

Giovanna Urist  
Articulations of Power Conference

The Purposes of a Text:  
Tommaso Caffarini's *The Legend of Maria of Venice*

How does a text about a fourteenth-century Venetian holy woman demonstrate articulations of power? First, *The Legend of Maria of Venice* tells the story of a powerless woman who found a way to obtain control of her life and carve out her own place in society. Second, the story allowed its author, the Dominican friar Tommaso Caffarini di Antonio da Siena, to use this holy woman in hopes of promoting his own authority. As an examination of *The Legend of Maria of Venice* will show, power articulates through texts to affect authors and audiences.

In July 1402, Caffarini finished the Latin text of his first hagiographical work, *The Legend of Maria of Venice*.<sup>1</sup> A little over a year later, on 16 August 1403, Caffarini completed a version in Italian.<sup>2</sup> *The Legend of Maria of Venice* (hereafter *Legend*) recounts how a laywoman embraced the “third order” of the Dominican tertiaries after having been abandoned by her husband.

Previous scholarship on the text argues that Caffarini wrote the *Legend* to promote the Dominican order in three ways. First, Maria of Venice's story provided a concrete example of how one should live according to the tertiary order. Second, the *Legend* promoted Catherine of Siena who was given credit for convincing Pope Gregory

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<sup>1</sup> Fernanda Sorelli, *La Santità Imitabile: “Leggenda di Maria da Venezia” di Tommaso da Siena* (Venice: Deputazione Editrice, 1984). Additionally, there is an English translation of the text: Daniel Bornstein, “Thomas of Siena: The Legend of Maria of Venice,” in *Dominican Penitent Women*, ed. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner (New York: Paulist Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Fernanda Sorelli, “Imitable Sanctity: The Legend of Maria of Venice,” in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, eds. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, trans. Margery J. Schneider (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 165.

the Eleventh to return to Rome, ending the Avignon Papacy in 1377.<sup>3</sup> The text made a bid for Catherine's canonization, which further legitimized the Dominican order and the tertiaries since the saint had chosen that way of life. Third, although the previous scholarship acknowledged that the text was aimed at a lay audience, it does not specify how and why the text addressed lay readers.

The tertiary order is a lay order associated with the monastic orders of the Franciscans and the Dominicans. They were most densely concentrated in the towns of central and northern Italy.<sup>4</sup> Tertiaries took different vows from those of monks or nuns and were able to live among the laity. Some, like Catherine of Siena, lived with their families; others lived with other tertiaries. They wore the habit of whichever monastic order they joined and often engaged in charitable work.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Caffarini wrote the *Legend* for the purpose of defining and institutionalizing the tertiary order.

At the end of the fourteenth century, political tensions between the Venetian government and an influential Dominican lay group in the city directly affected Caffarini and his story of Maria of Venice. The Dominican lay group particularly benefitted from the presence of a specific Florentine preacher, Giovanni Dominici (d. 1419), who had a reputation for being a troublemaker. In November of 1399, Dominici ignored a strongly worded warning by the Council of Ten, a main body of the Venetian government, and

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena: The Classic on Her Life and Accomplishments as Recorded by Her Spiritual Director* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1960), 303. For more information on the Avignon Papacy, see: Edwin B. Mullins, *The Popes of Avignon: a Century in Exile* (New York: Blue Bridge, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, "Introduction," in *Dominican Penitent Women*, ed. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sandy Bardsley, *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 40.

directed a procession of penitents called the *bianchi* through the city.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Dominici was expelled from Venice for five years and the other Venetian organizers were banished for one year.<sup>7</sup> In this tumultuous environment, Caffarini had to prove that the Dominicans and their lay order had a right to exist.<sup>8</sup> In the midst of these political tensions, Caffarini wrote the *Legend*.

