Florence and The Madonna del Latte

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Senior Honors Project
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Mary, Mother of Jesus, became one of the most prominent and influential figures in the Christian corps in the Late Middle Ages, an era defined by intense religious expression. The portrayal of her image provided significant messages to a largely illiterate Christian laity. Yet, depicitions of Mary were never static. Rather, from the early days of Christianity to the fifteenth century, the image of Mary underwent dramatic transitions. Dependent upon the period Mary was either obscure or prominent, queen or maid.

Given that the image of Mary was subject to change, then certain societal factors must have been present in a particular period which determined the character of Mary. By the fourteenth and fifteenth century in Florence, Mary came to be portrayed as the *Madonna del Latte* or the nursing Madonna. It is intriguing to discern what factors were present to allow for these images which celebrated the intimate relationship between a mother and her infant. With the new emphasis on the *Madonna del Latte* the observer could speculate that perhaps a greater value was placed on motherhood in Florentine society. Further, if motherhood increased in value then, perhaps, so did women and children.

Unfortunately, the reverse was true. The increase in the veneration of the Madonna and her role as a mother marked a period of decline in the social valuation of women and female children. The tasks of childrearing came under greater patriarchal control. The family patriarch, not the mother, made the decisions in the care of the infant, including choosing to hire a wet-nurse. Further, according to cadastral studies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there were disturbing population irregularities present. The numbers indicate that from infancy through

death the male to female ratio was skewed in favor of males. Possible explanations for this phenomenon range from the underreporting of female infants to mass infanticide.

In effect, the mother's fundamental role in caring for her child diminished at the same time that veneration of the Madonna of mercy nursing her own child increased. What can explain this contradiction?

The answer can be found by examining the dissimilarity between the advice of the Florentine moralists and the practices of the family patriarchs. The moralists wrote treatises and journals which focused on the minutiae of daily living, particularly the details of childrearing. Many moralists wrote specifically on the importance of the person who nursed the child. The prevailing wisdom was that it was best if the mother suckled her own child, failing that it should be someone of equal moral standing for anatomical reasons. They believed that the source of the milk given to a child was an integral biological factor which determined the child's potential character. Hence, if the child was fed on the milk of a beast, then the child would take on bestial qualities.

The patriarchs, at the same time, also expressed great concern over childrearing matters. Due to a variety of factors involving inheritance, marriage and patrilineal concerns, the patriarch took control of the day to day details of raising their children. It was too important to leave in the hands of the mother. Ignoring the moral messages surrounding them, the patriarchs developed a complicated system of wet-nursing in order to maintain a separation between mother and child. In addition, the

practice of slavery was reintroduced into this society, partly to provide the child with a nurse.

The prevalence of the Madonna del Latte may have been a response by the moralists to address the practices of the patriarch. Essentially the Madonna del Latte was used as a tool of propaganda to spread the image of the loving mother nursing her own child. The moralists used the Madonna del Latte to espouse the ideal of maternal relations, while the patriarchs practiced a much harsher reality.

SECTION I:

And Thus you Mary are that lucid matter
Through whom the Word breathed forth everything of value.[1]

From Obscurity to Prominence

Prominent Christian figures fluctuated in importance and were depicted in different ways as social needs and desires changed. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was not an exception. Mary was relatively obscure in the first thousand years of Christianity and then rose to prominence so that by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries she conveyed a highly developed message of divine mercy.

To ascertain the variety of iconographical associations that Mary had come to embody, a brief sketch of her first thousand years as a Christian figure is useful. Further a look into Mary's transition from the Queen of Heaven to the Madonna del Latte illustrates how she became more accessible to the laity. The emerging urban society of the twelfth century latched onto Mary as their intercessor; her role was to help them gain salvation. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries examples of the Nursing Madonna indicate the development of a potent depiction of the mother/child relationship. The development demonstrates that the image of the Madonna del Latte progressed towards greater intimacy and accessibility, providing a powerful iconographical message for the moralists to use.

The Pieta, Mary holding the dying Jesus in her arms, fill the museums and is possibly one of the most recognizable images of the western world. Yet, according to the Gospels, Mary played a minor role in the final days of the Crucifixion and

Resurrection. In the Gospel of Matthew (27:55), Matthew names the women who attended Jesus at the crucifixion: "Many women were also there...among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." He refers to many Marys but not Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The Gospel of John (19:25) is the only Gospel which mentions Mary at the preparation of the crucifixion:

> Meanwhile standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."

This passage describes Mary sent away from the scene before Jesus had died on the cross. The image of Mary holding the dying Jesus in her arms was an invention of artists of a later period because, according to accounts in the Gospels, she was not counted among those present at the crucifixion.

The Gospel of Luke gives Mary the greatest amount of attention when he wrote of the angel speaking to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you (Luke 1:35). After which Mary made a speech, referring to herself as "the lowliest of his servant" and continuing to exalt "He who blessed her" (Luke 1:47). This is arguably the most prominent passage regarding Mary from all the Gospels combined. In the other Gospels, much more attention was given to Joseph and what kind of man he was. For example, in the Gospel of Matthew, the Angel spoke to Joseph, not to Mary, when her pregnancy was discovered (Matthew 1:18).

Despite her obscurity there is evidence that some attention was paid to her. The earliest known representation of the Madonna is a second century painting of the *Vision of Isaiah* in the catacomb of Priscilla, figure 1. This picture depicting the Mother and Child is significant because it mirrors the later fourteenth century development of the Madonna del Latte. The evolution of Mary, it seems, went full circle from this depiction to the fourteenth century Madonna del Latte.

Figure 1. Second Century, Madonna, Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome.

During the first 500 years Christians sought to organize the text of the New Testament and resolve issues of doctrine. Mary was not considered important in most of these issues except when it came to deciding the true nature of Christ as either God or man or both. The dilemma over how Jesus could be both a man and a God raised issues so grave that splinter groups began to break away from the central church. The matter was resolved at the Council of Ephesus in 425, where it was decided that Jesus had two natures, both man and God. Because it was determined that Jesus was both the son of human and of God, it became important to clarify the role of Mary. It was at this same Council of Ephesus that Mary was given her formal title of Theotokos, or dei Genetrix, which literally means 'Godbearing', not quite the same as 'Mother of God'.[2] It was an important distinction because Mary was human and bore a human child who was also a God.[3] Despite the attention she received at this council, Mary's official title had less to do with concern over her role than with resolving Christological doctrine.

From the third century in the East and the fifth century in the West, the Madonna was depicted with an open armed gesture of prayer, the 'orans' posture. The standing figure of the orans, with both arms stretched heavenward, signified opening oneself up to receive God and His gifts, including mercy. These early depictions of Mary in the orans pose set a precedent for her ultimate role as intercessor and embodiment of Christian Mercy since they indicated that she received her gift of Mercy from God .[4]

The joined hands of prayer developed from the prostrate pose known as proskynesis. When the Madonna was depicted in statues with joined hands it was

understood that she was pleading with her son for mercy. She did not need to plead for herself, but rather on behalf of the clergy and laity. These images carried powerful associations for theologians and laypeople, literate or illiterate.[5] While Mary's role as mediator for humankind was developing, the images of Mary with open or closed hands were somewhat elementary as symbols.

From roughly the seventh to tenth centuries Christians traveled to urban cathedral churches to venerate holy relics. Most relics were the body parts of saints. Mary's body, according to Christian beliefs, was borne directly to heaven, thus she left no body parts. Her remains consisted of breast milk and hair which were considered to be relics. There is no evidence that Mary's relics held any greater power or significance from the relic of another saint.

It was not until the eleventh and twelfth century that Mary gained prestige when the Cult of the Relics made the transition to the Cult of the Virgin. One of the reasons Mary increased in popularity during these centuries was the shift from a gift and barter economy to a cash economy. These economic changes had a profound effect on all of society, particularly in the moral sphere.

The reaction was dramatic. Religious leaders had to adapt quickly to meet the needs of a troubled and demanding urban laity. Theologians and clerics scrambled for control, but the force behind the creation of a new urban Christian faith was in the laity. Their response was significant and long-lasting, and led to the development of the mendicant movements, canons regular, and popular movements, orthodox and heretical. Many people responded by developing new forms of piety within the

realm of the church structure, sometimes overlooked by historians. One of the responses was increased veneration of Mary, and the rise of the Cult of the Virgin.

