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The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden

Women, Politics and Reform in Renaissance Italy

Edited by

Unn Falkeid
Anna Wainwright



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Discourses on the Virgin Mary: Birgitta of Sweden and Chiara Matraini

Eleonora Carinci

Introduction

It is well known that the Virgin Mary was a crucial figure for Birgitta of Sweden's spirituality and theology. The Virgin appears in a large number of Birgitta's *Revelations*, and she is the main subject of the *Sermo angelicus de excellentia beatae Virginis*, the text that Birgittine nuns were expected to read daily during the morning office. What emerges from Birgitta's representation of the Virgin and her interpretation of the most crucial moments of Mary's life is a very close relationship. Birgitta describes Mary as one of the most important figures for Christians, God's most beloved, even before her conception. Mary embodied all human and divine virtues; she was the most humble, pious, and wise of human beings, and is presented as a very powerful and active woman who had prophetic knowledge of Christ's actions and destiny even before his birth, and who *saved* humanity by giving birth to her son.

While most of the characteristics and biographical episodes of the Virgin described by Birgitta belong to the Christian tradition and are identifiable in various sources, the ways in which she represents the Virgin, paying attention to her feelings and emphasizing her incontrovertible authority, make Birgitta's view and relationship with the Virgin outstanding. As Claire Sahlin has pointed out, "in approximately one-third of the revelations, the Virgin occupies an exalted position and acts as Birgitta's instructor, intercessor, comfort, protector and guide", and Birgitta seems to identify herself with Mary on many occasions.¹ Particularly significant in this sense is the crucial vision in which Birgitta describes her "mystical pregnancy", the movements she could feel in her womb, as similar to Christ's movement in Mary's womb, and her association

1 Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: 2001), 79. For a discussion of the importance of Mary for Birgitta and the meaning of her "mystical pregnancy", see *ibid.*, 78–108. For an interesting interpretation of the use of Mary as authorizing figure in Birgitta and other visionary women see also Laura Saetveit Miles, *The Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation* (Cambridge: 2020), 115–74.

of this event with the call she received to become a prophetic channel between God and humans.²

For Birgitta, Mary's wisdom was due to her being pregnant with Christ, and in the moment in which she identifies herself as mystically pregnant, she seems to attribute to herself an "infusion of divine wisdom" and possibly a similar prophetic power to "proclaiming God's will to the world".³ Consequently, as Unn Falkeid has convincingly argued, Birgitta's representation of the Virgin was fundamental in establishing a strong model of female authority, necessary to allow a woman such as Birgitta to challenge the Avignon Papacy.⁴

In the post-Tridentine era, when configured as a model for imitation, the Virgin Mary was often presented by the dominant culture as an example of an obedient, passive, and silent woman, to support the idea that women had to possess these qualities. However, some women writers subverted this idea, using Mary to legitimate their right to speak and write. Therefore, while for Birgitta the Virgin represented a crucial authority to legitimate her prophetic voice and her right to be considered seriously by the Church and powerful men, in post-Tridentine Italy, women who wrote about the Virgin at a time when writing religious literature was a way to make their voices public seem to use the Virgin to legitimate their right to study, write, and teach; express their point of view; and defend the female sex. In light of these aspects, some questions arise. Were Birgitta's writings suitable and available sources for women? Did Birgitta's Mary have any influence on or at least something in common with the versions of Mary represented by women in Counter-Reformation Italy? If so, why?

This chapter aims to consider the possible impact of Birgitta's interpretation of the Virgin Mary on Marian writings by post-Tridentine Italian women, considering in particular Chiara Matraini's *Breve discorso sopra la vita e laude della beatissima Vergine e madre del figliuol di Dio*, printed in Lucca in 1590.⁵ Although, for lack of unquestionable textual evidence, it is unlikely that Matraini had a copy of the *Sermo angelicus* in her hands when she wrote the *Breve discorso*, the two texts have some common elements that suggest that some kind of influence by Birgitta or her legacy may have occurred.

2 Rev. vi:88.

3 Sahlin, *Birgitta*, 97–98.

4 Unn Falkeid, "Constructing Female Authority: Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and the Two Marys," in *Sanctity and Female Authorship: Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (New York: 2020), 54–73.

5 Chiara Matraini, *Breve discorso sopra la vita e laude della Beatiss. Vergine e Madre del Figliuol di Dio* (Lucca: 1590), now published in Chiara Matraini, *Le opere in prosa e altre poesie*, ed. Anna Mario (Perugia: 2017), 543–625.

One of the possible channels which may have favoured Matraini's connections with Birgittine thought is her geographical location. Indeed, in Tuscany the Birgittine cult was very much alive due to the presence of the Paradiso convent in Florence and the circulation of her writings.⁶ Figures such as Domenica Narducci of Paradiso, who had perpetuated Birgitta's message, had a certain resonance.⁷ Later in the 17th century, Leonora Ramirez de Montalvo, author of a life of the Virgin in verse, who founded the order of the Montalve in Florence and dedicated her life to the education of young girls, may have been in part inspired by Birgitta.⁸ Although the centre of the diffusion of Birgittine worship in Tuscany was Florence, it is likely that there was also a Birgittine tradition in Lucca. For instance, a painting by Sano or Ansano di Michele Ciampanti (1474–1532/35), dated around 1495–1500 represents the Virgin and the Child with John the Baptist and Saint Birgitta and two angels.⁹ Moreover, in 1558, a biography of Birgitta and one of her daughter Caterina were translated by Lodovico Domenichi into Italian vernacular as a gift for the contemporary noblewoman Maddalena Acciaiuoli.¹⁰ Although it was never printed

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- 6 On the diffusion of the Birgittine cult in Tuscany, see Michele Lodone, "Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgarizzamenti e riscritture profetiche," *Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia*, LXXIII, 2019: 69–84. An interesting testimony of the circulation of Birgitta's *Revelations* within Florentine convents in the late 16th century is the translation into Italian of six of Birgitta's revelations, "cavate da' libri de le sue [Birgitta's] revelazioni", by Sister Fiammetta Frescobaldi from the convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli. The translations are included in the 1581 manuscript containing some translations from Latin of a number of lives of Franciscan saints, entitled *La vita del serafico San Francesco, Istitutore et Patriarca dell'ordine de' frati minori, vulgare, con tutte le vite degli altri santi canonizzati del prefato ordine*, private collection, 133–36; 355–58.
- 7 See Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta of Sweden in Tuscan Art and Sermons," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and Her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Maria H. Oen (Leiden: 2019), 223–46 (243).
- 8 On Montalvo, see Jennifer Haraguchi, "Vita di Eleonora: A Unique Example of Autobiographical Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 17.2 (2014): 369–97 and the editions of her writings, Ven. Leonora Ramirez de Montalvo, *Gloria alla Santissima Trinità*, ed. Angelo Pellegrini and Suore Montalve, 3 vols (Florence: 2016–2019). In Montalvo's *Life of the Virgin*, according to Pellegrini, there are some elements which could come from Birgitta.
- 9 "La Vierge et l'Enfant en trone entre saint Jean l'Évangéliste et sainte Brigitte di Suède avec deux anges." The painting belongs to the Musée du Louvre, but it was lent to the Musée du Petit Palais at Avignon. I would like to thank Elissa Weaver for informing me about this painting.
- 10 See Lodovico Domenichi, *Vite di santa Brigida e di santa Caterina di Svezia*, ed. Enrico Garavelli (Manziana: 2016). Interestingly, in the 14th century, the Acciaiuoli family had a significant role in spreading the cult of Birgitta, as Lapa Acciaiuoli was a very good friend of hers, and it is possible that for this reason, Maddalena Acciaiuoli had asked Domenichi

and did not have any known circulation, Domenichi's translation of Birgitta's life addressed to Acciaiuoli confirms that women in Tuscany were interested in the figure of Birgitta during the 16th century. Moreover, as we will see, Chiara Matraini was in contact with Domenichi in the same period, and could have been aware of his translation.

Matraini's "encounter" with Birgitta or her cult could also have happened in Genoa, where Matraini spent some years in the early 1560s. Virtually nothing is known about this period of her life, and it is therefore worth considering whether she had any contact with the Birgittine nuns at the convent of *Scala Coeli* during her time in Genoa. The convent of *Scala Coeli*, the fourth Birgittine convent established in Europe, was founded by the Birgittine nuns in 1403, in the area of Genoa that today is called, significantly, *Santa Brigida*, and was suppressed and confiscated at the end of the 18th century for Napoleonic rules, as were many other religious institutions.¹¹ When Matraini was in Genoa, the monastery still had its original double-sex structure as prescribed by the Birgittine rule. The double-sex monastery was abolished and transformed into a female-only one in 1605 by the local religious authorities.¹² If Matraini had some contact with the convent, and had the chance to hear the *Sermo angelicus* directly from the nuns or even had the opportunity to read it, this could have in some way inspired her to write her *Breve discorso*, which she actually published several years later. Further research will be conducted in this direction, but it is certainly a suggestive hypothesis that could explain some similarities between the two texts.

In any case, whether or not Matraini read or used Birgitta's writings for her *Breve discorso*, it is likely that, consciously or unconsciously, she was influenced by some aspects of Birgittine worship, which possibly had become normalized for women writers during the Counter Reformation. A comparison of the two writings and the analysis of the possible channels of transmission of

to make a translation of Birgitta's life. For the connection between the family and Birgitta, see Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta of Sweden," 225–26.