In the *Legend*, Caffarini tells the story of a Venetian woman from an upper class family. Maria Sturion was born circa 1379. The beginning of her life was typical for any girl of her status. He describes her marriage, at about age fifteen, to a young man named Giannino, who was from a wealthy family. Caffarini indicates that it was a normal marriage proposal and ceremony handled by the patriarchs of both families. Not long after their wedding, Giannino became a mercenary and went to Mantua to fight in a war between that city and the duke of Milan. Maria was abandoned. Her husband left her in the care of her father-in-law, who, according to Caffarini, did not treat her with the “decency she deserved.”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, she returned to her parents’ home.

Upon her homecoming, Maria became more devout. She began accompanying her mother to the Dominican church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, where Caffarini preached. He and Maria grew closer as Maria increasingly resembled a tertiary. Eventually she begged him for admission into the order.<sup>10</sup> After a period of hesitation, during which Caffarini emphasized his desire to discuss the matter with her father prior to agreeing to Maria’s wish, he informed the reader as to why Maria was a good candidate for the tertiaries.

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<sup>6</sup> Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, “Writing Religious Rules as an Interactive Process: Dominican Penitent Women and the Making of Their ‘Regula,’” *Speculum*, vol. 79, no. 3 (July 2004): 677.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Bornstein, *The Bianchi of 1399: Popular Devotion in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 186.

<sup>8</sup> Lehmijoki-Gardner, “Writing Religious Rules,” 677.

<sup>9</sup> Sorelli, *Santità Imitabile*, 155. All translations are my own and so I will provide the original language: “...con quella decentia che [ad] essa se sarebbe convenuto...”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

First, it would prevent further scandal, because she would be unavailable to other men who could destroy her reputation and her chastity.<sup>11</sup> Second, Maria would follow in “the blessed” Catherine of Siena’s footsteps.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Dominican habit was bestowed upon Maria and both her reputation was preserved and Catherine was emulated.

Soon after she officially entered the tertiaries, Maria was afflicted with the plague. Maria died of the disease in 1399 at approximately age twenty. After Maria’s death, her mother claimed that Maria, joyous and laughing, came to her in her dreams dressed in the Dominican habit. Another tertiary also asserted that Maria had appeared in her dreams many times. Caffarini recounted these visions, but did not indicate that Maria herself had visions, unlike Catherine of Siena. Additionally, Maria had not performed any miracles. In other words, Maria was not a saint, but she was a role model.

Catherine of Siena plays a significant role in the *Legend*. One historian states that, “One effective way for penitent women to promote their way of life was to publicize the sanctity of one of the group’s members.”<sup>13</sup> Catherine’s association with Maria elevated Maria’s status as a holy woman. It also added to the literature in support of Catherine’s canonization. Just as Caffarini depicts Catherine as the exemplary tertiary for those within the order, so he presents Maria as an example for those who might join.

Caffarini addressed his audience at the beginning of the text, asserting that the *Legend* had a didactic purpose. He wrote that he had undertaken the project “for the edification of all the faithful and as an example to be imitated by some people.” Although the *Legend* held lessons for everyone, it was directed at “especially those women who may want to take or have indeed taken the decision to live [Catherine’s] way of life...

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<sup>11</sup> Sorelli, *Santità Imitabile*, 197.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 199. “...beata Katerina da Siena...”

<sup>13</sup> Lehmijoki-Gardner, “Writing Religious Rules,” 673.

that of the penitents of Messer Saint Dominic.”<sup>14</sup> Men also became tertiaries, but the *Legend* was an exemplary text for women. Caffarini explicitly focused on women in certain situations to recruit them, but did not neglect to address pastorally those who were already tertiaries.

Women are the main characters in the *Legend*. Four men appear in the text: Caffarini, Maria’s father, Maria’s husband, and Christ. On the other hand, many more women are not only mentioned but also quoted in the document. Maria’s peers, who were referred to by name in the *Legend*, were her most influential supporters. These women urged Caffarini to write the *Legend* and they provided the evidence to prove her holiness. By making the female characters more prevalent and more numerous than the male characters, Caffarini supplied models after whom women could shape themselves.