The flourishing interest in Mary was apparent because she was a ubiquitous cultural presence. She was often the subject in popular literature, paintings, music and theological texts. Mary's popularity extended over the church itself which took on a feminine persona; it came to be called *Mater Ecclesia* or Mother Church:

> Hearing of this the Roman Church, mother of you and, as you know mistress (magistra) of all Christendom...When it pleased him who exalteth the lowly that our Holy Mother, the Church, should seize upon the ruler of the Apostolic See...[6]

In addition, Mary took on a multitude of personalities in this period. She was referred to as both the Mother and the Bride of Christ, often at the same time: "Mary, most glorious Virgin, and Mother of God, ...he prostituted the bride of Christ."[7] Peter Abelard, the twelfth century theologian, used the same references with the intention of defining a clear distinction between the image of Mary and other women:

> Let women consider carefully with how much glory the Lord elevated their inferior sex and how natural it must seem that both the heavenly and the earthly paradise pertain to them ... Today, he who is at once her bridegroom and son (Christ), lifts the latter (Mary) to a more happy paradise.[8]

Abelard echoed popular sentiment as the same distinction, Mary's superiority over all women, was found in this eleventh century prayer:

> Virgin Mary, holy and immaculate bearer of God, most kind, most merciful and most holy, glorious mother of my Lord and illustrious beyond the stars, **you who alone without equal** have been a woman pleasing to Christ, you alone with your aid have brought health to a desperate world, pure and most worthy virgin of virgins and most powerful of all women, **lord (domina)** of all women.[9]

From notions such as these it is not surprising that in the eleventh century Mary became the Queen of Heaven. A poem dated around 1050 entitled "Salve Regina." began: "Mary, we hail thee, Mother and Queen compassionate."[10] In the thirteenth century Mary was depicted in paintings as Queen of Heaven and Protector. In Florence, in May 1285, a confraternity dedicated to the Virgin, the Compagnia di Sta. Maria del Carmine, noted a sum in their records for the placement of "an image of Our Lady above the altar of the Company, and that the image may be in such a way that she has at her feet figures who are kneeling, with their hands closed (i.e. praying)."[11] The pose of the enthroned Madonna they describe was similar to the Madonna of Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337), figure 2. In that painting, the Madonna holds the Christ child on her lap. The baby is pointing to Mary which has been interpreted as reassurance that the trust placed in Mary was not misguided.[12] It reinforced that one should plea to Mary for intercession and protection.

Both Mary and Child are looking out towards the viewer and there is little relationship between them except her rather large hand on his leg. Mary is not wearing a crown, but her position as queen is secure as she is both in a throne and the figure on the left is holding her crown. She is larger in scale than any of the other figures, this may be interpreted as an expression of her stature or a result of underdeveloped skills of perception and scale.

Figure 2. Giotto, Madonna, Uffizi, Florence

Another Madonna, represented as Queen of Heaven, appeared in The Master of the Stefaneschi Altarpiece , figure 3, painted by an artist from the immediate circle of Giotto in early fourteenth century. The Madonna is surrounded by Saints and Virtues. The Christchild is reaching out to Caritas, the third Cardinal Virtue.[13] This picture again depicts Mary as Queen of Heaven but she is a slightly less imposing figure than in Giotto's panel. She is looking toward the child and holding him with more purpose, to keep him from falling as he leans towards Caritas. The inclusion of the Virtue Caritas reminds viewers of one of the critical foundations of Christianity, the double love of God and neighbor (*amor Dei* and *amor proximi*). Mary is physically linked with Caritas through her Son. This connection between Mary and Caritas is an early example of their relationship. At this moment Caritas is personified as a separate being from Mary. Later, Mary herself came to personify Caritas.

Figure 3. Master of the Stefaneschi Altarpiece, Madonna, Saints and Virtues.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Mary gradually changed from being called a queen to virgin. For example in "Stabat Mater" Jacopone da Todi (1228-1274) never once referred to Mary as a queen, rather he called her: "Blessed Mother, Blessed Maiden" or "Virgin holiest, Virgin purest."[14] A less austere and more personable Mary became a popular focus of worship in Northern Italy, particularly Florence and Siena.

One of the methods used to soften Mary's image was showing her relationship with her son as an intimate and human one. Perhaps the most intimate relationship between mother and child can be portrayed by the act of nursing. This can partially explain why one of the most popular representations of the Madonna was the *Madonna del Latte* or nursing Madonna. The role of Mary as queen and her softer persona were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Sometimes these roles were united into what was essentially a medieval paradox. For example, the Maesta of Seina by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, dated 1335-1340, Figure 4, demonstrates this polarity that was prevalent in Christian thought. The *Regina Coeli*, merges with the *Nostra domina de humilitate*, and becomes *Regina humilitatis*, or Queen of Humility. This paradoxical representation was also suggested by the medieval symbol of humility, the dove, for the dove appeared in humble meadows and yet could fly high in the sky.[15]

Bartolome da Camogli's Madonna painted in 1346, figure 5, is the earliest known example of the new style of Madonna.[16] The Madonna is seated upon a cushion holding the child in a feeding position. He is not nursing but cupping the breast with his hands. Again, this gesture has been interpreted that the child is indicating his mother as a trustworthy intercessor. However, instead of pointing at

Mary, the baby is specifically indicating her breast. By doing so he recalls for the medieval viewer all of the iconographical associations of the breast. In this painting, the Madonna is neither looking at the child nor the viewer, but the child gazes at the viewer. Mother and child are no longer surrounded by saints and angels but by inscriptions in Latin, one in particular reads "NRA DNA De Humilitate" which expands as "Nostra domina de humilitate" (our lady of mercy).

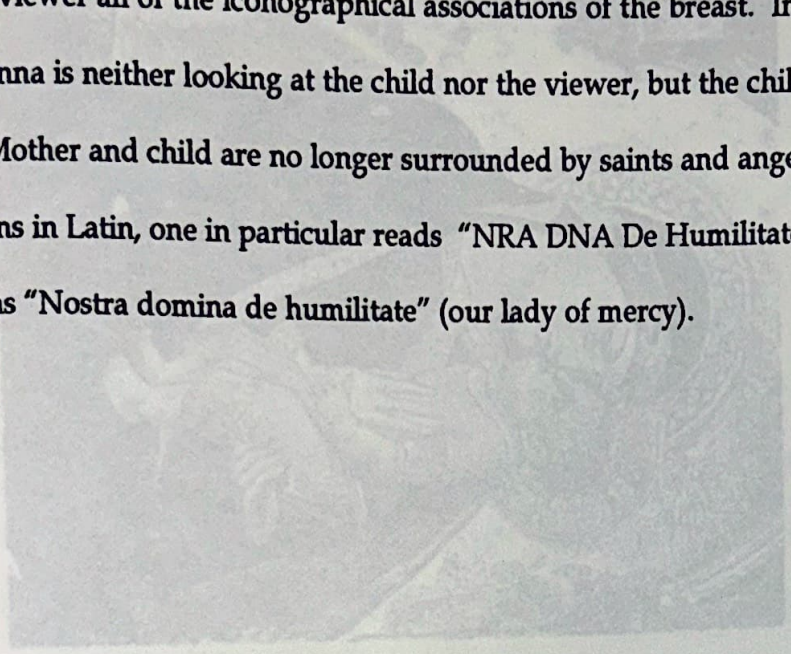


Figure 4. Ambrogio Lorenzetti. The Maesta of Siena, 1335-1340.