- 11 On the history of the monastery, see Hans Cnatingius, *Studies in the Order of St. Bridget of Sweden. 1: The crisis in 1420s* (Cambridge: 1963) and <https://wallinapp.com/walloutmagazine/pilloledarte-santa-brigida-il-recupero-della-storia-e-il-fascino-attuale/>, last visited on 21/10/2021.
- 12 According to the Birgittine rule, Birgittine convents, ruled by an Abbess, were inhabited by nuns and friars in two separate cloisters. At the beginning of the 17th century, probably for the increasing restrictions regarding convents after the Council of Trent, the religious authorities decided to remove the friars of the order of Savior from the convent of *Scala Coeli*. See Francesco Maria Accinelli, *Liguria Sacra* cited in <https://wallinapp.com/walloutmagazine/pilloledarte-santa-brigida-il-recupero-della-storia-e-il-fascino-attuale/>, last visited on 21/10/2021.

Birgitta's thought to Matraini can therefore offer interesting research insights into how and why some aspects of Birgitta's Mariology could have influenced post-Tridentine Italian women, despite the cultural and historical differences.

The Virgin Mary in Counter-Reformation Italy

The Virgin Mary has always had a crucial role for Christianity as well as being a very important female symbol, object of devotion, and model for imitation in Catholic culture. Mary is the crucial centre of all the contradictions of the construction of the idea of womanhood in human history. In 1976, Marina Warner, in her pivotal study on the history of the myth and cult of the Virgin in Western culture, pioneeringly recognized that the figure of Mary, despite her unique powerful role within the Catholic Church, had been over the centuries exploited to promote a perfect, submissive, chaste, and silent model of womanhood.¹³ This is certainly true, if we consider the cultural results of the position and definition of women in society over time. However, Warner does not consider women's attempts, taking place in different historical moments and connected with religious changes and women's role in society, to recognize and present the Virgin Mary as an empowering role model.

Miri Rubin's fascinating *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* offered an overview of the meaning of the figure of Mary in Western culture and society, considering, if briefly, her importance for women and men.¹⁴ According to Rubin, only men used Mary as a powerful model of wisdom and knowledge (for men) and inspiring object of literary works, while for women she was merely a model of piety for virgins and mothers and an object of devotion.¹⁵ However, Birgitta of Sweden and her legacy of visionary women, as well as a number of early-modern Italian women writers, contradict this idea, proposing a different way to imitate Mary, transforming her obedient relationship with God into a powerful tool. They use Mary's knowledge, wisdom, and ability to speak and teach, traditionally denied to women, to legitimate their voice and their own potential for publicly expressing their perspective and to challenge male power.

When Birgitta of Sweden became a public figure as God's spokesperson with her *Revelations*, the Virgin was represented in art and literature as a very

13 Marina Warner, *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: 1976).

14 Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: 2009).

15 *Ibid.*, 256–82.

powerful figure, different from any other woman, but not imitable by women for this power.¹⁶ Birgitta reinterpreted Mary's power and found her way – not obvious for a woman – into the public sphere, despite the difficulties and the compromises that women had to make in order to be recognized and heard by a skeptical male-dominated culture and Church. For Birgitta, Marian piety was therefore crucial to legitimate her voice and her right to preach in the very critical period of the Avignon Papacy. The same authority of the Virgin was used as an authorizing figure by visionary women and reformers, such as Domenica da Paradiso (as Clara Stella in this volume points out), but also by laywomen such as Vittoria Colonna, involved in the reform movement in the first half of the 16th century.¹⁷ Moreover, Birgitta's description of Mary in her *Revelations* transformed the iconography of the Virgin, probably increasing the idea that she could be used by women as an empowering model.¹⁸

After the Protestant Reformation, the Virgin became a controversial figure, as well as the centre of a theological debate concerning her role in human redemption and her human or divine nature. In order to react to the reformed image of Mary, in fact crucial, but totally human, the Catholic Church underlined Mary's divine nature, emphasizing the cult of Mary within Christianity. After the Council of Trent, the need to reaffirm her role in Catholic worship became urgent; a large and varied body of Marian writings was produced in Italy by various authors, men and women, clergy and lay, in Latin and in the vernacular, from both theological and devotional perspectives and targets. Between 1570 and 1630, numerous vernacular lives of the Virgin, mostly addressed to a general public, were printed in different parts of Italy, as well as other kinds of newly written or reprinted devotional and meditative Marian writings, meditations, books for the Rosary both in prose and in verse.¹⁹ In

16 A good description of the powerful representation of Mary in the Middle Ages is described in Klaus Schreiner, *Vergine, madre, regina. I volti di Maria nell'universo cristiano* (Rome: 1995) (original German: *Maria. Jungfrau, Mutter, Herrscherin*, 1994).

17 See Unn Falkeid, "Magistra apostolorum: The Virgin Mary in Birgitta of Sweden and Vittoria Colonna," in *Vittoria Colonna: Poetry, Religion, Art, Impact*, ed. Virginia Cox and Shannon McHugh (Amsterdam: 2021), 75–94.

18 On the influence of Birgitta's *Revelations* on Marian iconography see Maria H. Oen, "The Iconography of *Liber celestis revelacionum*," in *A Companion to Birgitta*, 186–222 and Ben-Aryeh Debby, "Reshaping Birgitta".

19 For an idea of the diffusion of this genre, see the bibliographical repertory in *Donna, disciplina e creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo. Studi e testi a stampa*, ed. Gabriella Zari (Rome: 1996), 407–705. For an overview, see Maria Pia Paoli, "Nell'Italia delle 'Vergini belle': A proposito di Chiara Matraini e di pietà Mariana nella Lucca di fine Cinquecento," in *Religione, cultura e politica nell'Europa dell'età moderna: Studi offerti a Mario Rosa dagli*

these copious texts, the figure of the Virgin was reshaped and transformed into something different from the late-medieval one.

The gap between the divine and powerful Mary and the human Mary became larger. In this period, when Mary is offered as an exemplar for women, in most cases, especially by male authors, Mary is described as a passive, silent, and obedient woman, a perfect model for lay and religious women.²⁰ In such works, her power concerns only her divine position and has nothing to do with powerful women. Women can be devout to Mary, can imitate some of her characteristics and virtues, but not those who make her a powerful, authoritative, and learned woman. An example for all in this regard is the book of meditations on the life of the Virgin by the Jesuit Luca Pinelli (1542–1607), printed for the first time in 1593.²¹

Pinelli's book was clearly addressed to a large audience of Christians, especially pious women, and was probably quite successful considering that it was reprinted more than once in the subsequent years.²² According to Pinelli, Mary was an ideal model for women in all their possible – acceptable – statuses. Indeed, Pinelli argued, between the age of three and thirteen years, when she lived in the temple, Mary was a perfect example for virgins and nuns; later, until the age of forty-five, she was a model for mothers and married women, obedient to her husband and taking care of the house. Finally, in the last part of her earthy life, she had become an example for widows, because “as Saint Bridget states”, she lived secluded and completely dedicated to God.²³

amici, ed. Carlo Ossola, Marcello Verga, and Maria Antonietta Visceglia (Florence: 2003), 521–45.

20 Eleonora Carinci, “Lives of the Virgin Mary by Women in Post-Tridentine Italy” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2009). The representations of the Virgin made in works by Vittoria Colonna, Chiara Matraini, Maddalena Campiglia, Lucrezia Marinella, and Arcangela Tarabotti seem to reflect this tendency.

21 Luca Pinelli, *Libretto d'imagini e brevi meditationi sopra la vita della Sacratissima Vergine Maria Madre di Dio. Con la historia della sua vita, cavata fedelmente da gli antichi e Santi Padri* (Naples: 1593).

22 The booklet was reprinted in Naples in 1594, and then, with the title *Meditationi devotissime sopra la vita della Santissima Vergine Maria*, in Milan in 1599, in Brescia in 1600, and in Venice in 1611.

23 “Stette Maria da i tre anni fino ai quattordici con le Vergini nel Tempio di Gierusalem, dove con l'abhorrire le vanità del mondo, con il suo pronto obedire alli Superiori di quel luogo, con la diligentia dell'orationi, e divotioni, con la sua modestia, & humiltà insegnò, come si debbono portare tanto le Vergini, come le Religiose, ciascuna nel suo stato. Dopo fino alli quarantacinque anni in circa fu Maestra delle maritate, e madri di famiglia, che se bene ella era Regina degli Angeli e Madre di Dio, piena d'ogni gratia e sapienza, nondimeno obediva, honorava, e riveriva il suo sposo Gioseppo, col quale conservò sempre la pace, & unione. Nella cura poi della casa, & in allevare Christo suo Figliuolo, era diligentissima,

Pinelli mentions Birgitta to support the idea that widows should have followed Mary's perfect widowhood. When narrating Mary's life, he documents the story, quoting various Church Fathers and referencing his sources rigorously. Within them, he also includes Birgitta, choosing *ad hoc* passages from her *Revelations* to describe episodes of Mary's life and some of her characteristics. Interestingly, when Pinelli discusses Mary's life after the Resurrection, he mentions that Mary confirmed several Christians and converted many Jews and Gentiles to Christianity, in fact contradicting himself about the lack of activity in the final years of Mary's life.²⁴ Pinelli's work is an important testimony of the fact that Birgitta was well known in Italy, that her writings circulated in the late 16th century, and were treated as authoritative for works about the Virgin Mary likely read by women, even though these texts were meant to represent a quite passive image of Mary.

