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## Hagiography as Institutional Biography: Medieval and Modern Uses of the Thirteenth-Century Vitae of Clare of Assisi

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Writing the Lives of People  
and Things, AD 500–1700

A Multi-disciplinary Future for Biography

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## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Foreword</i>	xv
Introduction	1
<i>Robert F.W. Smith and Gemma L. Watson</i>	
<b>PART I RESCUING FORGOTTEN LIVES</b>	
1 The (Truncated) Life of Alice de Solers Rufus née de Huntingfield: Medieval Hostage, Wife and Widow <i>Katherine Weikert</i>	13
2 Writing the Lives of Legal Writers: The Use of Prosopography in Medieval Legal History <i>Kitrina Bevan</i>	29
3 The Scandalous Life of a Puritan Divine: John Harmar at Winchester College, 1569–1613 <i>Robert F.W. Smith</i>	47
<b>PART II THE LIVES OF OBJECTS AND THEIR OWNERS</b>	
4 The Lives and Deaths of People and Things: Biographical Approaches to Dress in Early Anglo-Saxon England <i>Toby F. Martin</i>	67
5 Roger Machado: A Life in Objects <i>Gemma L. Watson</i>	89
6 Mary Beale (1633–1699) and her Objects of Affection <i>Helen Draper</i>	115

## Hagiography as Institutional Biography: Medieval and Modern Uses of the Thirteenth-Century *Vitae* of Clare of Assisi

Kirsty Day

When Thomas Heffernan (1988) and Patrick Geary (1994) described the attitudes of their contemporary medievalists to the use of hagiography, neither of them seems to have had in mind the approaches of scholars writing in the twentieth century on the formation of the Franciscan order of nuns.<sup>1</sup> Heffernan asserted that hagiography had 'until recently fallen through the net of scholarly research', and that it had been 'avoided by the historians because it lacks "documentary" evidential status'.<sup>2</sup> Geary directly criticised Heffernan's assessment, arguing instead that '[n]ot only have hagiographic texts received frequent, close scrutiny from medievalists for years, but they have moved from the periphery to the center of the scholarly enterprise'.<sup>3</sup>

Had Heffernan or Geary been aware of the state of scholarship on Franciscan women, the conclusions that they reached might have been quite different. The body of primary material consulted by scholars working on Franciscan nuns throughout the twentieth century was formed largely of hagiographical texts, which such scholars seemed to have embraced as a source that they have regarded as meriting "documentary" evidential status'. The use of hagiography in this particular field of scholarship thus evades Heffernan's appraisal. Geary's description is, however, no more fitting. Hagiography was used by scholars writing prior to, and contemporaneously with, Geary's survey – and is still used by scholars today – to create a historical narrative of the early formation of a

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Patrick Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). For a more recent summary of how the relationship between hagiography and historical narrative has been understood in modern historiography see Gábor Klaniczay, 'Hagiography and Historical Narrative', in *Chronicon: Medieval Narrative Sources*, ed. János M. Bak and Ivan Jurković (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 111–17.

<sup>2</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Geary, *Living with the Dead*, 10.

Franciscan 'second order' of nuns prior to 1218. This is a narrative for which we have no other evidence.<sup>4</sup> The *vitae* of Clare of Assisi (d.1253), in being treated in this way rather than according to the circumstances in which they were produced, have not received the 'close scrutiny' described by Geary. Moreover, the fact that the narratives derived from hagiographical material have become so engrained in scholarship on the Franciscan women means that hagiography does not occupy a strong position as evidence within this field by virtue of its genre. Rather, their status is derived from the fact that they have become so deeply entrenched in modern histories of the women's order, perhaps as a result of the fact that there is no other extant material that could be used to identify the origin and early development of a movement of Franciscan women.