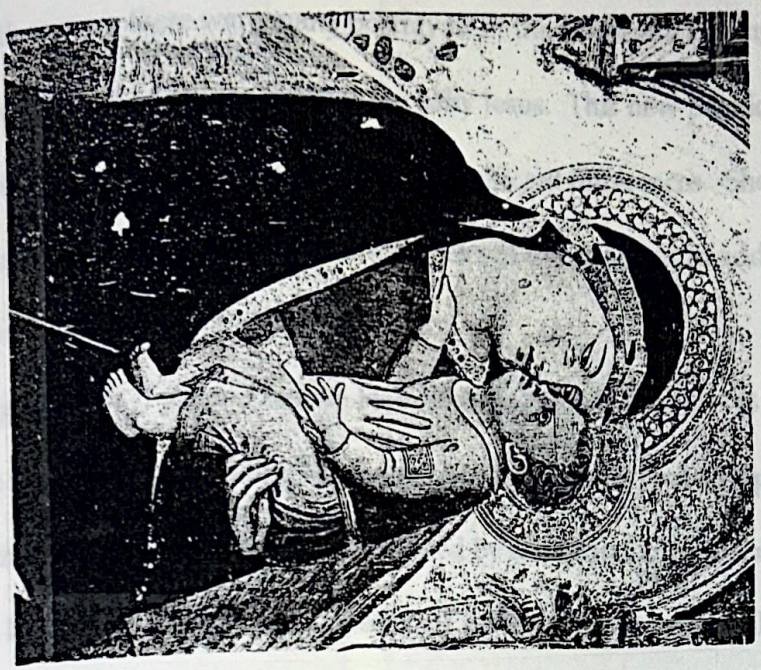
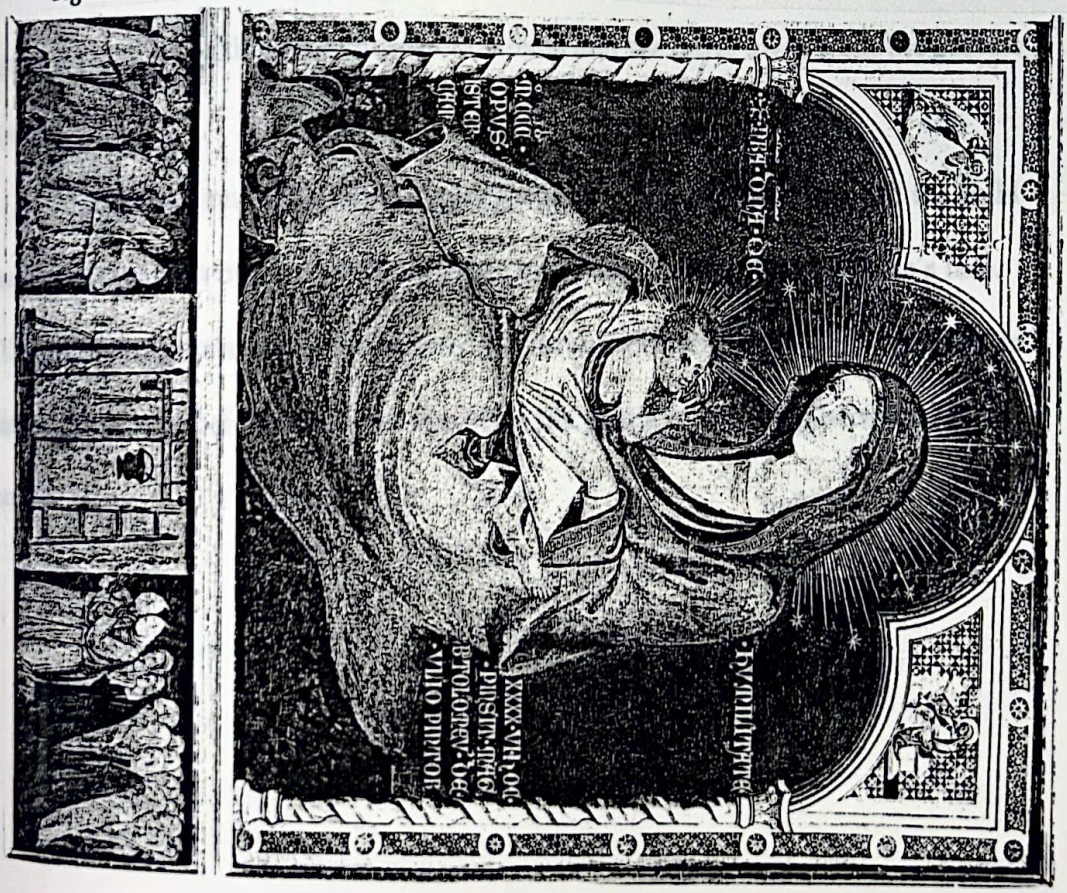


Figure 5. Bartolome da Camogli. Madonna of Humility. 1346.



Most artists took more gradual steps than da Camogli. Around the mid fourteenth century there were many portrayals of the Madonna leaving her throne but shown in a standing position, holding the baby Jesus. This new position was reminiscent of the 'orans' posture, but with significant differences. She is no longer raising her arms to heaven but stands with her son in her arms. In addition, she is no longer wearing or being offered her crown.

Figures 6, & 7, painted by two Florentine painters between 1343 to 1365, illustrate the move to a standing Madonna. In Giovanni del Biondo's painting, figure 6, she stands on a platform and is surrounded by saints and angels, reminiscent of the painting by Giotto. There is an expression of intimacy in the relationship between the Madonna and the child; mother and child are looking at each other and their faces touch. This is a particularly tender depiction of their relationship which illustrates the general trend towards a more human Madonna and the move away from the austere queen.

Nardo di Cione's Madonna, figure 7, stands on the floor and she and the child are looking at each other. In addition the child is reaching for the Madonna's face. This childlike gesture can be interpreted as Christ indicating that Mary is the path to salvation as seen before. Also, it represents the gentle relationship between Mary and Jesus.

Figure 6. Giovanni del Biondo, Madonna and Saints.

Figure 7. Nardo di Cione, Madonna.

All of these pictures depict a gentle and human relationship between Mary and Jesus. It clearly touched a popular nerve because Da Camogli's depiction of the Madonna seated on the cushion, called the *Madonna of Humility*, was by 1375 the most popular of all the new subjects.[17] This was a 'radical innovation' according to Millard Meiss. He contends that the 'humility', and therefore, accessibility, of the Virgin came directly from her being seated lowly on a cushion.[18] Many of these Madonna of Humility show Mary nursing the Christchild, in which case they were also known as the *Madonna del Latte*.

The appearance of the Madonna of Humility rekindled motifs already set in place by theologians who established a Mary who embodied mercy. In the very early days of Christianity, St. Augustine of Hippo (c.347-419) defined *Misericordia*, Latin for mercy, as follows: "But what is mercy if not a certain compassion in our heart towards someone else's misery, which we are compelled to help if we can in any way." He further examined the etymology of *misericordia* by breaking it down to its roots: *miser* means wretched or miserable, *cor* means heart.[19]

Mary and mercy had been conjoined in theological texts and songs from the earliest days of Christianity. It was a commonly held belief that Mary was able to plead successfully for all people before her Son. Mary's role as an intercessor was a natural extension stemming from the Council of Ephesus (425) when Mary was named Theotokos which means 'Godbearing'. The God she bore was the human part of Christ. That is why 'Mother of God' can be a misleading interpretation. Mary was the mother of a man not a God, therefore she was of this world, hence approachable and capable of maternal influence over her Son.

However, it was not until the eleventh and twelfth centuries that Mary became active in her role as intercessor. The numerous miracle stories regarding her power to heal and save any and all persons, even the criminal became tremendously popular. For example, "Our Lady's Tumbler" tells the tale of a wandering entertainer who enters a monastery. He is uneducated and cannot join the Monks in prayer so he serves the Virgin in his own way. He tumbled for her, in private, for part of every hour of every day. The other monks could not imagine why he emerged sweating and panting after he went into the crypt every hour. Eventually the tumbler died: "But in nowise was it lost, for the Mother of God received it...Thus died the Minstrel."[20] This story transpired to assuage the concerns of salvation that people of all classes and occupations had. Mary was responsive to the needs of a person regardless of class or education.

References to Mary and her powers of mercy could be found in many sources. The images and metaphors used to describe her mercy more often than not referred to her breasts or milk. Milk was the sustenance of life, connected to survival, rebirth, resurrection, and salvation. This connection was established before Christianity and had validity in many societies.[21] Jacopo da Voragine, writer of the popular Golden Legend, inserted this image when he wrote: "Mary gives to us the milk of piety and mercy."[22] In 1427, S. Bernardino da Siena summarized this tradition in his sermon:

> In truth, it being manifest that in the breast of Mary is enclosed all of the divine nature, all of the divine Being, Power, Knowledge, and Will, I do not fear to affirm that this Virgin--from whose breast emanated, almost as if from an ocean of divinity, the streams and rivers of all the graces--as acquired such a right concerning the distribution of whatsoever grace.[23]

This passage is typical of most of the evidence relating to Mary's mercy. It was almost inevitable that, with such an abundance of references, a cult of the Virgin's breasts and Milk of Mercy developed. It was known to have existed throughout the fourteenth century and very probably existed much earlier.[24] Relics of vials of what was presumably her milk were prized by the clerical authorities who held them. According to William of Newburgh, the twelfth century English cleric: "Many persons daily run for help to the mother of piety and, for obtaining (it) from the milk of her breasts, they worship them with so much eager devotion."[25]

Consequently, the *Madonna del Latte* or Nursing Madonna had recognizable themes which were significant for the Medieval citizen. Two of those themes were the 'fountain of Mercy' and the dual nature of caritas, love of God and love of Neighbor, illustrated in this sermon:[26]

> Why would human fragility fear to approach Mary? (There is) nothing harsh in her, nothing fearful: all of her is pleasant, offering milk and wool to everyone. ... She opens (her) breast of mercy to everyone so that they may receive of His (of Her?) plenitude all together, the prisoner redemption, the infirm a cure, the unhappy consolation, the sinner forgiveness, the just grace, the angel happiness, finally the whole Trinity glory, so that there may be no one who hides himself from her warmth.[27]

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) pronounced in this sermon what many of the paintings depicted. In the Middle Ages the Virgin was believed to be the mother and nurse not only of Christ but of all humankind; she was the *Mater omnium*.[28] She was also referred to as the *nutrix omnium* which is nurse of all. She was often referred to as the nurse of the faithful and in numerous miracles she was said to give milk, three drops for the Trinity in some cases, to various people. One of these people was

St. Bernard of Clairvaux himself, who, according to legend, drank from a statue of the Virgin who came to life. This legend is depicted in figure 8 which shows a statue of the Madonna holding the Christchild squirting milk to St. Bernard as he knelt in prayer with many onlookers.

Figure 8. Majorcan, fourteenth century, Legend of St. Bernard.