In such a context, Italian women who wanted to write about the Virgin were probably in search of alternative authorities to build up a more active and powerful Mary, more suitable for them as an authoritative figure and more similar to the one represented by Birgitta. Indeed, by the end of the century, many women had entered the literary system and were looking for strong female models to legitimate themselves in a patriarchal culture. Like Birgitta, these women wanted to be recognized as authoritative voices in a world in which women were increasingly becoming too visible in the public space, and hence considered dangerous, criticized, and gradually silenced.²⁵ It is therefore worthwhile to wonder if Birgitta had a role in the construction of Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Marys (and women), especially after the Council of Trent, when the attention paid to the figure of Mary and her life had such a revival in Italy.

Between the 16th and 17th centuries, the very popular lives of the Virgin were mainly based on medieval sources such as Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* or those works dependent on it, and the works of the Church Fathers.

impercioche si bene distribuiva il tempo, che i servitij della casa non impedivano le sue orationi, ne queste impedivano i negotij di casa che a lei appartenevano. Nel resto della Vita, che secondo la comune opinione fu sino alli sessantatre anni, fu essemplio, e Maestra alle Vedove, e Povere, poiché nello stato vedovile, dice Santa Brigida, che Maria come morta al mondo visse tutta a Dio, e data alle contemplationi celesti, fece vita più divina, che humana; il suo vitto era parco, e di persone povere." (Pinelli, *Libretto d'imagini*, "Letter to the reader", no pagination).

24 Ibid., 41: "Dice S. Brigida che Maria non solo confermò questi novelli cristiani, ma che convertì innumerabili Giudei e Gentili alla fede".

25 For a pivotal overview and analysis of the evolution of the activity and perception of women's writing in early-modern Italy, see Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy: 1400–1650* (Baltimore, MD: 2008).

Some authors, including Bartolomeo Meduna (second half of 16th and early 17th century), in part Maddalena Campiglia (1553–1595), and Lucrezia Marinella (1579–1653), used as a main source for their Marian writings the controversial *Vita di Maria Vergine* by Pietro Aretino, first printed in 1539.²⁶ However, it is likely that Birgitta was also used, as Pinelli's work demonstrates.²⁷

Recent studies have revealed how the cult and the writings of Birgitta – both authentic and spurious, as Brian Richardson and Marco Faini show in this volume – were diffused in Italy and Europe from the late Middle Ages.²⁸ The database produced within the research project, *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden*, shows that a large number of manuscripts of Birgitta's writings were circulated in Italy, and that the complete *Revelations*, including the *Sermo angelicus*, were printed in Italy in Latin in 1556, 1557, and 1606. The *Sermo angelicus* also had an independent circulation, at least within Birgittine monasteries, and the figure of the saint had great notoriety, especially in Tuscany, where the worship of Birgitta was very diffused, her writings were circulated and she was the object of artistic representations.

In 1590, Chiara Matraini published in Lucca her *Breve discorso sopra la vita et laude della beatissima Vergine Maria*, which will be compared in this chapter with Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus*. Although the two writings are in fact very different in terms of period, intentions, style, and to some extent, content, the *Breve discorso* has some structural and contextual characteristics which recall Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus* and which are yet uncharted.

Chiara Matraini

Chiara Matraini belonged to a family of wealthy weavers in Lucca who were involved in the 1531 *Rivolta degli straccioni*, a rebellion of rich families without

26 See Eleonora Carinci, "The Imitation of Pietro Aretino's *Vita di Maria Vergine* and *Umanità di Cristo* in Italy after the Council of Trent," in *A Companion to Pietro Aretino*, ed. Marco Faini and Paola Ugolini (Leiden: 2021), 409–32.

27 See, for instance, Domenico Pezzini, "Una *Vita beatae Mariae* tratta dalle *Revelaciones* di Santa Brigida di Svezia," *Hagiografica*, 16, 2009: 167–230.

28 See, for instance, *Santa Brigida, Napoli, l'Italia. Atti del convegno Italo-svedese Santa Maria Capua Vetere 10–11 maggio 2006*, ed. Olle Ferm, Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese, and Marcello Rotili (Naples: 2009). *Sanctity and Female Authorship*, ed. Oen and Falkeid; Domenico Pezzini, "The Italian Reception of Birgittine Writings," in *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into the Medieval Vernaculars*, ed. Veronica O'Mara and Bridget Morris (Turnhout: 2000), 186–212. For further (and additional) references, see *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, and its bibliography.

noble origins, who tried, unsuccessfully, to gain access to public office.²⁹ She married Vincenzo Cantarini in 1530 and her son Federigo was born in 1533. In 1542, at the age of twenty-seven, she was already a widow. After the great success of Vittoria Colonna's *Rime*, in the 1550s she emerged as a writer of lyric poetry. Her *Rime e prose* appeared for the first time as a book in Lucca in 1555 and unabridged in an anthology compiled by Lodovico Dolce the following year.³⁰ In 1556, she also published the translation of Isocrates' oration, *To Demonicus*, thanks to Lodovico Domenichi, who promoted her work with the printer Torrentino.³¹

Between 1560 and 1576, information on Matraini's life is vague. She certainly left Lucca for a certain amount of time, possibly for moral, religious, or economic reasons, and in the 1560s, she spent time in Genoa, as attested by a number of letters. Matraini was again in Lucca in 1576, when an altar was erected in the church of Santa Maria Forisportam, with a painting representing herself as the Sybil who predicted the arrival of Christ to Augustus.³² In the last years of her life, between 1581 and 1602, she published four religious prose writings, in part conceived and drafted earlier, the *Meditazioni spirituali* (1581), the *Considerazione sopra i sette salmi della penitenza di David* (1586), the *Breve discorso*, and the *Dialoghi spirituali* (1602), as well as two new editions of her *Rime*.

On the one hand, these works reflect the trend of promoting devotional literature, especially addressed to women, which was typical of the post-Tridentine period. On the other, they seem to show new attention being paid by Matraini to spiritual and theological questions, which included the

29 On Chiara Matraini's life and works, see Giovanna Rabitti, "Linee per il ritratto di Chiara Matraini," *Studi e Problemi di critica testuale*, 22, 1981: 141–65; Daniela Marcheschi, *Chiara Matraini. Poetessa lucchese e la letteratura delle donne nei nuovi fermenti letterari del '500* (Lucca: 2008); and Anna Mario's introductions to the volume and Matraini's works in Matraini, *Le opere in prosa e altre poesie*.

30 Lodovico Dolce, *Rime di diversi signori napoletani e d'altri* (Venice: 1556).

31 See Anna Mario, "L'Orazione d'Isocrate. Introduzione," in Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 57–69; Eleonora Carinci, "Chiara Matraini traduttrice: L'Orazione d'Isocrate a Demonicus e altri scritti," in *Women and Translation in the Italian Tradition*, ed. Helena Sanson (Paris: 2022), 105–28.

32 The painting is currently on display at the Museum of Villa Guinigi in Lucca, entitled "La Sibilla Cumana predice a Cesare Augusto la venuta del Salvatore". Despite the title, the Sybil who traditionally predicted the arrival of Christ to Augustus was in fact the Tiburtine Sybil. The portrait was finished by Francesco Cellini around 1576, but it had probably been originally commissioned for, and started by, Alessandro Ardeni several years earlier, when the painter was active in Lucca. See Irma B. Jaffe, "Chiara Matraini (1515–1604). The Poet as Sybil," in *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of the Italian Renaissance Women Poets* (New York: 2002), 105–37.

possibility for women of teaching and which could have some Birgittine echo. The abovementioned self-identification of Matraini with the Sybil seems to create a connection between Matraini's renewed religiosity and the spirituality of some visionary women, like Birgitta, despite the fact that Matraini was not a visionary woman and had no prophetic aspirations. However, Birgitta was often associated with the image of the Sybil, and it is not unlikely that Matraini knew this, considering that she was from Tuscany, where the devotion to Birgitta was strong, and had direct experience of the Italian political, cultural, and religious situation of the first half of the 16th century.³³ Therefore, her choosing to be represented in the features of the Sybil, is an indication that Matraini recognized in the Sybil a symbol of the female power of speech, a power also attributed to Birgitta.

During her long life, Matraini experienced the enormous and crucial cultural, political, and religious changes which took place in Italy during the 16th century. It is likely that she had some contacts within reform circles, like nearly every educated person during that time, especially in Lucca, which was called "la città infetta" after the great number of heretics who were active there in the first half of the century.³⁴ She was linked culturally to many well-known *literati* of her time, including Ludovico Dolce, Ludovico Domenichi, and Benedetto Varchi, all involved in the promotion of women writers. We do not know anything about the circumstances of her education, but certainly she had a good knowledge of Latin, as she translated *To Demonicus*, read Boethius in Latin, and translated the *Penitential Psalms* into Italian, and was literarily active in the 1550s, when the first printed editions of Birgitta's *Revelations* appeared in Italy.

Matraini's work and life well represent the parabola of the phenomenon of women writers who were active in the 16th century in Italy described and analysed by Virginia Cox. The great success and promotion of lyric poetry by women in the 1540s and 1550s was followed by a phase of semi-silence in the 1560s and 1570s. Then, a period of great creativity and production of women's

33 For Birgitta's identification as a Christian Sybil, see for instance Alfonso de Jaén's prologue to Book VIII of the *Revelations*, where Birgitta's visions are connected to the spirit of prophecy of Old Testament prophetesses and of the Tiburtine and Erythrean Sybils. For the impact of Birgitta's political charisma and the diffusion of her image as prophetess during the Wars of Italy, see Jessica Goethals' and Anna Wainwright's chapter in this volume.