Unlike many traditional hagiographies, Maria’s story was concretely anchored in time and space. Caffarini referred to specific women with whom Maria interacted as well as certain important families. He fluidly inserted other women’s names into the narrative and his readers met Maria’s close friends and acquaintances through short asides. At one point, he practically listed the names and marital statuses of the women who Maria convinced to join the order. Thus, Caffarini’s intended readers may have known these women, or at the very least recognized their names. These women grounded the *Legend* and Maria in fourteenth-century Venice. Caffarini wanted his readers to understand that these specific women were successful as tertiaries. He chose to include the marital status of some women, so that his audience would understand why the tertiary order helped

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<sup>14</sup> Sorelli, *Santità Imitabile*, 153. “...e questo a edificazione di tutti e fedeli e ad imitazione et exempro d’alquante persone e specialmente di quelle le quail volessero prendere o avessero preso con effecto el mododel vivere dello stato e dell’abito suo, cioè de la penitencia di misser san Domenico...”

those women.

Caffarini directed the text towards women in bad marriages by describing Maria's entrance into the order. No married woman could enter without her husband's permission. Caffarini eventually waived this requirement by asserting that it was God's wish that Maria become a tertiary. Therefore, Maria, like other women in similar situations, realized that the church did not frown upon her joining the tertiaries without her husband's consent because she would be serving God. This was a very subtle way to inform women that the church would be sympathetic to women in certain situations. However, Caffarini did not indicate that he would confront any husbands, instead Maria's father was responsible to take care of Giannino if that situation arose. Caffarini did show women that an alternative to a bad marriage did exist. Even though the women also needed supporters in the lay world, the church would advocate on behalf of these women, and this acknowledgement made the tertiaries an attractive option for them.

The fact that Maria was not a saint, unlike Catherine of Siena, was the crucial point to convince women to join the tertiaries. Maria was not saintly, even though she had saintly qualities, but she was holy. Although Maria exhibited some pious characteristics, she never performed miracles. Unlike Catherine's hagiography, the *Legend* was not a bid for Maria's canonization. The juxtaposition of Catherine and Maria in the *Legend* emphasized their differences. Caffarini presented Maria as the everywoman version of Catherine, who was the greatest female tertiary ever to be a part of the Dominican order. Maria was everywoman, as opposed to Catherine, and every woman could be as holy as Maria. Thus, Maria was the recruiting tool to show women that they did not have to be saintly like Catherine to join the tertiaries.

At the beginning of the final chapter, Caffarini asserts that as a result of joining

the tertiaries, Maria's reputation was redeemed. He wrote that, "How much grace this woman universally had in the eyes of God and men, especially from her conversion onward, can be clearly seen from the things already said."<sup>15</sup> At the end, Caffarini reaffirmed Maria's now flawless character: "For this reason, since this beloved woman in this manner found grace in the eyes of God and men, one can conclude that she must be similarly glorious in the eyes of God and men."<sup>16</sup> Caffarini reiterated this theme of Maria's grace to prove to his readers one last time that Maria was able to overcome her tainted reputation by dedicating herself to God.

In addition to addressing women, Caffarini used the forum of the text to discuss his own piety. He was responsible for directing Maria and ensuring that she did not take her penance, such as fasting, too far, which was a common theme to texts of holy men and women. Caffarini stated that Maria obeyed his every order: "It was an admirable thing to see the holy awe she felt for me and to not overstep that which I might ordain or command, truly thinking of me as her God's vicar. And thus, she received everything from my mouth as if it had come from the mouth of God himself."<sup>17</sup> Caffarini employed Maria to elevate his own importance by comparing himself to God. By utilizing Maria to make this connection, he also exploited her authority as a holy woman to prove his own importance. Moreover, Caffarini's association with exceptional Catherine further asserted his own holiness. He proved himself to his flock by testifying to his outstanding piety and

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<sup>15</sup> Sorelli, *Santità Imitabile*, 222. "Di quanta gràcia sia suta universalmente questa [dilecta] appo Idio e gl'uomini, e singularmente de la sua conversione innanzi, avenga si possa chiaro vedere per le cose decte di sopra ne li sopradecti capitoli..."

