new convents adhering to the mitigated rule promulgated ten years after Clare's death by Pope Urban IV: three in Lazio, and the last in Rome, where she died. Elena Onori's essay considers Santa Maria della Provvidenza, the convent where the conference took place, founded and meticulously supervised by Cardinal Francesco Barberini senior (1597–1679) in the last years of his life, more than two decades after Francesca Farnese's demise but in accordance with her principles.

The last six essays on material culture in the Fara convent strike me as the most innovative and intriguing. Alessandra Agneni examines the layout of the convent's kitchen and its battery of copper pots and pans. Francesca Sbardella addresses “objects of devotion”: unofficial relics preserved by the nuns. Cristina Fabriani focuses on their dyeing and working of straw into items ranging from sandals to small altarpieces. Lia Barelli reflects on the fit between Francesca Farnese's emphasis on poverty and the architecture of her convents. Sveva Di Martino describes the origin in 2004 and the ongoing development of the Museo del Silenzio, designed to convey an impression in depth of the sisters' devotional and working lives.

Compared to the somewhat schizophrenic character of the essay collection, Debby's monograph makes a single, simple, unsurprising argument: that Clare of Assisi's visibility changed over time. Achieving the objective announced in her title necessitates examining earlier verbal and visual representations. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Debby argues, the saint, canonized only two years after her death, began as a “heroic civil saint” (24). In 1260 Guido da Siena depicted her as brandishing the monstrance and driving away the enemy, described in the contemporaneous *Versified Legend of Saint Clare* as “wild men” and “that pack of dogs.” (This date and attribution are contested: the panel may have been produced two decades later by a follower of Guido.) Very soon, however, particularly in and around Assisi, artists relegated her to the background of the

Franciscan scene. She was shown as a humble virgin with downcast eyes bearing a palm frond — an allusion to her conversion on Palm Sunday, not the attribute of a martyr — or a lily, symbolizing virginity.

Although in many fifteenth-century paintings Clare continued to be marginalized in comparison not only to Francis, but also to other female saints, the range of her attributes expanded to include a book (alluding to her composition of the Clarissan rule) and a bishop's crosier (referring to her position as founding abbess). Sermons by such Observant Franciscan preachers as Bernardino da Siena and Giovanni da Capistrano evaluated her in similar ways. From midcentury into the early years of the next, having acquired features of the Madonna della Misericordia, she was pictured as a protector of Clarisse, a defender against the plague, a multiplier of bread, and — no doubt in imitation of and competition with the Dominican tertiary Catherine of Siena — a stigmatic. The range of miracles attributed to her in painting and print expanded to include rescuing sailors and passengers on ships about to sink and saving a child attacked by wolves. An altar screen painted in Messina in the second half of the fifteenth century, which constitutes a sort of summa of Clare's prodigies, prominently features her Eucharistic route of the Imperial army attacking Assisi.

Debby devotes less than a quarter of her text to a rather impressionistic treatment of her proclaimed subject: Clare in the early modern period. She concludes with a brief epilogue touching on some modern depictions, including the saint as a belated unofficial patron of cats. (The official one, seventh-century abbess Gertrude of Nivelles, receives no mention.) The book is lavishly illustrated with ten color plates and fifty-one reproductions in black and white. Unfortunately, the latter are so small that one must take the author's word for what they show. She treats verbal representations, which take second place, as mere parallels to visual ones without attempting to establish causal relationships. All things considered, this is a handsome but somewhat disappointing book.

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