34 See Marcheschi, *Chiara Matraini*; Eleonora Carinci, "L'inquieta lucchese': tracce di evangelismo nelle opere religiose di Chiara Matraini," *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 23.1 (2017), 145–60.

writings took place between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, favoured by the Counter Reformation.³⁵

If we consider the figure of Matraini, she ostensibly did not have very much in common with Birgitta. While she was a widow who never remarried, at least for the first part of her life, she had a very different profile compared to other well-known widows, such as Birgitta, Vittoria Colonna, and Francesca Turina Bufalina, known for their piety and devotion. In an anonymous life of Gherardo Sergiusti, father-in-law of Matraini's lover Bartolomeo Graziani, Matraini is defined as a "luxurious woman from Matraini, who was a poet" ("disonesta donna de' Matraini che faceva la poetessa") or "wicked widow" ("scelerata vedova").³⁶

This writing certainly represents the point of view of someone who meant to criticize the affair between Graziani and Matraini, but it is also a clear sign that Matraini had a controversial reputation in Lucca and was not famous for being a pious and devout widow. It is, however, likely she did not deserve this reputation, as since her first poetic production, her consideration of figures such as Vittoria Colonna was evident.³⁷ Moreover, despite the attempts of her family to gain access to political privileges reserved for aristocracy, Matraini was not a noblewoman. She was conscious of it, and in a letter to an unidentified M.L., perhaps, as Giovanna Rabitti suggested, Messer Lodovico [Domenichi] or Messer [Ortensio] Lando, published in the 1555 edition of her *Rime et Prose*, she defends herself as a woman without noble origins, but still virtuous and from a good family who wanted to dedicate herself to literature and philosophy.³⁸

Finally, unlike Birgitta and Vittoria Colonna, Matraini was not actively involved in contemporary political and religious questions. However, she had in common with them the determination to express her voice and to follow her aspirations, and the need to be recognized as an authoritative voice. Like them, she was a laywoman who married and was widowed before developing an interest in writing, and who decided to write about the Virgin Mary, recognizing in her an authoritative role model. In the last part of her life, she clearly tried to promote a new image of herself, as a pious widow, author of religious literature, similar to her predecessors. She promoted the possibility of women teaching and discussing religious topics. Her writings, indeed, include

35 Virginia Cox, *The Prodigious Muse: Women's Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Baltimore: 2011).

36 See the Appendix in Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 791–807 *passim*.

37 See Anna Wainwright, "Outdoing Colonna: Widowhood Poetry in the Late Cinquecento," in *Vittoria Colonna*, ed. Cox and McHugh, 95–114.

38 Cited in Rabitti, *Linee per il ritratto*, 142.

not only devotional books for pious women but also literary works in which she expresses her view on a number of theological and philosophical issues.

Breve discorso sopra la vita e laude della beatissima Vergine

Although the *Breve discorso* can certainly be considered within the boundaries of the genre of the Life of the Virgin, it includes some anomalies in relation to other contemporary similar works which require attention.

The *Breve discorso*, dedicated to Matraini's cousin Iuditta Matraini, abbess in the Cistercian convent of San Bernardo in Pisa, begins with a *Proemio*, followed by a poem that invites women to imitate Mary, and a prayer to the Virgin. The work is divided into potentially independent narrative sections, separated by poems, and includes prayers in prose or verse. Such poems are based on the most notable episodes of Mary's and Christ's lives and are related to the following prose sections of the text. This can be compared to the structure of medieval *prosimetra*, texts in which prose alternates with poetry, such as Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, which was in fact an important model for Matraini's *Meditazioni spirituali* and Dante's *Vita Nova*.

The widespread insertion of spiritual poetry is, however, unusual in the context of post-Tridentine Lives of the Virgin. The narrative sections tell the story of Mary's life from her birth to her Assumption into Heaven, but more than a narration, Matraini offers an interpretation of these events and Mary's reactions.³⁹ Matraini focuses on some of Mary's characteristics more than others, paying particular attention to Mary's feelings and emphasizing her central role in Christianity and unique relationship with God. All the attention is concentrated on the figure of the Virgin, as a unique, exceptional, blessed, and elect woman, who, humbly, brought about the salvation of humanity by giving birth to Jesus Christ. Perhaps these peculiarities can explain the inclusion of fourteen annotations by Giuseppe Mozzagrugno, canonico regolare in the Church of S. Salvatore in Naples, who clarifies documents and sometimes contradicts unclear or controversial statements, in order, perhaps, to guarantee the orthodoxy of the text.⁴⁰

Unlike other women authors of her time, in her published works, Matraini did not write specifically and explicitly about the condition of women. However, it is evident that she had clearly in mind what it meant to be a woman

39 Erminia Ardissino, *Donne interpreti della Bibbia nell'Italia della prima età moderna. Comunità ermeneutiche e riscritture* (Turnhout: 2020), 310.

40 For a description of Mozzagrugno's annotations, see Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 535–42.

and a writer at that time, and this emerges in all of her writings, including the *Breve discorso*. In a letter to Cesare Coccopani, frequently cited in studies on Matraini, she complains about the lack of recognition for women's literary ability, in a similar manner to other contemporary women writers.⁴¹ Moreover, alongside her desire to be an independent woman, Matraini was conscious of her literary ability, as is demonstrated by her frequent allusion in her poems to the accretion of honour and fame, and by her letters, in which she declares her total devotion to studying and writing. Thus, it is unsurprising that her Virgin Mary looks different to the one proposed as the model of women's submission to men described by some male authors.

Like other contemporary authors of Lives of the Virgin, Matraini proposes the Virgin as a role model, but the idea of Mary as a model for imitation by all women is not stressed, at least as a model for everyday life. Rather Mary is held up as a model for women on account of their relationship with God, and she is to be imitated for her excellence in all the cardinal and theological virtues, in particular for her faith and humble acceptance of God's decisions.

A remarkable aspect of Matraini's presentation of her subject is that the most important virtue possessed by Mary is humility. This is an entirely traditional idea, but within the economy of the *Breve discorso*, the stress on this characteristic becomes particularly meaningful. Mary's humility as praised in the *Breve discorso* is not the same humility that a woman was supposed to possess in order to demonstrate honesty and decorum, as was generally proposed in other Lives of the Virgin of the period, in accordance with contemporary conduct literature for women, and it is uncontaminated by the idea of submission of women to men. Rather, it is the humility that each Christian must have in his or her relationship with God, a quality that God loves most. As Eleonora Cappuccilli superbly demonstrates in this volume, Mary's humility and obedience were crucial to Birgitta and other women who came after her. As mentioned above, her obedience to Christ and the Virgin in many cases was used by Birgitta as a powerful tool to justify her "mission" before powerful people. Matraini does something similar. In her sonnet, "all'obedientissima Vergine", for instance, which refers to the episode of the purification of the Virgin, Mary is "[...] obediente/al suo gran padre, e figlio onnipotente";⁴² there

41 'Non è come alcuni hanno detto o dicono [...] che la Donna sia di cotanta imperfezione che non sia capace di ciascuna scienza e arte [...] e quello che in tali esercizi non fanno è solo perché non s'è dato loro occasione essendo sempre rinchiuse e occupate in bassi esercizi, osando gli uomini dirci che quella Donna solamente merita d'esser lodata, i cui fatti e le cui lodi non escono dalle mura della sua casa' (cited in Rabitti, "Linee per il ritratto", 152).

42 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 579.

is no mention of the need for obedience of a woman to her husband, often mentioned by authors of other Lives of the Virgin. Mary must be obedient and accountable only to her divine Father and Son. Like Birgitta, Matraini stresses the obedience of the Virgin as an example of good spiritual practice but not as a desirable domestic arrangement.

What is particularly interesting and even surprising about Matraini's work is the total absence of the very traditional quality of Mary's silence: in the *Breve discorso*, Mary speaks. In several passages, Matraini stresses her exceptional ability in the deployment of her intelligence and knowledge, and she refers to her as *sapientissima* several times. Those who really desire to reach divine knowledge are invited to follow Mary, who participates in, and is testament to, her son's knowledge.⁴³ This "de-silencing" of Mary is particularly meaningful, both because it illustrates the careful attention given by these women writers to the role of women in society, and because it reflects a desire to make Mary a powerful and alternative role model for women. It becomes even more important in the study of Birgitta's influence on Italian women, if one considers that Birgitta received her prophetic power directly from Mary, who gave her authorization for her "spiritual motherhood", enabling her "to write, instruct and speak on behalf of God".⁴⁴ She defines Mary as *Magistra apostolorum* and highlights in several passages her knowledge and speaking ability.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Vittoria Colonna, in her letters to her cousin, had proposed a Mary who used language to teach other women.⁴⁶ Birgitta and Colonna had offered new interpretations of the Virgin in moments when political and religious changes in Italy were considered possible. Matraini proposes a model which seems to belong to previous generations, at a time when the failure of such hopes for reform was clear, and the success of women writers was beginning to decline.

The idea of a woman who is able to teach matters of faith is also present in other religious works by Matraini. In her *Dialoghi spirituali*, for instance, she represents Teofila teaching Filocrito how to be a good Christian, emphasizing

43 In the poem included in the *Breve discorso*, "Ai molto desiderosi della divina sapienza," Matraini writes: "Chi dal gran maestro eterno / ch'oggi picciol fanciullo a noi si mostra / vuol aver alta e vera intelligenza, / col chiaro lume interno / seguiti della nostra / scorta i passi Maria Vergine immensa / ch'il troverà nel tempio, in fra' dottori / a disputare e vincere i maggiori / d'etade, e d'ogni umana esperienza," Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 585.