The double nature of caritas lent itself to allegorization as the twin breasts of a woman particularly since Caritas, as a Virtue in both Roman and Christian traditions, was referred to and personified by a woman. Caritas, was one of the foundations of Christianity from its earliest days. Translated as the double love of Christianity: *Amor Dei* is the love of God as described in Deuteronomy 6:5: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." While *amor proximi* is the love towards one's neighbor or fellow human as demonstrated in Leviticus 19:18: "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the Lord."[29]

The femininity of Caritas can be demonstrated by a letter Catherine of Siena wrote in 1374: "O Charity full of joy, you are the mother who nourishes the children of virtues at your breast." after she saw Tino di Camaino's statue of Caritas, figure 9. This statue of Caritas is a humble woman suckling two children at her breast. The allegory was easily transferred to Mary who eventually embodied Caritas herself. [30]

Figure 9. Tino di Camiano, Caritas.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux made the connection when he said: "The breasts of Charity are two, compassion and congratulation. Out of compassion is sucked the milk of consolation; out of congratulation is sucked the milk of exhortation."[31] In mid twelfth century Abbot Wolbero of St. Pantaleon in Cologne referred to the nursing image when he said:

> ...by the two breasts can be interpreted the diligence of masters instructing pupils in the twin doctrines of piety...:of piety, indeed, when they inform them of the active and contemplative lives with honesty, or by the love of God and of neighbor...And thus neither love of God without love of neighbor, nor of neighbor without love of God can be anything, because one is a proof of the other. For he who loves (his) neighbor is judged to love God, because in order that he may love a neighbor, he is summoned by the love of God..."[32]

The symbolism connected to representations of the Madonna del Latte were understood by a laity well versed in iconographical meanings. Further, the undeniable demonstration of the Virgin's motherhood of the Christchild served to illuminate the critical role she played in human salvation and her right to be an intercessor before her Son. [33]

However, in addition to the symbolism, the overall trend towards a natural human relationship between Mother and Son was also underway. The tendency was clearly towards a more human and loving the relationship between mother and child. It was a direction that served the purposes of the moralists who wanted Florentines to emulate this intimacy. The following depictions of Mary and child fluctuated between those more intimate and those somewhat aloof. The relationship between the Madonna and the baby can be quickly ascertained by studying the gaze of the Madonna and the child. Figures 10 and 11 are both examples of a more formal relationship between mother and child. Both subjects look to the viewer, so although

the act of nursing is in progress it is somewhat disconnected from the focus of the Madonna and Child who draw the viewer into their gaze first.

Figure 10. Andrea di Bartolo, Madonna of Humility.

Figure 11. Neopolitan Follower of Simone Martini, Madonna of Humility.

Through the gaze of the Madonna and Child, a warmer more intimate relationship can be seen in figures 12 and 13. In these paintings the Madonna is looking at the child, while the child looks at the viewer. The relationship is further depicted as more loving and intimate in figure 13 where Mary tilts her head to her child. In this case she appears to gaze intently at the baby, she is neither sad nor happy, but clearly directs the viewer to focus on the child who looks out to the viewer.

Figure 12. Giovanni di Niccolo. Madonna of Humility.

Figure 13. Lorenzo Veneziano. Madonna of Humility.

Orcagna and Jacopo di Cione (c. 1360's-1390's) employ a different device in their Madonna of Humility, figure 14. The Madonna gazes at the baby with a sweet and loving expression, while the baby looks to the viewer and squeezes her breast. Jesus is indicating the symbols connected to the breasts and milk of Mary without nursing. The result is a playfulness between the Madonna and child which does not appear in the pictures previously discussed. Often the Madonna is somber or neutral in expression, but in this painting she is smiling.

Figure 14. Orcagna and Jacopo di Cione.

Madonna of Humility.

In Domenico di Bartolo's Madonna of 1433, figure 15, the child is indicating nursing by sucking his fingers. Again this refers to the symbolic language of the nursing Madonna but in this painting Mary is decidedly somber. Furthermore, she is positioned center and holds the child's feet which is unlike the other paintings. The cradling of his foot is a loving gesture but the sadness of her gaze is not playful.

Figure 15. Domenico di Bartolo. Madonna of Humility, 1433.

The Master of the Straus Madonna, figure 16, is a Florentine example of the Nursing Madonna. The maternal relationship of the Madonna to her Son is particularly stressed in this painting because the Son looks at the Madonna while he nurses. Whereas, in most of these pictures the Baby is looking out to the viewer while the Madonna looks at him. There is a strong gaze between the Madonna and Child which is somber but intimate and intense and depicts a definite connection between the Mother and Child.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1319-1348) painted a Madonna del Latte that was different from the others because of the perspective. In figure 17 the Madonna seems to be standing but she may be sitting on a cushion, we cannot tell because the Madonna and Child are much closer to the viewer than the other paintings studied. The Madonna, looks intently at the Child while he engages the viewer in his gaze. Mary is more somber than smiling but her eyes are loving. The child holds the breast in a more natural way than in the other paintings and kicks his leg in a babylike fashion. The kick injects playfulness into the scene. The mother holds the child with both hands in view, again emphasizing a more natural and loving cradle than some of the other depictions which shows only one hand.

Figure 16. Master of the Straus Madonna. Madonna of Humility.

Figure 17. Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Madonna.

These paintings are a handful of the abundance of Nursing Madonnas painted in this period. As we have seen, many of these paintings follow the same pattern: the Madonna on the cushion with little embellishment surrounding her, the nursing child, and the Madonna gazing at the child while the child looks to viewer. In each painting the artist deviated slightly, and often the deviations suggested a more realistic and intimate relationship. This move towards intimacy was in response to a need to make the Madonna more accessible to the urban laity.

In addition to the increased intimacy of the nursing Madonna another progression was taking place. The image of the nursing Madonna eventually became a condensed shorthand image which contained a multitude of associations that the medieval viewer would have recognized. For example, it was no longer necessary to portray Caritas as an external element but rather Mary came to embody Caritas herself. These traditions in symbolic iconographic images were a common Christian language, in a predominately illiterate society.

Given the prevalence of the images of the Madonna del Latte in fourteenth and fifteenth century Florence it is possible that they conveyed messages to Christians which went beyond the interpretations already explored. However, it will be shown that the moralists used these paintings to promote the loving maternal relationship in general and the mother nursing her own child in particular.

Section II.

Those idle creatures who stay all day among the little females or who keep their minds occupied with little feminine trifles certainly lack a masculine and glorious spirit.[34]

The study of the lives of women and families of fourteenth and fifteenth century Florence is crucial to determining the context of the Madonna del Latte. To determine if the Madonna del Latte was employed by the moralists as a response to societal concerns then the focus of this study should be specifically on family structure, marriage and childrearing practices. It will become clear that women in fourteenth and fifteenth century Florence suffered repercussions from the prevailing cultural practices.

There exists strong evidence which implicates the devaluation of women. For example, there were peculiar population numbers, overall males outnumbered females. Some of the variety of possible explanations will be explored but none of the arguments contradict that women were devalued. Essentially, a review of the social practices and the impact those practices had on women will help to ascertain what social ills the moralists sought to address.

The Evidence

One consequence of Florence's professional urban personality was the increase in record keeping. The wealthy Florentine patriarch diligently recorded their day to day activities in journals called *ricordanze*. Often they included extensive and sometimes fictitious genealogical charts, indicating an increased interest in their patriline. These journals provide insights into the daily life of the Florentine patriarch and shed some light on the plight of women.

In addition to the ricordanze there were a number of treatises written to give advice on how to run a family. The most notable of these was Leon Battista Alberti's: *I libri della Famiglia*. The authors of these books are referred to in this study as the moralists. Even though there is a clear distinction between the actions of the patriarchs and the advice of the moralists it must be noted that these two groups come from the same social pool of men. Although they have been differentiated in this study, they are by no means mutually exclusive. They were quite capable of not practicing what they preached.

Arguably the greatest source of evidence for this period comes from the Catasto. The Catasto, an innovation of 1427, was a compilation of organized and detailed tax records and data on households. It was unique because every Florentine citizen and subject, who was required to pay the forced loan or a direct tax elsewhere, was obligated to submit a declaration describing both his possessions and the 'mouths' which made up his household.[35]

The most comprehensive study of the Catasto is *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber.

This work will provide strong evidence to piece together a social foundation of Florence. Although the Catasto data dates in the early fifteenth century, the implications can be used for the fourteenth century, particularly in the latter half. Unfortunately, despite the wealth of evidence available most of it was confined to the elite, urban families of Florence.

Marriage and the Florentine Consorteria

Practices of inheritance are central to determining the position of women in a given society. In the fourteenth century, Florentine families operated a lineage which was different than France or England. In this system, identified by David Herlihy as a consorteria, women were profoundly marginalised, socially and economically.[36]

The consorteria was a kinship grouping who shared property. These consorteria in Florence were patrilineages, or male descent lines. They usually consisted of several lines of descent, none of which were determined to hold seniority over the other. In order for this system to work effectively it needed a strong central authority, the paterfamilias, to maintain control over was often a three generation extended family unit.

In Florence, inheritance was divided among the male heirs. For women, partible inheritance virtually excluded them from a share in the paternal estate.[37] Further, it was through the male line that personal and collective identity was valid.[38] After the devastation caused by the Black Death in 1348, the Florentine household suffered psychologically from its loss of members and tended to emphasize membership in the larger kinship group.[39] In any event, the predominance of the value of the male lineage minimized the female role and contribution to the family group.