Such histories typically begin with Clare's conversion, which took place in 1212, according, at least, to the hagiographical texts that were produced long

<sup>4</sup> Scholars that have used Franciscan hagiography in this way include: Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. Stephen Rowan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), originally published as *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen über die geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge zwischen der Ketzerei, den Bettelorden und der religiösen Frauenbewegung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert und über die geschichtlichen Grundlagen der deutschen Mystik* (Berlin: Ebering, 1935); Brenda M. Bolton, 'Mulieres Sanctae', in *Sanctity and Secularity: The Church and the World*, ed. Derek Baker, Studies in Church History 10 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 77–95; Christopher N.L. Brooke and Rosalind B. Brooke, 'St. Clare', in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker, Studies in Church History Subsidia 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) 275–87; Roberto Rusconi, 'The Spread of Women's Franciscanism in the Thirteenth Century', *Greyfriars Review* 12 (1998), 35–75, originally published as 'L'espansione del francescanesimo femminile nel secolo XIII', in *Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII: Atti del VII Convegno internazionale, Assisi, 11–13 ottobre 1979* (Assisi: Società internazionale di studi francescani, 1980), 265–313; Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, trans. Sister Frances Teresa (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), originally published as *Chiara d'Assisi* (Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1989); Maria Pia Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi and the Poor Sisters in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Jean François Godet-Calogeras, trans. Nancy Celashi and William Short (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2004), a collection of four English translations of studies published in Italian by Alberzoni between 1995 and 1998; Clara Gennaro, 'Clare, Agnes, and their Earliest Followers: From the Poor Ladies of San Damiano to the Poor Clares', in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 39–55; Joan Mueller, *The Privilege of Poverty: Clare of Assisi, Agnes of Prague, and the Struggle for a Franciscan Rule for Women* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006); Lezlie Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan Identities in Later Medieval Italy*, The Medieval Franciscans 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder: The Poor Clares between Foundation and Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

after this date. It is, however, the case that the first piece of evidence for a form of penitential activity followed by groups of women who were dedicated to poverty – and, it is important to note, who were only later collectively subsumed into an order that might be described by modern scholars as 'Franciscan' – was produced in 1218. In a letter to Cardinal Hugolino of Ostia, the future Gregory IX, Honorius III instructs the cardinal to place the houses and churches built to accommodate the 'very many virgins, and other women' who wished to live without possessions under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic See.<sup>5</sup> However, the hagiographical material on Clare's life takes precedence as evidence for the origin of the women's order. It has wielded, and wields to this day, an extraordinary power over the scholarship that aims to reconstruct the early history of the order of Franciscan nuns.

This is not to say that this is the first study to bring this to the attention of the field. Maria Pia Alberzoni has cautioned against the interpretation of the 'delicate founding period [of the women's contingent of the order] in light of later developments'.<sup>6</sup> It is, then, curious that historians of the order – Alberzoni included – have continued to use, uncritically, material produced long after this period in order to substantiate the origin of the women's order. This practice is indicative not only of the power that saintly biography still possesses in a modern scholarly context, but also of the great compulsion that is felt by scholars of monasticism to find clear and definitive origin stories for the order on which they work – clear and definitive origin stories which place a saintly founder at their roots.

It should be noted, of course, that there is nothing to prove that the origin stories illustrated in the hagiographical accounts of Clare's did not 'happen', or that they were not based on source material which has since been lost. This essay is therefore not concerned with the extent to which hagiographical representations of Clare can be employed as a "reliable" source for the early chronology of the women's component of the Franciscan order, and it will not comment on the usefulness of Clare's hagiography to the search for a "historical" or "authentic" Clare.<sup>7</sup> Rather, it aims to cultivate an awareness of some of the problems that can

<sup>5</sup> 'Litterae tuae Nobis exhibitae continebant, quod quamplures Virgines, et aliae Mulieres ... desiderant fugere pompas, et divitias huius mundi, et fabricari sibi aliqua domicilia, in quibus vivant nihil possidentes sub Coelo, exceptis Domiciliis ipsis, et construendis Oratoriis in eisdem.' *Bullarium Franciscanum Romanorum pontificum constitutiones, epistolas, ac diplomata continens tribus ordinis minorum, clarissarum et poenitentium* 1, ed. Joannis Sbaralea (Rome: Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, 1759), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Pia Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi and the Poor Sisters in the Thirteenth Century*, 29–87 (32).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Dalarun has charted the century-long quest of scholars working on Francis of Assisi's *vitae* to determine which of the *vitae* best represents the 'historical Francis', a quest known as the 'Franciscan Question'. See Jacques Dalarun, *The Misadventure of Francis*

arise when scholars write origin narratives from hagiography – origin narratives that had, in these cases, in turn been mapped by papally commissioned authors onto the saint's life for very specific purposes – into their chronologies of the nascent women's order.