44 See Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden*, 107.

45 SA, XIX: 12: "magistra apostolorum, confortatrix martyrum, doctrix confessorum, clarissimum speculum virginum, consolatrix viduarum, in coniugio viuencium saluberrima monitrix atque omnium in fide catholica perfectissima roboratrix".

46 See Abigail Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation* (Aldershot: 2008), 46–53.

the importance of the study of philosophy and theology in order to reach a perfect love of God. Moreover, the structure of the *Meditazioni* is dialogic and didactic: Matraini's intellectual soul teaches her sensitive soul to follow the inner part of herself, which is able to look towards the light of Christ and reject the material world. In the *Considerazioni*, Matraini interprets her biblical text in order to render it understandable and accessible to a wide readership. The fact that Matraini, a woman, takes on the role of teacher is particularly relevant, considering that Saint Paul (and the Catholic Church) had denied women the opportunity to teach.⁴⁷

Concerning Mary's role as a teacher, in the *Breve discorso* Matraini points out that on the day of Pentecost, when all the Apostles and Mary were secluded in the cenacle, Mary shared with the Apostles the Holy Spirit, which enabled them to speak different languages and teach the Christian message. The presence of the Virgin and other women in the cenacle is in the Acts of the Apostles, but subsequently women are mentioned no more.⁴⁸ Matraini, on the contrary, emphasizes Mary's presence throughout, as well as the fact that she received the Holy Spirit twice:

Through His love, she was worthy that He [God] not only concealed and impregnated her (in taking flesh from her) with the holy and divine Spirit, but also that (after His marvelous Ascension, on the day of Pentecost) she received the Holy Spirit, as well as all the other marvelous comforts she had obtained from Heaven, together with the other Apostles.⁴⁹

Matraini does not in fact explicitly discuss the question of Mary's teaching, but by remarking on the fact that she shared the Holy Spirit with the Apostles, she seems to allude to it.

Although proposed as a model for imitation, Matraini's Virgin Mary is a different kind of role model: the all-powerful, "imperatrice dell'universo",

47 See 1 Timothy 2:11.

48 See Acts 1:14. When the Holy Spirit arrives, there is no mention of women (Acts 2:1–2). The Camaldolite Silvano Razzi, in his *Vita di Maria Vergine* (Venice: 1590), 133–34, after mentioning the presence of women when the Holy Spirit came, justifies the disappearance of women from the book's narrative, stating that it was no longer necessary to mention them because they were not supposed to preach alongside the Apostles. However, he accepts the possibility of their teaching privately.

49 "Per il cui amore ella fu degna, ch'egli [Dio] non solo l'adombrasse, e riempisse (nel prender di lei carne) del santo e divino spirito, ma anco (di poi la sua mirabile ascensione nel giorno della Pentecoste) ricevesse (oltre all'altre meravigliose consolazioni che avea ricevute dal cielo) lo Spirito Santo, insieme con gl'altri Apostoli, per il qual venne a sentire inestimabile contento, sopra di ciascun'altro" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 595).

superior to all human beings, almost participating directly in giving grace and in redeeming humanity, as mother of Jesus Christ. This is a traditional interpretation, but it assumes a new meaning when a woman writer proposes Mary in this powerful role as a model for other women. Matraini, like Birgitta, seems to create a sort of identification of this incredibly powerful Mary with herself, an identification which authorizes her words and aims to make them influential. Even as she professes humility, she asserts her own status as a writer: she aspires to poetic fame and puts herself forward as a teacher and interpreter of the Holy Scriptures. This identification emerges in particular in her poems. For example, in the paratext of the *Breve discorso*, when replying to an encomiastic sonnet by Mozzagrugno, she identifies herself with the moon (“Cinthia”) and thanks Mozzagrugno for his praise and for having made possible the “alta impresa e gloriosa” (high and glorious venture) of writing the life of the Virgin.⁵⁰

The same identification of the author with Cinthia appears in a sonnet *A' lettori* introducing the *Dialoghi spirituali*, which Matraini explains in the following note, *A' benigni lettori curiosi*, comparing herself to the moon when it comes out from the clouds and receives again the light of the sun, just as she came back to life after an illness.⁵¹ As Rabitti has pointed out in her reading of Matraini's *Rime*, Matraini constantly plays with the imagery of light and of the sun and the moon.⁵²

Her name, “Chiara”, was particularly well-suited to this kind of wordplay. In Petrarchan poetry by women, the sun commonly represents the beloved or Jesus Christ/God.⁵³ In some cases, the author identified herself with the moon, taking advantage of the respective male and female symbolism of the two celestial bodies. Vittoria Colonna identified the Virgin Mary with the moon, and Matraini also identified her with metaphors of light. This creates a direct

50 “Come dal sommo Sol, dallo splendore / di Dio, provvede nella eterna mente / di voi, chiaro del ciel spirito ardente, / quel lume ond'arde del suo sant'amore; /così, come dal Sol nasce l'albore / di Cinthia, il nome mio chiaro, e lucente / è da voi fatto, ond'all'umana gente / Chiar'hoggi andrà, dalla sua notte fuore. / E da noi sol, con più splendida luce / del vostr'alto saper mostrata chiara / l'istoria sia della divina sposa. / Per voi'l popol di Dio, sacro duce / ode oggi il suon d'eccelsa tromba e rara / che desta ad alta impresa e gloriosa” (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 546).

51 See Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 665.

52 For Matraini's metaphors of light, see Giovanna Rabitti, “La metafora e l'esistenza nella poesia di Chiara Matraini”, *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, 27 (1983), 122–145.

53 Vittoria Colonna first created a lexicon for a new female poetic voice by adapting Petrarchan language. For bibliographical references, see *L'una et l'altra chiave. Figure e momenti del petrarchismo femminile europeo*, ed. Tatiana Crivelli (Rome: Salerno, 2005). On Colonna's poetry, see Maria Serena Sapegno, “La costruzione di un Io lirico al femminile nella poesia di Vittoria Colonna,” *Versants*, 46 (2003): 15–48.

identification of the author with the Virgin. In Matraini's poetry, Mary is often represented as a star, from the tradition of Mary as *stella maris*, guide of sinners, but also as the sun, as object of poetry. In the prose, moreover, when Matraini describes the amazement of the angels at seeing the Virgin's Assumption, and "quanto lume e splendore ella spargeva" (how much light and splendour she spread), Matraini states "assomigliandola alcuni per la luce sua all'Aurora, alla Luna, & al Sole" (some authors used to assimilate her to the dawn, the moon, and the sun). Thus, Matraini, when identifying herself as the moon, and more generally associating herself with the light, creates a connection between herself and the Virgin: she receives the light from the Virgin in order to obtain salvation, but also so as to write poetry.

In another poem, "Prego alla gloriosa Vergine", Matraini asks the Virgin to give her "dolce suono e scelte voci e chiare parole" (sweet sound and elected voices and clear words) to enable her voice to praise her by revealing Mary's "glorie immense and sempiterni honori" (immense glories and eternal honours), which the author no doubt also hoped to obtain herself through writing about such a subject.⁵⁴

The connection with the Virgin appears again in "Prego allo Spirito Santo", where the Holy Spirit who had touched Mary will also touch Matraini herself:

Spirto ch'ovunque vuoi, sempremai spiri,
 deh, spira un dolce fuoco
 Nel vivo nido della mia Fenice,
 tal ch'ogni suo mortale a poco a poco
 ardendo mora, e di sua morte elice
 nov'angel che, volando, al Ciel aspiri.
 Ecco ch'apprendo l'ale
 Cerca, nel fin di sé, farsi immortale.⁵⁵

O Holy Spirit, you who go everywhere, do you never breathe? Please breathe a sweet flame into the living nest of my phoenix [soul], so that little by little every mortal part of it may die by burning, and from its death could send forth a bird that, flying in the sky, aims towards Heaven. Behold, opening its wings, it seeks in its breast to make itself immortal.

There appears to be an identification here between the grace of God, represented by the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the possibility of writing poetry.

54 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 556–57.

55 *Ibid.*, 593.

The image of the phoenix, as a mythological figure of immortality, is traditionally connected both with poetic glory and with the Resurrection, appearing frequently in Petrarchan poetry. Like other women authors of the period, Matraini identifies herself with the phoenix in some of her *Rime*, not only in a spiritual context.⁵⁶ However, the image of the phoenix is also used by Birgitta. In a revelation, Christ compares her with a phoenix and she will resurrect like a phoenix.⁵⁷ In more than one poem, Matraini attributes the condition of the phoenix to the Virgin, at the moment of the Assumption:

Sali dunque davanti
 al tuo bel Sole, eterna alma Fenice,
 con le lucide, pure e candide ali,
 al tuo Sole, a' suoi dì, chiari, immortali.⁵⁸

Rise therefore before your beautiful Sun, eternal, divine phoenix, with shining, pure, and chaste wings, to your Sun, to His brilliant and immortal aeons.

These associations establish a connection between the author, the Virgin, and perhaps Birgitta. The glory obtained in Heaven by the Virgin is compared, through the use of similarly allusive language, to the poetic glory that the poet hopes to gain. This arguably confirms the idea that Matraini identifies herself with the Virgin – and hopes to obtain immortal glory. This attitude hints at the hopes of Matraini for salvation and poetic glory and might explain the emphasis on the imitation of Mary and on the exaltation of Mary's power, knowledge, and teaching abilities.