Although the patriarch was not obligated to ensure for his daughter's inheritance he was obligated to provide a dowry to ensure her marriage. The dowry was perceived as being more than an economic necessity, it was a guarantee of family honor conferred upon the bride. However, the dowry rarely infringed on the

inheritable property of the ancestral home, the patrimony.[40] The dowry was not considered a female share in inheritance in law. Irregardless of whether a Florentine daughter was dowered she was only able to inherit one quarter of the fathers estate and only in the absence of brothers or nephews. The rest was to go to agnatic kin.[41]

Providing a dowry for a daughter preoccupied many family patriarchs. Some even provided dowries in their wills for unborn daughters and granddaughters. Charitable confraternities were called in to dower the daughter of a good but impoverished family.[42] Ensuring that all the daughters in the family had a dowry was expensive. Also, it was difficult, if not nearly impossible, to marry the daughter to someone of her own social status. When the birth of a daughter caused the father a multitude of economic and logistical problems it was often not seen as a joyous occasion that the birth of a son would have been. This is one reason why male children were appreciated more than female children. The patrilineal practices and the status of marriages in Florence weakened women without hope of money or even a role in her household.

Many Florentines held the view that although marriage was an honorable state it was inferior to celibacy or even widowhood. For example, Boccaccio and Petrarch, fourteenth century writers, recommended a life without a spouse for the philosopher so that he could concentrate on his work: "Let philosophers leave marriage to the ignorant rich, to rulers and to peasants; let them take delight in Philosophy a better wife than any other:[43]

Yet, after the decimation of the population after the Black Death of 1348, a new attitude towards marriage was developing out of fear of survival of some lineages.

By the end of the century in 1392, Coluccio Salutati, the dean of the civic humanists, refuted the traditional position of marriage as previously stated by Boccaccio. Rather, he purported that it was the duty of the active citizen to marry.[44]

Leon Battista Alberti voiced concern for his lineage in this passage which also illustrates the Florentine trend of men to remain unmarried until they were in their thirties.

> It grieves me to see so many of you younger Alberti without an heir, not having done what you could to increase the family and make it numerous...according to a count I took a few days ago not less than twenty-two young Alberti no younger than sixteen or older than thirty-six are living alone and without a female companion, since they have no wife. I think we should gladly bear all the discomforts and unpleasant burdens in the world rather than allow our family to stand desolate, with none to succeed in the place and name of the fathers. I particularly hope that you will adorn and increase the Alberti family, not only as now with your fame and honor but also with sons like yourself.[45]

On the other hand Giovanni Morelli, a fourteenth century Tuscan moralist, condones the practice of older Florentine men marrying much younger women:

> Take her as a child, if you wish to be happy with her, that she might be healthy and whole...let her be very young, and not at all neglected (by suitors), as girls become vicious when they do not receive what nature requires.[46]

The common age for a girl to marry was 15 - 16. Whereas her groom was usually much older at age 30 to 35.[47] The reasons why men married late were directly related to their urban environment. There was no advantage to a young man seeking to establish himself in a trade to have a wife and children. It was not until his more mature years, when his economic situation was established that he considered marriage and family.

Both Alberti and Morelli stressed that the reason why one should marry was to fulfill their biological function of procreation and childrearing. However, often marriage did not happen. Florence, like other Tuscan towns, harbored a large population of bachelors, widows and those in between marriage creating a risk that many urban lineages would not survive. Alberti's concerns were not unfounded because many of the lineages did not survive.[48]

Delayed marriage for men affected the fate of young urban women. High death rates and inevitable shrinkage in the age pyramid at the upper levels reduced the number of available men.[49] There was desperate competition among the families of the wealthy to secure a suitable marriage for their daughters. This competition drove up the value of the dowry to injurious levels. It also persuaded families to offer their daughters at an even younger age. In 1352, Matteo di Niccolo received a dowry of 600 florins. Whereas, by 1466 the dowry price was recorded at 2,500 florins. There is evidence that in the latter half of the fourteenth century and very early decades of the fifteenth centuries the dowry price was more stable due to the decimation caused by the Black Death and the recurring cycle of plagues. Irregardless of the speed of the inflation, the dowry price steadily increased.[50]

Due to the age difference between the bride and groom, and the consequent result that there were not enough wealthy and available grooms, many girls had to accept grooms from a lower social station. Through marriage many women lost status. The groom, however, saw marriage as a means to elevate his status. This was another reason why the bachelor would delay marriage, the longer he waited the better the chance for a more favorable match.[51]

Once the couple were married the difference in ages between bride and groom created another difficulty for the wife. Because the husband was so much older than the wife the relationship between husband and wife was more paternalistic than one of companionship. When young girls marry older men it did not foster mutual companionship and equality. Rather, it most often led to a paternalistic and suspicious relationship. As can be seen from the misogynist overtones that were prevalent in many of the writings of Alberti and his contemporaries.

From a purely practical standpoint the husband may have had genuine cause for concern when entrusting his fourteen year old wife with the complicated running of a household and care of children. As a child of fourteen her level of maturity could never match that of a man of thirty-five. Her lack of maturity was most likely attributed to her feminine nature rather than to her level of mental growth. In addition, the father may have perceived her as simply too young to raise his children.

Childrearing

Women's value in Florentine society decreased at the same time that moral attitudes stressing the importance of the child increased. It may be attributed to the new humanist philosophy or the tremendous psychological effects of the recurring plague which attacked children after the Black Death itself. Whatever the reasons, Florentine writers of the late 14th century focused on the details of raising a healthy child with good morals.

One debate concerned about how much one should love an infant which, in the context of a period of high infant mortality, was a painfully relevant discussion. There is no doubt that recurring infant death devastated parents. It was intensified because

the new emphasis on the child conflicted with the established custom of not becoming attached to an infant whose life was precarious. In the following passage by Leon Battista Alberti, his character Adovardo expressed the dilemma of loving a child today that may die tomorrow:

> Consider, you who hate to see them cry when they have fallen and hurt their hands, how much anguish it is to a father to think that more children perish at this age than any other. Imagine the painful waiting from hour to hour in expectation of losing so great a happiness. In fact this first period of life seems to me the one that particularly causes many and great sorrows.[52]

The result of the new attitude towards the infant and the care given to him was the proliferation of the art of the Madonna and infant Jesus. A fourteenth century Dominican, Giovanni Dominici, advises the father to:

> Have pictures of saintly children or young virgins in the home, in which your child, still in swaddling clothes, (i.e. under two years old) may take delight and thereby may be gladdened by acts and signs pleasing to childhood. And what I say of pictures applies also to statues. It is well to have the Virgin Mary with the Child in her arms, with a little bird or apple in His hand. There should be a good representation of Jesus nursing, sleeping in his Mother's lap or standing courteously before Her while they look at each other.[53]

As this passage suggests, the moralists of the period, encouraged the use of these images to indicate the bond that was held between mother and child. Therefore, Tuscan art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which exalted the relationship between the Madonna and infant Jesus, had a purpose. It was deemed a necessary part of the nursery in the great pedagogical plans. The purpose of the Madonna del Latte was to appeal to children through iconography and a relationship that reflected the love of a parent. In most of these paintings the Mother looks lovingly upon the child, thus conveying the fourteenth century's new vision of the child.[54] Given that this was

the case it helps to explain why the frequency of Nursing Madonna increased so dramatically in Italian art after 1300.[55]

Despite the urging of the moralists and the strong propaganda of this period an interesting turn of events occurred. The patriarch of the family usurped the position of the mother and took control of the details of raising a family. The increased practice of wet-nursing provides the most profound demonstration of this argument.

The practice of Wet Nursing

Florentine patriarchs of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries sought to control many aspects of raising his children, even the feeding. Thus, a system of wet-nurses was developed which effectively separated a mother from her child. The practice of putting a child out to nurse was based on a system of contracts. The contracts were entered into by the patriarch and the *balio*, the husband of the nurse. The contracts rarely mentioned the mother.

The interest of the patriarch to dominate the care of the infant helps to explain why the practice of wet nursing was a growth industry in fourteenth and more particularly fifteenth century Florence. The *ricordanze*, the daily journals in which the father recorded the details of the household indicated that families of the upper and middle class strata, and even some artisans and modest ranking families by the mid fifteenth century, participated in this system.