In doing so, this chapter demonstrates how the authors of the *vitae* of Francis and Clare created, through their representations of Clare's life, a set of origin narratives that suited the needs of their papal commissioners, who were attempting at the time of the texts' production to carve out a uniform juridical identity for the many communities of women who desired to embrace religious poverty. Those who were responsible for shaping these women's penitential lives and finding a space for these forms of life encountered many problems in trying to do so. Using the neat narrative framework of saintly biography – and by neat, I do not mean that hagiographical narratives were not complex, but that their formulaic and episodic nature lent itself well to being shaped into clear narratives of origin – as a medium through which to create an origin story, the authors of Clare's hagiography developed a narrative that created a single point of origin for the disparate communities of women who were devoted to poverty. This was a narrative that made the development of the women's order seem more straightforward than it was. By interpreting this narrative within the contexts of its production in the thirteenth century, this chapter exposes the power that the *vitae* of saints were felt to have possessed by their thirteenth-century producers.

The two *vitae* under examination in this study are Thomas of Celano's *Life of St. Francis*, written in 1228–29, and the anonymous *vita* of Clare of Assisi, written at some point between 1253 and 1261.<sup>8</sup> These texts were produced during a time in which the papacy had asserted a monopoly over the canonisation

*of Assisi: Towards a Historical Use of the Franciscan Legends*, trans. Edward Hagman (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002). This work is a translation from its original Italian, entitled *La Malavventura di Francesco d'Assisi: per un uso storico delle leggende francescane* (Milan: Edizione Biblioteca Franciscana, 1996). Lezlie Knox has outlined the development in scholarship on Clare of a 'Clarian Question'. See Lezlie Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan Identities in Later Medieval Italy*, *The Medieval Franciscans*, 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 9–14.

<sup>8</sup> There also exists a versified *legenda* of Clare's life, which was probably produced at some point before the prose *legenda*. There are great similarities in content between the two texts, and Regis J. Armstrong has suggested that the prose *legenda* was modelled on the verse *legenda*. See Regis J. Armstrong, 'The *Legenda Versificata*: Towards an Official Biography', in *Clare of Assisi: Investigations*, ed. Mary Francis Hone, *Clare Centenary Series 7* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1993), 69–93. It is thought that the text was not papally commissioned, but was instead produced as an appeal to Alexander IV for Clare's canonisation. For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to focus on the papally commissioned texts. This is not least because a speculative discussion of the circumstances in which the verse *legenda* was produced would exceed the spatial remit of this piece.

of saints.<sup>9</sup> The papacy knew the immense power that these writings possessed, as texts that dared to capture the lives of the individuals who interceded between heaven and earth. Innocent III's pontificate is often held up as a time during which the papacy's self-awareness as the sole body responsible for all mortal souls became more acute, and it is possible to see this awareness manifested in the pope's concern over the role that saintly intercession played in human salvation.<sup>10</sup> Canon 62 of the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council – codified in 1234 in the *Decretals* of Gregory IX – enjoined that no-one was to venerate relics that had not received papal approval.<sup>11</sup> Papal procedures of investigation into sanctity became increasingly formalised as the thirteenth century progressed.