Therefore, the figure of the Virgin depicted by Matraini represents a reaction to the contemporary tendency to use the Virgin as an example of submissive womanhood. Emphasizing Mary's traditional but central human role in the salvation of humanity, her knowledge and her humility and obedience only in relation to God and not to men, Matraini offers contemporary women an alternative, more powerful and authoritative role model. If, on the one hand, the Virgin is described as a humble model of Christianity, who represents the perfect example of piety and intimacy with God, on the other hand, as a woman,

56 See for instance C 46 (B 33): "Deh, perché a me della tua chiara luce / non lece ornarmi e da quest'atro inferno / salire al tuo bel regno alto e felice? / Ché, qual teco già vissi, anco in eterno / chiara vivrei e col tuo chiaro duce, / quasi nova del Cielo alma Fenice" (Chiara Matraini, *Rime e lettere*, ed. Giovanna Rabitti (Bologna: 1989), 249, ll. 9–14).

57 *Rev.* 11:18.

58 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 597.

she embodies a model of a learned and strong figure, imitable and capable of empowering women. This is an attitude common to many Italian women who, in different ways, wrote about the Virgin Mary, and could have its roots in Birgitta's Mariology. Indeed, in Birgitta's most powerful visions, in which she corrects and criticizes the pope and the Church, denouncing the corruption of the Roman Church and blaming the Avignon Papacy for causing this, she does it on the command of Mary, gaining through obedience an unforeseen power and authority.⁵⁹

Discourses on the Virgin

In her recent important edition of Matraini's prose writings, Anna Mario has convincingly demonstrated that, in addition to the canonical gospels, Matraini's main sources for the *Breve discorso* were Jacopo da Voragine's *Legenda aurea* and Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi*, probably in an Italian translation.⁶⁰ However, although these texts were undoubtedly important sources for Matraini for filling in details about Mary's biography and for the descriptions of specific episodes, the *Breve discorso* is something very different, both structurally and for the way in which Mary is represented. This suggests that it had other inputs and sources of inspiration. In particular, the *Breve discorso* seems to have some similarities with Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus*, which need to be analysed.

According to its prologue, the *Sermo angelicus* was revealed to Birgitta for being read during the Office of the Order of the Saviour that Christ had told Birgitta to establish. It was dictated by an angel when she was in Rome, in the house of Cardinal Hugues Roger, looking toward the church of San Lorenzo in Damaso.⁶¹ The *Sermo* is divided into twenty-one *lectiones*, three for each day of the week from Sunday to Saturday, and they all cover the excellence of the Virgin and her crucial role for Christianity. Each *lectio* is introduced by a brief invocation to the Virgin and focuses on specific aspects and moments of the Virgin's life, characteristics, and roles. The first readings focus on the backstory of Mary's birth, the fall of the angels, and the creation of men, and Birgitta insists that Mary was part of God's project even before the creation

59 For a discussion of Birgitta's political role against the Avignon Papacy, see Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested: An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge, MA/London: 2017), 121–45.

60 Matraini, *Le opera in prosa*, 512–34.

61 SA, Prologue:1.

of the world and was the one whom he loved more and above all creatures. It proceeds with some references to the prophecies preannouncing Mary's birth and destiny, her immaculate conception, the Annunciation, the purification, and then her emotional response and behaviour during the Passion and the Resurrection. The *Sermo* concludes with her life after the Resurrection, when she preached to and benefitted many persons, and finally, her Assumption. Although the chronological order is followed, the *Sermo* is not a linear account of the life of the Virgin. It is praise of the Virgin and a reflection on her pivotal and exceptional role in Christianity, which considers some crucial moments of her life. The language brings to mind a meditation more than a narrative, and in some passages there is great physicality in the descriptions and at the same time introspection in relation to the feelings of Mary and her extraordinary circumstances.

A first obvious similarity between the two writings is the title. Matraini entitles her life of the Virgin *Breve discorso*, unlike the typical hagiographic title of "Life of ...", and Birgitta's writing is a *Sermo*, namely a discourse. Both titles imply someone who speaks. In one case, the speaker is Matraini, who identifies herself as the author of the text. She prays to the Virgin to give her the inspiration and the ability to find the right words to describe her life, but she assumes the responsibility of what she writes. In the other case, the one who speaks is an angel, who dictated to Birgitta what she wrote. Such an authority provided Birgitta with a sort of freedom that was impossible for Matraini. The unusualness of Matraini's title was probably also evident to her publishers, as the 17th-century editions of the texts, printed after her death, were normalized with the more canonical title of *Vita della beatissima Vergine Maria madre, e sposa del figliuol di Dio*.⁶² In these editions, the concept of discourse is moved to the subtitle *Descritta in un discorso brevemente*. The *Proemio* and the poem to women following it, disappear along with Mozzagrugno's annotations, and some images were added, probably in order to normalize the text and make it more similar to standardized lives of the Virgin.

Concerning the structure, both the *Breve discorso* and the *Sermo Angelicus* include respectively a prologue, written by Alfonso of Jaén, and a *Proemio*. Moreover, both discourses are divided into narrative sections covering different aspects of the life and role of the Virgin Mary. Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus* is divided into 21 readings, three for each day, each of them introduced with an

62 For a description of the subsequent editions of the *Breve discorso*, printed between 1599 and 1675, see Alan Bullock and Gabriella Palange, *Per un'edizione critica delle opere di Chiara Matraini*, in *Studi in onore di Raffaele Spongano*, ed. Emilio Pasquini (Bologna: 1980), 235–62 (255–60).

invocation to the Virgin and sometimes concluded with a prayer; Matraini's *Breve discorso* is divided into 17 sections, separated by one or more poems addressed to the Virgin, and sometimes a prayer. Interestingly, the poems included in the *Breve discorso*, if we also count the poem addressed to women following the *Proemio* and the final one, addressed to the readers, are 21, like Birgitta's *lectiones*. Moreover, each poem is introduced with an appeal to the Virgin mentioning one of her qualities, which in some way resembles the invocation to the Virgin which introduces each of Birgitta's *lectiones*. For instance, we find poems addressed to the "potentissima Vergine" ("the most powerful Virgin"), the "eccellentissima regina di tutte le vergini" ("the most excellent queen of all the virgins"), the "purissima vergine regina di tutti i re del mondo" ("the most chaste virgin, queen of all the kings of the world"), the "obedientissima vergine" ("the most obedient virgin"), the "amorosa genitrice del figliuolo di Dio" ("the loving mother of the son of God"); the "abbondantissima fontana delle divine grazie" ("the most plenteous fountain of divine grace"), the "pietossissima consolatrice dei tribolati" ("the most merciful consoler of the afflicted"), the "immortale e beatissima Vergine" ("the immortal and most blessed Virgin"), the "benigna stella e fidatissima guida di tutti li naviganti" ("the gracious star and most faithful guide of all the sailors"). Birgitta's invocations define Mary as the one with "whom the Holy Trinity is most pleased", who "brought joy to a world in tears", who "became God's home"; "the angels' Queen"; "God's mother", "our ready protector, the Queen with virtues crowned", "loving Virgin", "mother of the true charity", "wisdom's mother", "star of the sea", "Virgin of virgins", "glorious Maid". Certainly, the common definitions are so traditional that it is difficult to establish any intertextual connection, but the presence of these powerful epithets of the Virgin, likely with a liturgical origin, introducing each section of the two texts, are interesting and may be connected.

However, these are not the only signs of the possible influence of the *Sermo angelicus* on Matraini's work. The two texts have some themes and images in common that, although they belong to a shared tradition, are quite peculiar and require some attention, as they show a similar perception of the Virgin. In her *Proemio*, Matraini lists most of the traditional biblical prophecies of the Virgin Mary as mother of God, such as the flowering of Aaron's rod (Is. 7), the star of Jacob (Gen. 49:10), and Ezekiel's closed door (Ez. 44:1–2). Anna Mario has pointed out that Matraini refers to Ludolph of Saxony and Jacopo de Voragine when reporting most of these prophecies.⁶³ However, the first prophecy mentioned by Matraini – Noah's Ark – is missing in both her main

63 Anna Mario, "Vita di Maria. Introduzione," in Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 512–34.

sources, while the second *lectio* of the *Sermo* is nearly entirely dedicated to the Noah's Ark as a prefiguration of the Virgin.⁶⁴ It is likely that Matraini used a different source, as she added details absent in Birgitta. However, the image of Noah's Ark is pivotal for Birgitta, as she spent an entire lecture on the connections between Mary and the Ark. Therefore, the fact that Birgitta also mentions some of these prophecies throughout the *Sermo* and often mentions Mary's prophetic knowledge, might explain why Matraini opens her book with a special attention to prophecies, choosing Noah's Ark as a first example, and why she frequently mentions them throughout her work. This attention to prophecy could be related to Matraini's possible "encounter" with Birgitta or her legacy and with to their common attention they both paid to women's prophecy as a form of female power.

The final lines of Matraini's *Proemio* are as follows:

Let us then place before ourselves her beautiful and holy example, distinguished in every virtue, and looking at it as if in a bright mirror, let us consider with what rich and very precious adornments of rare virtues she was adorned to please her dearly beloved husband, and let us seek to imitate her with every desire of ours (insofar as it is possible), to please our eternal and most benign God.⁶⁵

Similar concepts are reformulated in a poem added immediately after the *Proemio*, in which Matraini invites women to imitate Mary, in order to know God:

Questo, donne, è lo specchio in cui dovete,
 co' begli occhi dell'alma, intento e fiso,
 mirar; se voi volete
 veder sempre più bello il nostro viso.
 E s'a lui, d'hora in or rivolgerete
 il Chiaro sguardo interno,
 sempre, l'estate e'l verno,
 più belle, e grate, al nostro vero amante
 Sarete, e'n terra e'n Ciel lodate et sante.⁶⁶

64 SA, II.

65 "Poniamoci adunque davanti il suo santo e bellissimo essemplio, d'ogni virtù singolare, et in quello, come in lucido specchio, guardando, consideriamo di quai ricchi e preciosissimi adornamenti di rare virtù si adornasse per piacere al suo diletissimo sposo, e cerchiamo con ogni nostro studio, per quanto a noi sia possibile, di imitarla per piacere al nostro eterno e benignissimo Dio" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 549).