According to Klapisch-Zuber, whether a nurse was employed in the home or the child was sent out to live with the nurse depended upon the income of the family. It was better, but more expensive, to have the nurse in the home with the child. The advantage to having the nurse in the home was that it afforded the patriarch oversight

over her care of the infant. It also allowed the father some control that the nurse would not get pregnant while she was employed by him. The Florentines believed that pregnant milk was tainted and poisonous to the infant. They became enraged if a wet nurse withheld the fact of her pregnancy from them while they were paying her to nurse their child.[56]

There was correlation between the choice of nurse and sex of the child according to Klapisch-Zuber. From 1300 to 1530 we know of 467 infants entrusted to a wet-nurse. Roughly 23 percent of the males were given to a nurse in the home as opposed to 12 percent of the female infants. From the same sample 68.5 percent of the girls were sent to rural nurses compared to 55 percent of the male infants. Klapisch-Zuber concludes that it was easier for the Florentine family to be separated from their daughter than from their son and heir.[57]

Nonetheless, the records reveal that most of the infants were not cared for in the home. Forty-two percent of the rural nurses lived beyond the suburbs of Florence within fifteen kilometers while forty-five percent lived even further out. These numbers suggest that the need to separate the infant from the mother was significant enough that they would allow their infant to go great distances to receive their basic nurturing needs. The Florentine patriarch opted to send a newborn infant for an arduous ride into the Florentine countryside on the back of a donkey, rather than keep the child in the home to be nursed and cared for by its mother.

It is hard to ascertain what the mothers wishes were regarding whether the child was nursed by her or sent away. It would be erroneous to assume that the mother was never in agreement with the decisions regarding the infant. The

popularity, success and longevity of the use of a wet nurse implies that many women did not find the practice wholly objectionable.

Why did a family patriarch go to such considerable trouble and expense to employ a wet nurse for his children? The practical reason was that he was concerned that he have enough children to inherit and continue the lineage. Infants were fragile and the mortality rate was alarming, particularly in a century of recurring plague and declining population. Despite the possibility that sending an infant to a wet nurse might place him into greater jeopardy, the patriarch chose to do so in order to ensure his wife's constant fertility. He did not want her to nurse because it was believed that nursing hindered pregnancy.

Another explanation offered was that because the mortality of an infant was so high the parents did not want to become attached to the child. Therefore, they sent the child away to a wet nurse for the first two years when the infant was most vulnerable.[58] This argument may be attributed to some of the parents but is problematic when applied as the primary reason.

The subject of proper wetnursing went beyond concerns over the health of the child and into a moral sphere. In the texts of the moralists, it was preferable for the real mother to nurse the child. If that was not possible, then a wet-nurse who resembled the mother must be chosen. What was to be avoided at all costs was providing animal milk, cow or goat, which degraded the child and may turn him into a brute.

These men argued that the act of nursing created intimate bonds between the mother and child. It was this bond that was portrayed in the images of the Madonna

del Latte.[59] These men repeatedly warned fathers that nursing a child by anyone other than the mother was morally dangerous. They argued that the pregnant mother, followed by the nursing mother, was not a passive vessel which carried the child. Rather, her blood and her milk formed the child in her own image. Thus, the prevailing belief was that the nursing mother continued to shape the child in her own image. Therefore, the seed planted in the womb by the father continued to mature with maternal milk.

Nevertheless, the patriarch, when sending his child to a wet nurse, was acting in direct contradiction to the prevailing moralists, the medical authorities of the period, and the preachers. Klapisch-Zuber maintains that because the patriarch ignored these ideas which were prevalent in the society, then they must have been governed by much stronger values.

The importance of lineage outweighed the moral and medical advice. The children born of a couple belonged to the father and his kin. Thus, to extricate the mother from her role as nurturer to the child ensured the maturation of the virtues and values of the paternal lineage. The qualities inherent in the mother did not count. The paternal blood, transmitted in the act of generation, was superior over the milk and blood of the mother and/or nurse. This explains the absence of the mother from many decisions concerning the care of the child.[60] The father was responsible for the material and spiritual development of the child. The practice of wet nursing provides evidence of the lengths that the Florentine patriarch went to exercise control over the household. By separating the woman from her role as nurturing mother she becomes almost a superfluous figure in the household.

Although the practice of wet nursing was used by middle to upper class families, the rural and servant classes were affected as well.[61] Who were the nurses and how did they provide milk? Klapisch-Zuber claims that the practice of "milk brothers," two babies being fed at the same time, was not tolerated by the Florentine parents paying for the service. The baby sent out to the wet-nurse was to receive the undivided attention of the nurse. In order for this to be possible, the nurse had to have recently given birth and either lost her child through death, weaned it early, or given it to another wet nurse or foundling home. It is conceivable that the infants of the wet nurses were subjected to greater harm given the economic advantages of hiring the mother out to nurse another child. In the best possible scenario the fathers of the *popolo minuto* found it advantageous to send their own child to a nurse for one *fiorini* per month while they earned two *fiorini* for their wives to nurse the wealthier children of Florence.[62] However, some of the cases of abandonment and infanticide may well be attributed to the need and desire to earn money by providing services as a wet-nurse.

The Slave Trade

The increased practice of wet nursing cannot be extricated from another increase in Florentine society, the slave trade. Indeed, it can be argued that there existed a triangle comprising the increase in the practice of wet nursing, the increase in the slave trade and the increase in abandoned babies. Although there is a perceptible link between the points of this triangle, the question of how the connections relate to the numerical decline of women still remains.

It is not generally realized that one of the flourishing businesses that built Florence was the trade and commerce of eastern slaves, predominately women. Indeed, there is scant information to be found on the slave trade despite the abundance of works on Florence produced by scholars. Many years ago, Iris Origo published an article treating the slave trade in Tuscany.[63] Despite its age this article still stands as a thorough examination of this issue.

The slaves brought to Tuscany were mostly imported from the regions surrounding the Black Sea and Africa. They were predominately Tartars from Turkey, some Russians, Circassians, Greeks, Moors or Ethiopians. Every noble and merchant family owned at least two or three and some shopkeepers and notaries might own one. Indeed, it was not uncommon for a priest or nun to possess a slave.[64] Basically, owning slaves was prevalent throughout the society, not just an exotic possession of the very rich.

Origo notes that slavery in Florence was not a continuation of practices of the eleventh and twelfth century; rather, the late medieval slave trade was a new phenomenon. Slavery only returned to Italy in the mid-fourteenth century. Origo attributes this to the development of trade with the East and the devastating demographic effects of the Black Death.[65] However, Origo's argument that slaves were an economic necessity is unpersuasive since the function of a slave was domestic labor, cooking, cleaning and care of babies, not field labor. It appears that slaves were more of a luxury than an economic necessity.

There is another possible explanation that Origo did not mention. Perhaps there is a possible correlation between the increase of the practice of wet nursing and

the increase in the importation of the slaves. It might have been that the trading of slaves was restored because it proved to be a very lucrative business, rather than a need resulting from the plague.

In the *Decree of 1363* the importation of slaves from the East was sanctioned by the Priors of Florence. The Decree allowed the importation of unlimited numbers of either sex, the only limitation being that the slave had to be an infidel. Although the decree did not specify the sex of the slave the customers certainly appeared to do so. Origo describes a register of slaves which was maintained between 1366 and 1397. The register was more than likely incomplete because the majority of the names were registered in the first four years. There were 357 slaves registered of which 329 were women or girls. Of the twenty-eight males included only four of them were over sixteen. These young males were probably sons who were sold with their mothers. A young girl between the ages of ten and fifteen fetched the highest price of thirty to fifty florins whereas a male slave brought only fifteen to twenty florins.[66]

Pregnant slaves became useful as nurses for the master's children. Klapsich-Zuber argues the possibility that a good number of Florentine fathers may have abandoned the child of a slave in order to provide milk to his own child. Further, the abandoned child of the slave might well have been fathered by the household patriarch. There is also evidence that it was common practice to rent the slave *cum lacte* (with milk) to another family as a means to recoup some of the expense of maintaining the slave.[67] The correlation between statistics for abandoned children and paid wet nursing have been made in other societies and cannot be ruled out here.[68]

In addition to the aforementioned domestic duties, the slaves provided domestic services of another kind: the satisfaction of the master's sexual needs and those of his sons or even family friends. There is no doubt that substantial numbers of the abandoned babies were the products of a slave girl and her master. The mother's servile status accounted for 22 percent of the admissions to San Gallo between 1430 and 1439. The registers openly recorded the belief that having a mother who was a slave or servant was ample justification for abandoning the child.[69]

The higher number of abandoned females was related, in part, to the tendency for some patriarchs to allow an illegitimate son to remain in his household but not an illegitimate daughter. The Catasto reveals that illegitimate sons declared in the household were twice as numerous as girls.[70] The hierarchy exists, even in the case of illegitimate children of slaves, the baby girl was held in less value.

Perplexing Population Problems

The Catasto captured information on 60,000 households of 260,000 individuals comprising both the upper and lower echelons of Tuscan society.[71] When the numbers of the Catasto had been crunched and the graphs drawn the statistics revealed a perplexing imbalance in gender ratios. In the Florentine population, males significantly outnumbered females in ratios that are not within normal population averages. What happened to the females?