<sup>9</sup> A large body of scholarly literature exists on the development of the canonisation process and the papacy's assertion of a monopoly over canonisation during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See especially the following studies: Stephan Kuttner, 'La réserve papale du droit de canonisation', in *Revue historique française et étrangère* 17 (1938), 172–228; Eric W. Kemp, *Canonisation and Authority in the Western Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948); André Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1981), esp. 25–37; André Vauchez, 'De la bulle *Etsi frigescente* à la décrétale *Venerabili*: L'histoire du procès de canonisation de saint Maurice de Carnoët (d. 1191) d'après les registres du Vatican', in *L'écrit dans la société médiévale: diverse aspects de sa pratique du XIe au XVe siècle*, ed. Caroline Bourlet and Annie Dufour (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1991), 39–45; Michael Goodich, 'Vision, Dream and Canonisation Policy under Innocent III', in *Pope Innocent III and his World*, ed. J.C. Moore (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 151–63; Gábor Klaniczay, 'Proving Sanctity in the Canonization Processes (Saint Elizabeth and Saint Margaret of Hungary)', in *Procès de canonisation au Moyen Âge: Aspects juridiques et religieux/ Medieval Canonization Processes: Legal and Religious Aspects*, ed. Gábor Klaniczay, *Collection de l'École française de Rome* 340 (Rome: École française de Rome, 2004), 117–48; Thomas Wetzstein, *Heilige vor Gericht. Das Kanonisationserfahren im europäischen Spätmittelalter* (Köln: Böhlau, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> An equally large body of scholarship has been produced on Innocent's pontificate. See especially Michele Maccarrone, *Studi su Innocenzo III* (Padua: Antenore, 1972); Colin Morris, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050 to 1250* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 417–51; Jane E. Sayers, *Innocent III: Leader of Europe 1198–1216* (London: Longman, 1994); John C. Moore, *Pope Innocent III (1160/61–1216): To Root Up and To Plant*, *The Medieval Mediterranean* 47 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> X. 3.45.2, in Emil Friedberg, *Corpus Iuris Canonici* 2 (Graz: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1959), 650. Innocent was building on the efforts made by Alexander III to secure a papal monopoly over the veneration of saints. As Kuttner has explained, Alexander's 1170 bull *Audivimus*, in which the pope asserted that no-one was allowed to venerate a would-be saint without authorisation from the Roman Church, received greater attention from canonists during Innocent's pontificate than that of Alexander's. The bull was also codified in the *Decretals*. See X. 3.45.1, in *Corpus Iuris Canonici* 2, 650. See also Kuttner, 'La réserve papale du droit de canonisation', 172–228.

The papacy's investigation into the sanctity of Clare's life constituted the first formal inquisition into sanctity that required oral depositions from its witnesses.<sup>12</sup>

As a consequence of this increased vigilance, the *vitae* of saints as a textual genre gained a great deal of power. The power that narratives of the lives of saints were thought to possess can be felt in the decrees made in the 1260s by the general chapters of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, regarding the use and production of the *vitae* of their founders. One of the statutes from the 1260 General Chapter meeting of the Dominican order, composed by Humbert, states that 'the brothers should use the legend of St. Dominic that has been inserted in the lectionary, and [that] hereafter others should not be written'.<sup>13</sup> The lectionary was commissioned by the Dominican order in 1254 as part of the order's wider effort to make uniform the Dominican liturgy, as well as to consolidate the various different versions of the liturgy that were in circulation into one master copy.<sup>14</sup> The task of the composition of the lectionary fell to Humbert, who had also been entrusted by the order with the task of writing a new life of St Dominic, the order's founding father.<sup>15</sup> In the above statute, Humbert does not state explicitly the reasons why he was prescribing the use of his own legend of Dominic or why he was prohibiting the composition of future *legendae*. However, read in the context of the order's liturgical reform, it is most probable that his mandate was representative of a bid for uniformity; a way of eradicating the confusion caused by the multiple *vitae* that were in circulation.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps inspired by Humbert, the 1266 Franciscan General Chapter took a more drastic approach to the control of the use of the *vitae* of Francis of

<sup>12</sup> Clare's *vita* is modelled on the information provided in these depositions. The oral testimony exists only in a copy written in the fifteenth century in an Umbrian dialect; the thirteenth-century text has been lost. See P. Zeffirino Lazzeri, 'Il processo di canonizzazione di S. Chiara D'Assisi', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 13 (1920), 403–507. The bull *Gloriosus Deus*, in which Innocent IV orders the inquisition, is, however, still extant in its Latin form. See *Bullarium Franciscanum* 1, 684. On oral traditions in the canonisation process see Gábor Klaniczay, 'Speaking about Miracles: Oral Testimony and Written Record in Medieval Canonisation Trials', in *The Development of Literate Mentalities in East-Central Europe*, ed. Anna Adamska and Marco Mostert, Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 365–95.

<sup>13</sup> 'Mandat Magister, quod fratres utantur legenda beati Dominici que inserta est in lectionario et alie deinceps non scribantur'. *Acta Capitolorum Generalium Ordinis Praedicatorum*, 1 (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta Sacrae Conventae De Propaganda Fidae, 1898), 105.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Brett, *Humbert of Romans: His Life and Views of Thirteenth-Century Society* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 80–102 (84).