66 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 550.

This, women, is the mirror in which you must gaze / Intently and fixedly, with the beautiful eyes of the soul / And if you wish / To see our face ever more beautiful; / And if to Him, from time to time you will turn / The clear gaze within, / Always, in summer and in winter, / You will be more beautiful and pleasant for our true lover, / And in earth and heaven you will be praised, and holy.⁶⁷

Thus, Matraini's direction to imitate Mary, as shown above, seems very different from those given by contemporary authors such as Pinelli, and, in a certain way, it recalls Birgitta's view.⁶⁸ Interestingly, the prologue of the *Sermo angelicus* also ends with an appeal to women, namely to the nuns of the Order of the Saviour:

Open your ears to hear the new, sublime and never before heard praise of the most Blessed Virgin Mary. With humble minds, ponder her excellence from eternity as described here. Swallow it with the loving throat of meditation; consume its sweet delights with an appetite for contemplation. Then lift up your hands and hearts with all your affection in the presence of God to render humble and devout acts of thanksgiving to him for the great kindness that he has so singularly shown to you.⁶⁹

The two messages are different and reflect different times, sensibilities, and intentions. For instance, the *Sermo's* prologue involves the senses of hearing, taste, and touch, while Matraini only focuses on sight, albeit an inner one which involves contemplation and meditation. The *Sermo*, meant to be heard, focuses on the emotion activated by hearing of the excellence of the Virgin. The imitation mainly concerns the act of being humble and devout (like the Virgin) to thank God for creating her. Matraini's appeal, included in a text meant to be read, is more canonical, even though she focuses on the imitation of the Virgin by women for her relation to God, a message, in fact, not too different from Birgitta's, and certainly very different from Pinelli's, for instance. In both cases, the Marys described in the main texts are praised for their humility and obedience to God, but also for their wisdom, knowledge, and power. Moreover, in terms of structure, the fact that both prologues are concluded with addresses

67 Chiara Matraini, *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Elaine Maclachlan, intro. by Giovanna Rabitti (Chicago, IL: 2008), 130.

68 The idea to exhort other women to imitate Mary's faith is also present in Colonna's Marian works. See Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna*, 153.

69 SA, Prologue:15–16.

to women could be a further sign of a possible relationship between the texts. The image of the mirror used by Matraini is very topical and traditional, but Birgitta in the *Sermo angelicus* also uses it when she defines Mary as “speculum virginorum” (“mirror of the virgins”).⁷⁰

The prayer to the Virgin that follows Matraini’s *Proemio*, in which the author asks the Virgin to allow her to make her words adequate to praise her, synthesizes the most important characteristics of the Virgin Mary. Matraini defines Mary as “Empress of the Angels”, “advocate of all sinners”, and as the one who sits on the higher throne, close to God, and who had been chosen by the Trinity before the beginning of time to be always virgin and mother of God, superior to every creature and gifted with all possible perfect qualities. The fact that God loved Mary above all his other creatures and that she was predestined before the beginning of the world to undertake a crucial role for the salvation of humanity, mentioned by Matraini here and in other passages, is certainly a broader idea, but also a *leitmotiv* of Birgitta.⁷¹

The first narrative section of the *Breve discorso*, entitled “Le supreme e singularissime grazie di Maria Vergine” (“The supreme and unique graces of the Virgin Mary”), is a sort of introduction in which Matraini describes the backstory of Mary’s birth and her extraordinary qualities and gifts. This section of the *Breve discorso* is particularly remarkable for this survey, as it contains some elements described in the first five days (16 *lectiones*) of the *Sermo*. Certainly, Matraini is more synthetic, but she touches on several themes crucial for Birgitta and not particularly common in contemporary lives of the Virgin, such as the description and significance of what happened before Mary’s birth. Matraini begins her account with the creation and fall of Lucifer. God, “unconquerable love, beginning without beginning, and end without end of all things, wished to share His priceless boundless blessings with others”, created the angels “perfect by nature, endowed with every beauty, and replete with wisdom”.

As he knows that Christ would have come, becoming superior to angels, Lucifer “decided to make for himself another kingdom” and was banished from Heaven. God then created humankind “in His image and likeness, so that it might know His supreme and infinite love, and once knowing it, it might love God, and loving God, it might possess Him, and possessing Him, might finally be made blessed by Him”.⁷²

70 See n. 45 above.

71 This idea appears in Eccl. 24:9; 1 Cor. 2:7.

72 Unless indicated otherwise, the translations of passages from the *Breve discorso* are from Vittoria Colonna, Chiara Matraini, and Lucrezia Marinella, *Who is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. and trans. Susan Haskins (Chicago, IL: 2008), 74–118. See Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 552–53.

As Anna Mario has pointed out, Ludolph of Saxony also introduces his chapter “Dell’incarnazione e del rimedio per la salvazione del genere umano” with the fall of Lucifer.⁷³ However, he does not supply the details added by Matraini (and Birgitta), such as the prophetic gift of the angels and God’s desire to share his joy and love with others. He simply mentions the episode of the fall of Lucifer as the cause of the creation of humanity and moves quickly to the account of original sin.⁷⁴ On the same topic, Birgitta had written something similar, emphasizing that the only reason for creation was “his fervent love and his desire to share his unutterable joy with others”. In her account, some angels “of their own free will began ungratefully to abuse the gracious gift of freedom and maliciously to envy their Creator”.⁷⁵

Birgitta also notes that God was “without beginning and without end”, and that angels had been made so wise through his wisdom that they could clearly see all the future within the limits of God’s permission.⁷⁶ With her own style, she stresses that God had done everything just for sharing his love and underlines the angelic gift of knowing the future, and that they could be joyful for Mary’s birth since their creation. Matraini is more generic, but she focuses on the same aspects. She says that the angels were aware of the advent of Christ, and of human beings who would have been superior to them, and this implies that they also knew about Mary. A few pages later in the same section, when Matraini writes about the relationship between Mary and the angels, she states that Mary “was superior to the angels”.⁷⁷ Mozzagrugno considers it appropriate to add an annotation here, specifying that it was difficult to believe and, indeed, was impossible, at least during her earthly life.⁷⁸ However, Birgitta had no doubts that Mary was superior to angels. When rejoicing for Mary’s future advent, the angels were perfectly aware that Mary would have been “even

73 See Mario, “Vita di Maria”, 518.

74 See Ludolph of Saxony, *Vita di Giesù Christo* (Venice: 1589), 3r: “Essendo nel principio creato Lucifero, si levò contra Dio suo creatore e incontante fu gittato di Cielo nell’Inferno. E per questa cagione Iddio deliberò di creare il genere umano, per riparar col suo mezzo al caso di Lucifero e dei suoi seguaci”.

75 SA, IV: 4.

76 SA, IV: 1–8.

77 “Questa è stata nella sua purità via più eccellente che Adamo, avanti ch’egli peccasse. E nella confermazione della grazia *superiore a gl’Angeli*, i quali non possono accrescere né menomare il loro premio sostanziale, dove che la Beata Vergine gl’ha sempre potuti accrescere, senza che mai mancassero” (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 554).

78 “che [la Vergine] sia stata superiore agli angeli, a prima fronte pare difficile a crederlo” (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 606).

closer to God than they, and they knew that an even greater love and an even greater delight were reserved for [her] than they themselves enjoyed".⁷⁹

After mentioning the fall of Lucifer and original sin, Matraini underlines Mary's crucial role in the salvation of humanity, describing her as the one who was able to eliminate original sin by giving birth to Christ:

For she was then that so very prudent Virgin, and most powerful lady, who was able, and knew how, through divine grace, to overcome pride and infernal Lucifer's power over the human race with the holy foot of her profound humility.⁸⁰

Matraini alludes to the tradition of Mary who crushes the snake, based on Genesis.⁸¹ This is particularly interesting considering that this episode represents the female retrieval of Eve, often used to justify the idea of women's inferiority to men and that women were the cause of original sin and its consequences. Once again, Matraini underlines the power of humility, crucial for Birgitta. In the *Sermo angelicus*, Birgitta compares Eve and Mary:

Eve's words sadly excluded her and her husband from glory and closed the gates of heaven to her and her descendants. Your blessed words, Mother of Wisdom, led you to great joy and opened the gates of heaven to all those wanting to enter.⁸²

Birgitta's position is certainly more innovative. She focuses on Mary's words and her wisdom, something that Matraini does not mention, remaining in the safer tradition. However, both Matraini and Birgitta stress Mary's powerful and crucial role in salvation.

Birgitta strongly affirms her belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, namely the fact that unlike all other human beings, since her conception, Mary was free of original sin. The question of the Immaculate Conception was the centre of a long theological debate, and was only officially recognized as dogma in 1854. In the 16th century, however, the dispute was less controversial than in the Middle Ages, and in fact commonly accepted. Birgitta's attention

79 SA, IV: 14.

80 "Però che essa è stata poi quella così prudente Vergine e potentissima donna che ha potuto e saputo vincere per la divina grazia, col piede santo della sua profonda umiltà, la superbia e potestà di Lucifero infernale contra l'umana generazione" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 554).