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 225. "...essendo questa dilecta per sì facta forma trovata gràciosa appo Idio et appo gli huomeni, si può conchiudere d'essa che similmente debba esser gloriosa appo Idio et appo gli huomeni..."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 173. "...Anco finalmente, quanto all'affetto che avea al voto dell'obediencia, era mirabile cosa vedere el santo timore che avea di me e di non passare quello che per me fosse ordinato o comandato, reputandomi veracemente sì come vicario del suo Idio. E così tutto de la bocca mia ricevea sì come fosse uscito de la bocca d'esso Idio..."

demonstrating his ability to lead.

In 1396, Caffarini was appointed to the directorship of the penitents in Venice; Caffarini's motive for writing the text was to establish the tertiary order within the Dominicans, within the Christian/Catholic hierarchy, and in Venice. Therefore, Caffarini had to determine who would join this order. Since he did not invent the order, but instead was attempting to institutionalize it, he very much had to consider the Venetian citizens at the turn of the fifteenth century. Therefore with the story and example set by Maria and her fellow tertiaries, Caffarini was able to create a position for even the most displaced of his flock. Hitting two birds with one stone, he could both bolster the ranks of the order while also caring for his flock by ensuring that no one was shunned by society. Women who were problematic in Venetian society, such as abandoned wives or widows, were cared for under Caffarini's plan, even though he did not account for those who would not have had the money to support themselves while living in the lay world. He targeted the upper classes, which he emphasized by listing the specific names of those elite women who had joined the order. While assisting these displaced women, Caffarini further promoted himself to the Dominican hierarchy and even beyond to the larger church institution. He had the skills to recognize an important holy woman, guide her into the tertiaries, and institutionalize the order.

As any administrator knows, fund-raising is a crucial component to any organization. The *Legend* reminded readers that tertiaries themselves and families of tertiaries should always contribute financially to the Dominicans. On her deathbed, Maria dictated her will to her parents, which included leaving money to the Dominican convent of Santi Giovanni e Paolo for the "holy memory of the blessed virgin Catherine of



Siena.”<sup>18</sup> Caffarini showed that the model tertiary left money to the order, while recalling that Catherine was the saintly ideal of the tertiaries.

Caffarini had his flock in mind as an audience when writing the *Legend*, but he also wrote it to promote himself to God, to his flock, and to his superiors in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. He championed his own holiness as Maria’s confessor and adeptly promoted himself as an excellent administrator and fundraiser. Perhaps most importantly, as an administrator, he proved that he was aware of and was able to navigate the political waters in Venice. As a result of Caffarini’s hard work for the tertiary order, papal endorsement for the penitent rule was approved in 1405, but there is no extant information as to whether Caffarini personally benefitted from his self-promotion.

A hagiographical text about a holy woman and not a saint is fairly anomalous, but Caffarini employed this unusual text to address women and promote himself. Maria, at least the character Caffarini constructed, was certainly a charismatic holy woman. She had the strength to overcome an unsuccessful marriage and to create a life, which would allow her more freedom, social acceptance, and salvation. Whether or not Maria Sturion existed exactly as Caffarini portrayed her is not the point of this text. Instead, this text demonstrates that the story of Maria empowered Caffarini and his audience.

Power articulates through the interaction of author, text, and audience. The distribution and formulation of power is fluid and further study of the *Legend* could be used to understand how power, through the medium of Caffarini’s messages, resonated with women and was re-articulated in their lives and their communities. Caffarini, the

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<sup>18</sup> Sorelli, *Santità Imitabile*, 203. “...supplicando a la madre che ordinasse sì factamente che ogni anno in perpetuo fossero dati al convento sopradecto di San Gianni e Paolo cinque ducati per la celebraçione de la santa memoria de la sopradecta vergine beata Katerina da Siena, singularissima devota sua, la quale celebrità e memoria si fa ogni anno nel decto convento la prima domenica che seguita doppo la festa del nostro santo Pietro martire dell’ordine de’ frati predicatori.”

*Legend*, and the *Legend's* original audience were all situated in fourteenth-century Venice. As circumstances change, interactions with the *Legend* change as well. These evolving relationships expose not only Caffarini and his vision of Venice and Venetian women, but also the iterative processes of shifting power.