<sup>15</sup> Brett, *Humbert of Romans*, 84, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Brett, *Humbert of Romans*, 80–102 (81). See also Dominic Monti, *St. Bonaventure's Writings Concerning the Franciscan Order*, Works of Saint Bonaventure 5 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1994), 203, n. 15.

Assisi, the order's founder. In 1263, Bonaventure completed his *Legenda Maior* of Francis of Assisi. At the beginning of the text he claims that he had been instructed to write the legend by the General Chapter, although he does not state at which meeting of the Chapter that the *Legenda* was commissioned, or the reason why it had been commissioned.<sup>17</sup> The relevant statute of the 1266 Chapter is far more explicit:

The general chapter likewise commands, under obedience, that all the legends of St. Francis hitherto composed shall be destroyed, and that the brothers should make every effort to remove any copies that may be found outside the Order, since the new legend written by the general minister has been compiled from what he himself gathered from the accounts of those who had almost constantly accompanied St. Francis and thus had certain knowledge of each and every thing; whatever it contains, therefore, has been carefully proven.<sup>18</sup>

The extent to which the existing texts were destroyed is mostly unknown, although we do know that at least some copies of existing *legendae* of Francis such as that of Thomas of Celano survived. What is more interesting is the reason why the Chapter felt that they needed to take such final action.<sup>19</sup> The implication behind the statement that the contents of the 'new legend' had been 'carefully proven', as the accounts on which it was based were given by companions of Francis, is that the other texts had not been so 'carefully proven'. This statute is then evidence of the influence that the lives of the saints – or, at least, the life of a saint who had such a profound impact on the way that the Franciscan order constructed their identity – had acquired during the thirteenth century: their power was such that it necessitated the elimination of any versions that did not reflect the needs of the order at that time.

<sup>17</sup> 'Ad huius tam venerabilis viri vitam omni imitatione dignissimam describendam indignum et insufficientem me sentiens, id nullatenus attentassem, nisi me fratrum fervens incitasset affectus, generalis quoque Capituli concursus induxisset instantia'. *Analecta Franciscana* 10 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1941), 558. See also Monti, *St. Bonaventure's Writings*, 137.

<sup>18</sup> 'Item precipit generale capitulum per obedientiam, quod omnes legende de beato Francisco olim facte deleantur, et ubi extra ordinem inveniri poterunt, ipsas fratres studeant amovere, cum illa legenda, que facta est per generalem ministrum, fuerit compilata prout ipse habuit ab ore eorum, qui cum b. Francisco quasi semper fuerunt et cuncta certitudinaliter sciverint et probata ibi sint posita diligenter'. *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 7 (Ad Claras Aquas: Quaracchi, 1914), 678. For the English translation see Monti, *St. Bonaventure's Writings*, 202–3.

<sup>19</sup> Although it is important to note that, unlike the Dominican General Chapter, this statute does not prevent the composition of future *vitae*.

The above examples are taken from contexts that existed – in theory at least – outside of the remit of the papacy's power. It should also be noted that, by the time that the papacy began to exert a monopoly over canonisation, saintly biography had long been a powerful medium through which to communicate an order's origin story.<sup>20</sup> However, via a detailed analysis of the *vitae* of Francis and Clare, it is possible to draw out papal influences over the production of these texts, and to chart how the papacy took a long-existing tradition and made it more powerful under their aegis.

On 19 July 1228, Gregory IX canonised Francis of Assisi.<sup>21</sup> At around this time, the pope commissioned Thomas of Celano, a Franciscan friar, to write the life story of the Umbrian saint. Celano's *legenda*, the *Life of St. Francis* of Assisi, was published in 1229. One of the first chapters of Celano's text narrates the origin of 'the order of poor ladies and holy virgins', and Celano's Francis plays a central role in this story as the very cause of the order's inception.<sup>22</sup> According to Celano, Francis's first major act after his conversion was to reconstruct the church of San Damiano of Assisi, which would become home to the Assisi community of Franciscan nuns. The reconstruction of a church gained symbolic significance in texts produced during the medieval period as a motif of reform. In the context of this story, it also serves to draw a connection between Francis and the 'order of poor ladies', by portraying Francis as the order's instigator.