81 Gen. 3:15.

82 SA, VII: 20.

to Mary's purity can be read again as a way to distinguish Mary from Eve, and all that she represents for the idea of women in the Western tradition. Like Birgitta, Matraini declares that Mary "alone, from within her mother's womb, saint above all saints, was always without the slightest stain of sin" ("fu sempre, fin dentro al ventre della sua genitrice, senza macula alcuna di peccato e santa sopra ogni santo"), and defines her as "Immaculate".⁸³

Matraini says that Mary "surpassed the use of reason of any person whom-ever in this world (except for Jesus Christ, her Son)".⁸⁴ For Birgitta, "Mary attained sensibility and understanding after her birth at a younger age than other children" and in another passage she states that Mary "excelled each living thing in the world in the beauty of virtues and purity, with the one exception of her own blessed Son".⁸⁵ For both of them, therefore, Mary's wisdom is crucial and placed her above any other human beings, but at the same time, she represents an authoritative, wise model for women.

Matraini continues by describing all Mary's qualities, mentioning the – very topical – fact that the exceptional virtues of Mary's soul correspond to the incredible beauty of her body, and the same concept is also in Birgitta.⁸⁶ This is a very topical aspect, also largely used in secular writings about love and beauty of women, and that associate implicitly, once again, the Virgin with women. If Mary's beauty reflects her virtues, and this is true for actual women too, presumably her wisdom and reasoning also belong to women.

Matraini compares Mary to the garden of delights, presenting Mary as the crucial fruitful garden which produced the fruit that saved humanity. She writes that at the centre of Mary's garden there was "the tree of supreme Wisdom, whose roots spread greatly in the soil of her deep humility".⁸⁷ The garden is described, like the biblical Eden, as a topical *locus amoenus*, full of beautiful plants and singing birds. For Birgitta, Mary is like a fruitful earth, "the whole earth itself", who fed humanity with her fruit.⁸⁸ Her words are assimilated to songs of birds and are listened to with joy by God.

83 "Nacque adunque questa bellissima e *immacolata* Vergine, nobilissima sopra tutte le creature della terra e del Cielo, con grand'allegrezza de gli Angeli e di tutta l'umana generazione" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 555).

84 "Nell'infanzia sua superò l'uso della ragione di qualsivoglia persona di questo mondo (salvo che di Gesù Cristo suo figliuolo)" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 555).

85 SA, XVI: 20.

86 SA, XIII: 21.

87 "Era nel mezzo di questo terrestre e tanto delizioso Paradiso di Maria Vergine l'arbore della suprema sapienza le cui radici grandemente si dilatavano nel terreno della sua profonda umiltà" (Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 555).

88 SA, V: 14.

While Matraini, when comparing Mary to the garden of delights, proceeds metaphorically, Birgitta uses similes, but the concepts they express are similar. Mary is the perfect synthesis of everything. She is the origin of every joy in the world, the creature, who is also creator, who gives life and knowledge, and she is a woman. Despite the traditional assimilation of Mary to the garden of delights, what emerges from Matraini and Birgitta's writings is nonetheless a human being who, thanks to her humility, saved humanity through her body and her wisdom.

Matraini continues her account of Mary's life, and as Birgitta does, in several passages mentions the complicated relationship between the joy for being the mother of the Saviour and the sorrow for knowing the destiny of her son. This is absolutely part of the tradition, but both interpretations emphasize Mary's feelings, stressing that her joy and sorrow were higher than any other mother's in the world. For instance, Matraini notes that Mary "felt the most excessive and inexpressible sorrow that ever a mother or creature of this world could experience".⁸⁹ Similarly, Birgitta had written that "she was also the most sorrowful of mothers, because of her foreknowledge of his most painful sufferings".⁹⁰

For Birgitta, there was no doubt that, "even before she knew that she was to be [Christ's] mother, [Mary] understood from the prophecies in the bible that God willed to become man and that he would suffer painful torment in his incarnate flesh".⁹¹ Matraini is more careful to affirm this. She mentions Mary's understanding of the Bible and prophecies and her prophetic knowledge, yet without focusing much on her knowledge of Christ's destiny since the very beginning. However, she stresses Mary's physical pain during Christ's circumcision as a prefiguration of her pain during Christ's Passion, and, like Birgitta, refers to Simeon's prophecy about the Passion of Christ.⁹²

Both Birgitta and Matraini refer to Mary's indescribable pain when she witnessed the Passion, already prefigured by Simeon's prophecy. For Birgitta, every offence to Christ was like a sword in Mary's heart: "that painful sword pierced the surface of the Virgin's heart and forcefully passed through her soul, inflicting grievous pain on her whole body".⁹³ Similarly, Matraini describes the pain of the Virgin when looking at her son during the Passion: "These were

89 "Venne a sentire il più eccessivo e inesplicabile dolore che mai alcuna madre o creatura di questo mondo potesse portare" (Matraini, *Opere in prosa*, 589).

90 SA, XVII: 20–21.

91 SA, XVI: 8.

92 Luke 2:35: "a sword will pierce your own soul". See SA, XVII: 18 and Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 574–75.

93 SA, XVIII: 2.

those knives that pierced (alas) her soul" ("Questi erano quei coltelli che gli trapassavano, ohimé, l'anima").⁹⁴ The attention they pay to the pain of Mary as a mother becomes particularly interesting when one considers that the accounts were written by two women who both experienced motherhood.

On the Resurrection, both Matraini and Birgitta report, as already mentioned by Jacobus after the Apocryphal gospels, that Mary was the first witness.⁹⁵ Interestingly, both mention that the Holy Scriptures do not report this episode and that other witnesses were mentioned in the Bible because they were more trustworthy than a mother, but both had no doubt that the one who would have most rejoiced at the Resurrection was the first to see him alive. Mozzagugno justifies Matraini's choice by pointing out that Saint Augustine had also said that Mary was the first to see Christ after the Resurrection, but it is possible that Matraini was inspired by Birgitta.⁹⁶

To conclude this survey, we can say certainly that both Matraini and Birgitta wanted to focus on the centrality of Mary and highlight her importance as an authority. Birgitta is more audacious, explicitly underlining Mary's crucial role as *Magistra apostolorum* and a powerful model; although Matraini only alludes to it, like Birgitta, she describes Mary's Assumption, the joy of angels and saints, and her unique place at the right of God and her crucial and active role for the salvation of humanity. Moreover, the structural and thematic similarities between the two texts allow us to draw parallels.

Conclusion

This survey attempted to show what Matraini's *Breve discorso* has in common with Birgitta's *Sermo angelicus*. Despite the lack of clear direct quotations, and the fact that both writers refer to established traditional stories and interpretations, there are some elements that allow us to speculate that Matraini had some contact with Birgittine Mariology. Matraini's interest in the Virgin, indeed, seems to surpass the simple gratitude for some local miracles who had inspired the cult of the Virgin in Lucca.⁹⁷ If this aspect could have been a promotional excuse to publish the book, it does not fully explain the profound attention given by Matraini to the human and divine figure of the Virgin. The structure of the text, the special attention devoted to Mary's feelings, her

94 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 590.

95 See Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 591–92 and SA, XIX: 9–10.

96 Matraini, *Le opere in prosa*, 621.

97 Paoli, "Nell'Italia delle 'Vergini belle'".

words, her centrality as a powerful woman and loving mother, the closeness and close identification of the author with Mary which emerges in some passages, and the emphasis on some very Birgittine aspects of Mary could be in part the fruit of some encounter with Birgitta or her legacy.

Certainly, in the mid-16th century, Matraini's life was quite different in terms of experience and culture to Birgitta's. In Lucca, Matraini had gained a bad reputation because of the affair with Bartolomeo Graziani. However, she soon started to develop a new image of herself. The portrait of herself as the Sybil who announced to Augustus the imminent birth of Christ and the attention to prophecies in the *Breve discorso* are particularly interesting if we think of Birgitta. Therefore, the figure of Birgitta could have inspired Matraini to offer a new image of herself as a wise, learned, and pious widow who wrote about the Virgin Mary.

There are significant differences between the two women and their writings, in terms of not only their different circumstances and historical moments but also their positions as authors. Matraini names herself as author of Mary's life and as a sinner, and prays for Mary to give her the inspiration to write about such a serious topic, while Birgitta declares that she has written what the angel has told her to write.⁹⁸ This is a crucial difference. Birgitta introduces herself as the medium of the truth, and for this reason she did not need any form of doubt, or any justification or responsibility; she was just, consciously or unconsciously, the *scriba* of God, and this gave her a sort of freedom, despite the ever-present control and supervision of her confessors and editors. On the other hand, Matraini is a laywoman who takes responsibility for her writing, in a historical moment in which authors had to take into account censorship, and who introduces herself in that writing as an author and a pious woman. Moreover, Matraini published her work under her own name, while Birgitta wrote for religious and political reasons, and although her writings were copied – and later printed – and made a fortune, they were not written for personal literary recognition.

However, it is possible that Matraini received, interiorized, and in part used Birgitta's message to develop her *Breve discorso*. Whether she actually read or was inspired by Birgitta or shared with her a view of the Virgin, which, through the centuries from Birgitta onward, had become part of women's culture, Matraini represents an interesting example of the way in which Birgitta's Mariology could have been used and considered by a post-Tridentine woman

98 For a comprehensive discussion on the role of Birgitta as an author, see F. Thomas Luongo, "God's Words, or Birgitta's? Birgitta of Sweden as Author," in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, ed. Oen, 25–52.

to build up her representation of the Virgin and legitimate her own voice and identity as a learned woman.

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