Demographers have found that in average populations throughout history the sex ratio is roughly 105 males to 100 females at birth. That imbalance eventually translates into women outnumbering males in most populations, because males do not usually survive childhood as well as females.[72] The Catasto of 1427 shows that

Florence's population ratio was exceptional; for every 100 women there were 110 men. Males constituted 52.4 per cent of the population. This works out to approximately 13,000 more men to women in Tuscany in 1427. From childhood to old age the male sex maintained higher numbers almost constantly with the exception of the period of adolescence and between the years of 40 to 60 when women gained a slight numerical advantage. The imbalance indicates that some conditions existed which were quite unfavorable to female survival. Furthermore, since the Catasto of 1480 produced similar results, indications are that these conditions were long lasting.

It was in infancy that the greatest gender discrepancies occurred. Up to the age of seven, girls were 16 to 17 percent less numerous than boys. This was despite a rather normal birth ratio of 104 boys to 100 girls.[73] Although the life of the infant was precarious for both the male and female child, infancy was far more dangerous for girls than for boys.

Historians have presented several arguments for the "striking absence"[74] of women in fourteenth and fifteenth century Florentine society. Individually, none of these arguments provide a sufficient explanation. Yet, when they are brought together one element, common to all of them, becomes apparent: the care given to female infants and children was less diligent. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber argue that the difference in 1427 was due to higher female infant mortality. Anthony Molho's study of a 1480 Florentine Catasto reveals a similar demographic pattern.[75] Molho's study demonstrates that the ratio of males to females was virtually the same at both ends of the century, suggesting that higher female mortality was not limited to one generation.

These figures elicited a variety of explanations by Herlihy, Klapisch-Zuber and Molho. All three of these historians explore the possibility that the skewed ratio was due to defective gathering and recording of information. For instance, in some cases the child's name can either be masculine or feminine, like "Andrea".[76] Yet, they concluded that the occurrence of faulty registration in recording the names, ages or sex of the child did not substantially change the data. They note that, while errors of this sort were found in the data, they did not occur frequently enough to explain the ratios.[77]

Another possible explanation, one related to accuracy of reporting, was the Florentine tendency to round off ages to the nearest birthday. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber maintain that Florentine men were more apt to round up female children's ages and even to exclude females from the records. Giovanni Morelli, a fourteenth century Florentine, gave some insight as to why this might be the case when he said: "There is no need here to make mention of the females, since they are very young; when they are old enough to marry, if they reach that age, then we shall mention them, if it pleases God..."[78]

The recorded instances when a child's age was rounded up were somewhat self correcting because persons raised to the higher age were replaced by those gained from the lower. This did not balance for infants under a year old. Therefore, the errors that occurred when the Florentines rounded the ages of their children can account for a portion of the skewed ratio of the infant population. However, it does not fully resolve the differences found in adolescence and adulthood.[79]

Child abandonment has been offered as another explanation for the imbalance in the population. Two Florentine hospitals, La Scala (founded 1316) and San Gallo (late thirteenth century) received foundling infants. Indeed, the numbers grew to be so great that a third establishment was set up for the exclusive purpose of taking care of the orphans; the hospital of the *Innocenti* was established in 1445. The registers of San Gallo from the years 1404 to 1413 show that 61.2 percent of the foundlings of all the ages were female.[80] As the age of the foundling decreases, the ratio of female to male increases. For example, of the infants under five 26 were male and 62 were female; at this age the girls constituted 70 per cent of the foundling population.[81] These numbers were particularly impressive if you consider that males outnumbered females in the general population.

Philip Gavitt noted that parents were more likely to abandon girls and that as admissions climbed so did the preponderance of girls. Gavitt argues that this was not due to "traditional Mediterranean misogyny" but due to immediate economic issues like the need to provide the girl with a dowry. He believes that the dowry was also the sticking point in getting girls adopted.[82] Further, the statistics from the hospital of the Innocents indicate that female admissions died at a greater rate than male admissions. Female infant mortality averaged 522 per thousand admissions, while male infant mortality was 443 per thousand admissions.

The evidence does not provide enough information to conclusively argue why baby girls died at a greater rate. Gavitt argued against Richard Trexler's hypothesis that the hospital practiced or encouraged female infanticide as being too simplistic because most of the children were sent to a wet-nurse in the countryside. The

geographical separation weakens the argument for infanticide. Gavitt maintains that many factors need to be taken into account. One possibility offered was that female infants were often abandoned in the first few days after birth whereas male infants were held for maybe a month or so because of the reluctance of the parents to abandon them.[83] That difference in time before abandonment could easily be a determinate factor between life or death of an infant.

Irregardless of the reasons, the conclusion that can be drawn is that the abandoned female infant was less likely to survive. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber have described abandonment, in general, as a "disguised or delayed infanticide." For the female infant of Florence that description was particularly relevant.[84]

Sometimes an abandoned child had instructions that it was to be cared for more carefully, or that the parents would pay for the wet-nurse. Often the infant was given a "countersign" some kind of momento or picture drawn on the note that identified it for the parents to reclaim:

> To Messer Girolamo di San Gimignano, at present superintendent of the hospital of the Innocenti in the Piazza dei Servi: (Here is) a baby who has the name Ambrogio Miniato. He is baptized and has around his neck a Pisan halfpenny as a sign so that he is recommended to you, because he is the son of a person of means, one of our Florentine citizens who will do his duty toward you. Make a note of the day he came and of his expenses, and everything will be repaid.[85]

It was more likely for a male child to have a countersign than a female child. The presence of a note or countersign indicates that there a variety of reasons why a child was abandoned, many came from great need and caused painful heartache. The reasons why a child was abandoned included the illness or death of a parent,

economic constraints, abject poverty, child of slave, child of unmarried mother and many other possibilities.

There was one conclusion that Gavitt drew that is particularly intriguing. He notes that there were frequent offers by the fathers to pay the wet-nurse directly. Therefore, it is difficult not to conclude that for some wealthy families the Innocenti acted as a referral service for wealthy families to recruit their best nurses.[86] This indicates the desperation that must have been prevalent to find a good wet-nurse for the infant. It also attests that the practice of wet-nursing was more than convenience, there was an urgent need to provide an alternative to the mother.

Despite the variety of reasons for abandonment it must be reiterated that females were abandoned in disproportionate numbers. The journals of the Florentine patriarchs often recorded the birth of a daughter less enthusiastically and sometimes expressed this disappointment clearly. The common belief was that the birth of a daughter was the result of an impure or stained conjugal act. Giovanni Morelli noted: "If you do the contrary...you will have children only with difficulty, you will have females, you will have them stunted."[87] Thus, the greater occurrence of female abandonment can, to some degree, be attributed to the perception that having a female child was tantamount to having a disfigured child.

Infanticide, the deliberate killing of an infant, is another proposed explanation to the skewed population ratios. Some historians have argued that it was a common crime and caught the attention of the church and civil authorities. However, the motivated killing of an infant is hard to prove. It was not likely to have been recorded in the *ricordanze*. It is easier to discern the rates of accidental death.

Florentines kept records of the accidental deaths that occurred when an infant was put out to a wet-nurse. The numbers reflect only those children who were nursed outside the home, but does give insight into the extent of the problem. Roughly 17.4 percent of children sent to a wet-nurse died. In 85 percent of those cases the recorded reason for death was sickness. In the remaining 15 percent the nursing parents confessed that they caused the death directly and they suffocated (*affoghata*) the child in their sleep. The nurses, and in one case the nurse's husband, were blamed for negligence. The records of the hospital of the Innocenti list instances where they believed the deaths were not accidental:

> We were told how the said girl died and how she was found dead during the night at the wet nurse's side, where she was suffocated. The wet nurse treated her very badly, and used to go out for straw in the morning and left the baby the entire day without feeding her.[88]

Yet, it seems unlikely that all these deaths were deliberately caused, since each death resulted in lost income and credibility for the wet-nurse. Further, there were many instances where the nurse asked to see the child again or even adopted the child, in the case of an abandoned child. In one case the nursing family refused eight months of pay because of the suffocation of the infant in their charge.[89] Rather than murder, many of these deaths should be seen as accidental. The incident of rolling over and smothering a baby in bed was prevalent enough that special cribs with high sides were developed and included in the infant's trousseau.[90]

It is hard to reconcile these incidents of death with the skewed ratio of males to females, with one exception. Since female children were more likely to be sent away for nursing, they may have been more likely to die in this way. However, the

problem of the skewed ratio cannot be fully explained with the argument of infanticide, deliberate or accidental. While infanticide certainly occurred, incidents would have to have been too numerous to account for the skewed ratios. There would have be stronger evidence like the instances of certain infanticide that were recorded by the registers of the Innocenti. However, the records do not show enough cases of deliberate infanticide of girl infants to account for the ratios.

Perhaps, there is not one overriding explanation and it was all of the above factors that contributed to the deviate ratios. Some of the entries in the memoirs and journals of Florentine families made it clear that the birth of a girl was a disappointment and that it was believed that a girl was the product of tainted conception. If the female infant was valued less than the male then the care provided for her may well have been less diligent. More than likely it was not deliberate infanticide but subtle neglect of the female and more care lavished on the male child that led to the disproportionate population ratios. For infants already at risk this neglect could often translate into death.