Celano extends his construction metaphor into the following passage, in which he introduces Clare of Assisi and describes Francis's role in her conversion:

<sup>20</sup> On the construction of origin narratives by the Cistercians in England, for instance, see Elizabeth Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Historical Writing in England, 1150–1220*, Medieval Church Studies 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002). See also Albrecht Diem's study of gender and monastic origins in the late antique and early medieval periods: 'The Gender of the Religious: Wo/Men and the Invention of Monasticism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 432–46.

<sup>21</sup> For the bull of canonisation, *Mira circa nos*, see *Bullarium Franciscanum* 1, 42–5.

<sup>22</sup> 'Primum itaque opus quod beatus Franciscus aggreditur, liberatione sui de manu carnalis patris obtenta, domum construit Deo, illamque non de novo facere tentat, sed veterem reparat, vetustam resarcit; non fundamentum evellit, sed super illud aedificat, praerogativam, licet ignorans, semper reservans Christo; fundamentum enim aliud nemo potest ponere, praeter id quod positum est, quod est Christus Iesus. Cumque ad locum in quo, sicut dictum est, ecclesia Sancti Damiani antiquitus constructa fuerat, reversus foret, gratia ipsum Altissimi comitante, in brevi eam tempore studiosus reparavit. Hic est locus ille beatus et sanctus, in quo gloriosa religio et excellentissimus Ordo Pauperum Dominarum et sanctarum virginum, a conversione beati Francisci fere sex annorum spatio iam elapso, per eundem beatum virum felix exordium sumpsit ...'. *Analecta Franciscana* 10, 16–17.

This is the place ... in which the Lady Clare, born in the city of Assisi, the most precious and strongest stone of the whole structure, stands as the foundation for all the other stones. For when after the beginning of the Order of Brothers, the said lady was converted to God, having been admonished by the holy man, she lived for the benefit of many and as an example to countless others ... A noble structure of precious pearls arose above this woman, whose praise comes not from men but from God.<sup>23</sup>

Using Clare as a model for the other women of the 'Order of Poor Ladies' instead of San Damiano in this instance, Celano again places Francis at the origin of the women's order by depicting him as the cause for Clare's conversion. As San Damiano is the first institution of the 'Order of Poor Ladies', Clare is the first 'poor lady'. The order, via San Damiano and Clare, derives its spiritual authority from Francis.

When Celano's text is read within the context in which it was produced, the papal agenda behind Celano's use of metaphor in relation to Clare's life becomes apparent. As Alberzoni was the first to make clear, the 1220s were a period during which the papacy was faced with the difficult task of creating a uniform religious identity for the many groups of women in northern Italy who wished to follow a religious vocation based on the relinquishment of the ownership of possessions, and ensuring that these women received adequate pastoral care from male religious.<sup>24</sup> There are many documents extant from the 1220s – produced both by the papacy and by more localised ecclesiastical authorities – that deal with the regulation of these women's lives. There is a certain degree of consistency across these documents in the terminology used to describe the communities of women, but there are also some telling discrepancies.

The early years of Gregory IX's pontificate witnessed a number of efforts to smooth over these inconsistencies. In 1228, Cardinal Raynaldus of Jenne – the future Pope Alexander IV – issued a document addressed to the 'abbesses and communities' of 24 'poor monasteries', all of which are listed in the *salutatio* of

<sup>23</sup> 'Hic est locus ... in quo domina Clara, civitate Assisii oriunda, lapis pretiosissimus atque fortissimus ceterorum superpositorum lapidum exstitit fundamentum. Nam, cum post initiationem ordinis fratrum, dicta domina sancti viri monitis ad Deum conversa fuisset, multis existit ad profectum et innumeris ad exemplum ... Super hanc quoque pretiosissimarum margaritarum nobilis structura surrexit, quarum laus non ex hominibus sed ex Deo est'. *Analecta Franciscana* 10, 17. My translation is based on the English translation of Celano's *Life of Saint Francis* in *Francis of Assisi Early Documents: The Saint*, ed. and trans. Regis J. Armstrong et al. (New York, NY: New City Press, 1999), 197.