It can be determined, given the evidence of the skewed demographics, practice of wet nursing and abandonment, the re-emergence of the slave trade that there was a strong "anti-feminine tendency" in Florence.[91] Given the information explored it can be agreed that this tendency started at birth. That is why girls were left out of the records and recorded incorrectly. It was also why female children were subjected to harsher conditions in the early days of infancy and accounts for the high numbers of abandoned female infants.

The imbalance in gender ratios was the result of a multitude of reasons, some which have been explored in this study. All the possibilities indicate that the female was not held in great esteem. The loss in status for the female translated into their overall decline in numbers. The worth of the female disappeared from the hearts of the Florentine and so, it seems, did the female.

Conclusion

The legacy of art from a culture has been used by historians as a tool to gauge the prevailing attitudes of that culture, particularly in the absence of other written sources. It has been shown that there was a prevalence of the Madonna del Latte, in fourteenth century Italy. These images exalted the intimate ties between mother and child. Further, that the texts of the pedagogues and moralists placed emphasis on the care and love of a child, preferably in the hands of the mother. Given this evidence alone a historian might well arrive at the conclusion that women and children held great value in this society.

However, the opposite was the case. The evidence provided in the Catasto shows that there was a discordance in the population ratios. For a variety of reasons, the numbers of females in the population were disproportionately low. In addition, despite the propaganda of the nursing Madonna, wet nursing grew to become common practice, replacing the mother's role as prime caregiver. The trade in female slaves prospered and women of foreign origin filled the homes and sometimes the beds of their Florentine masters. By all these devices it seems that duties of motherhood were adopted by the family patriarch.

The woman, instead of being held in greater esteem, lost esteem. She was described by Klapisch-Zuber as a guest in her own culture.[92] Instead of nurturing her child herself, the child was fed by a contracted employee. To be a female, particularly an infant, seemed to be fraught with hazards. It can be concluded from the evidence that despite the rise in the attention and care to the child in general, the female infant received less care and attention in reality. So much so that the female disappeared from Florence. Some were literally sent far away to rural wet nurses but it seems almost all females, young to old, were driven from the hearts and minds of the Florentine patriarchs.

Thus, the moralists and clerics were sending a message through the image of the Madonna del Latte. It was a message that they believed needed to be addressed given the prevailing practices of Florentine family life. Their message stressed the importance of the person who suckled the child. Their contention was that one should choose a wife of the highest moral standards, she should suckle her own child and then she would impart those morals to her child.

However, the Florentine patriarch had another agenda. He believed in the strength of the male seed, hence lineage. The mother was a vessel who carried the child and did not need to have influence on the child. Her role was to produce the children, while it was the father's role to raise and influence them. Even the *Mater Omnia* could not divert him from this belief.

The proliferation of the Madonna del Latte was caused in part by societal needs. In general people needed an accessible religious figure to intervene on their behalf for salvation. The messages of mercy and charity that the Madonna came to embody

were a visual means of communication between the church and laity. The Madonna del Latte was perhaps the most condensed form of iconography available.

In Florence, the Madonna del Latte was used to send a moral message to the Florentine patriarch. For the sake of the moral growth of the child let the mother nurse him. The Florentine patriarch, on the other hand, was desperately concerned that he maintain his lineage. These patrilineal concerns overrode the moral message sent through the Madonna. The ultimate outcome was that women lost purpose, hence value. They disappeared from sight.

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[1] Elizabeth Alvida Petroff ed. *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*. Hildegard of Bingen: Liturgical Song. Trans. Barbara L. Grant. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 157.
[2] Stuart G. Hall. *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1991) 212-214.
[3] Hall, 214.
[4] William R. Levin *Studies in the Imagery of Mercy in Late Medieval Italian Art.* University of Michigan: Ph.D. 1983.442. Levin refers to G.B. Ladner. "The Gestures of Prayer in Papal Iconography of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries", in Sesto Prete, ed., *Didascaliae: Studies in Honor of Anselm M. Albareda*, New York, New York, 245-175.
[5] Levin 444.
[6] Taken from Sharon Farmer's sourcebook, 103. E. Emerton trans. The Correspondence of Gregory VII. (Columbia University Press, 1960) 11-12.
[7] Taken from Sharon Farmer's sourcebook, 103.
[8] Taken from Sharon Farmer's sourcebook, 109. Peter Abelard's, 'Sermon on the assumption of the Virgin'. trans. Penny Gold The Lady and the Virgin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 59.
[9] Farmer, 109 an eleventh century prayer. Penny Gold, 69. Emphasis added.
[10] Sister M. Therese, *I Sing of a Maiden: The Mary Book of Verse.* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1947) 44.
[11] Levin 438 quoting from: A.S.F., Cod. Magliaabecchiana 9 bis, class. XXV, no. 9:
[12] Levin, 446.
[13] Meiss Millard. *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951) 115.
[14] Therese, 65-66.
[15] Meiss 154.
[16] However, Meiss attributes the prototype to Simone Martini. He believes that there was an earlier version by Martini which is no longer in existence.
[17] Meiss, 132.
[18] Meiss, 132.
[19] Levin, 580. Augustine quoted from De Civitate Dei, Lib. IX, cap.5:
[20] Brian Tierney. The Middle Ages Vol. I: Sources of Medieval History, fifth ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc. 1992) 219-220. There is also another version of the story where the man is named as a juggler (Russell, 137).
[21] Levin, 645.

[22] Levin, 586.
[23] Levin, 586.
[24] Levin, 591.
[25] Levin, 589.
[26] Levin, 559.
[27] Levin, 583. Quoted from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo*, "In Assumptionis B.V. Mariae"
[28] Miess, 151. Mater omnium is Latin for Mother of all.
[29] Levin, 631.
[30] Meiss, 116.
[31] Levin, 647.
[32] Levin, 647.
[33] Levin, 570.
[34] Taken from Sharon Farmer's sourcebook, 154. Leon Battista Alberti. *I libri della Famiglia* .trans. Renee Watkins: The Family in Renaissance Florence (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1969) 207.
[35] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 26.
[36] David Herlihy. Medieval Households. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 88.
[37] Herlihy 92.
[38] Klapisch-Zuber, 162.
[39] Frances and Joseph Gies. *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) 276. Credited to David Herlihy. "Mapping Households", 19.
[40] Klapisch-Zuber, 214.
[41] Herlihy, 277.
[42] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 227.
[43] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 229. Taken from Giovanni Boccaccio. *Opere in versi Corbaccio. Trattatello in laude di Dante. Prose Latine. Epistole*, ed. P.G.Ricci. La Letteratura Italiana, Storia e testi, 9. Milan and Naples. 580-81.
[44] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 229.
[45] Gavitt, 23. Taken from Leon Battista Alberti. *Della Famiglia*, Translated by Renee Watkins as *The Family in Renaissance Florence* (Columbia, S.C., 1969) 50-51.
[46] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber. Quoted from Morelli, 1956, 210.
[47] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 214.
[48] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 221.
[49] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 223.
[50] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 225.
[51] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 227.
[52] Klapisch-Zuber, 113. Taken from: Alberti, Leon Battista, *I Libri della famiglia* 42,49.
[53] Klapisch-Zuber, 115. Taken from Dominici, *Regola del governo*. 131ff.
[54] Klapisch-Zuber, 115.
[55] Levin 607.
[56] Klapisch-Zuber, 160.
[57] Klapisch-Zuber, 138-139.
[58] Gavitt, 19.
[59] Klapisch-Zuber, 161. The moralists Klapisch-Zuber refers to are: Alberti, Palmieri, Rucellai, Vegio.
[60] Klapisch-Zuber, 162.
[61] Klapisch-Zuber, 137.
[62] Klapisch-Zuber, 139.
[63] Iris Origo. "The Domestic Enemy: The Eastern Slaves in Tuscany in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries" *Speculum: A Journal of Mediaeval Studies.* Vol. 30 (1955): 321-367.
[64] Origo, 321.
[65] Origo, 324.
[66] Origo, 325.
[67] Klapisch-Zuber, 140-141
[68] Klapisch-Zuber refers to the June, 1982 lectures by Peter Laslett at the College de France.

[69] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 146.
[70] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 145.
[71] David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber. *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) xxiii.
[72] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 132.
[73] Klapisch-Zuber. *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 103.
[74] Anthony Molho. *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 214.
[75] Molho, 214.
[76] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 132.
[77] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 132.
[78] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 135.
[79] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 135.
[80] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 145.
[81] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 145.
[82] Philip Gavitt. Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410-1536. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990) 210-211.
[83] Gavitt, 212-213.
[84] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 147.
[85] Gavitt, 196. This infant died soon after in the hospital. Taken from AIOF, Balie e Bambini E (XVI,5), fol 21r, 9 December 1461.
[86] Gavitt, 201-203
[87] Klapisch-Zuber, 102.
[88] Gavitt, 235. Taken from: AIOF, Balie e Bambini E (XVI,5), fol. 40r, 24 March 1461.
[89] Klapisch-Zuber, 103.
[90] Klapisch-Zuber, 104.
[91] Klapisch-Zuber, 139.
[92] Klapisch-Zuber, 139.

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