<sup>24</sup> Alberzoni, 'Clare and the Papacy', 29–87.

the letter.<sup>25</sup> It is significant that these communities are grouped together as 'poor monasteries'. Prior to this letter, a group designation – however vague – had not been given to the religious vocation of these communities. Previously, different communities in different instances were referred to as 'poor nuns', 'poor enclosed nuns', 'poor enclosed', and 'poor ladies of the valley of Spoleto or Tuscany'.<sup>26</sup> Some of these communities were given a form of religious life drawn up by Gregory, in his former life as Cardinal Hugolino, and others were given a set of constitutions known as the 'constitutions of San Damiano'.<sup>27</sup> The papacy had also attempted to secure the care of the women from the Friars Minor, to which end Gregory IX issued the bull *Quoties cordis* in 1227. The bull committed the care of all *pauperes moniales reclusae* to the Friars Minor.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to note, here, that there is no evidence to suggest that any of the friars were opposed to looking after women at this time. There is a tendency in scholarship on the religious orders, particularly in scholarship which focuses on the women's components of these orders, to assume that male religious were always opposed to looking after the women, and that the negotiation for their care was a struggle across these orders in their entirety throughout time.<sup>29</sup> This

<sup>25</sup> 'Matribus, sororibus et filiabus carissimis ancillis Christi Sponsi, Filii Dei, abbatissis ac conventibus pauperum monasteriorum sancti Damiano de Assisio, Beatae Mariae Vallisgloriae, de Perusio, de Fulgineo, de Florentia, de Luca, de Senis, de Aretio, de Burgo, de Aquaviva, de Narnio, de Civitate Castelli, de Tuderto, de Sancta Seraphia de Terdona, de Faventia, de Mediolano, de Padua, de Tridento, de Verona, de Urbeveteri, de Eugubio, Sancti Pauli I[n]terampnen., Sancti Pauli Spoletan. et de Cortona, Rainaldus miseratione divina sancti Eustachii diaconus cardinalis, Domini Papae Camerarius, salutem et Sponsi regale cellarium introduci'. *Escritos de Santa Clara y Documentos Complementarios*, ed. and trans. Ignacio Omaechevarría (Madrid: Editorial Biblioteca Autores Cristianos, 2004), 365.

<sup>26</sup> The latter name first appears in the register of Cardinal Hugolino's 1221 legation, as part of a formula for the construction of a monastery '... in quo virgines Deo dicatae et ancille Christi in paupertate Domino famulentur'. Guido Levi (ed.), *Registri dei cardinali Ugolino d'Ostia e Ottaviano degli Ubaldini* (Rome: Forzani, 1890), 153.

<sup>27</sup> *Bullarium Franciscanum* 1, 36.

<sup>28</sup> 'Propter quod attendentes, Religionem Fratrum Minorum gratam Deo inter alias, et acceptam, Tibi, et successoribus tuis curam committimus Monialium praedictarum in virtute obedientiae districtae praecipiendo mandantes, quatenus de illis tamquam de ovibus custodiae vestrae committis curam, et sollicitudinem habeatis'. *Bullarium Franciscanum* 1, 36–7.

<sup>29</sup> This is one of the unfortunate legacies of Herbert Grundmann's 'incorporation' paradigm. Although it should be noted that Grundmann was one of the first scholars to argue for the importance of women's agency in the development of female religious life, the idea that women were incorporated by the papacy into already present and fully formed male religious orders – in part in order to ensure that they were cared for spiritually – takes away a certain degree of agency from the female religious, and still forms a large part of how scholars have perceived the women's components of the religious orders. See Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*.

has often resulted in the depiction of female religious by scholars as a perennial inconvenience to their orders, rather than as important constituents of these orders. Constance Hoffman Berman has criticised Cistercian scholarship for considering Cistercian women's houses as having acquired 'Cistercian' status only when the male component of the order began to regulate the administration of female houses in the early thirteenth century.<sup>30</sup> Berman demonstrates convincingly that these regulations were not the first put in place by the Cistercians to deal with women at all, but the first to originate from a recently 'centralised' Cistercian government, the General Chapter, which had only begun to meet on a regular basis since the 1170s.<sup>31</sup> She argued that if a Cistercian subject can be identified as such only when the General Chapter began to regulate them, then it is not possible to speak of male Cistercians before this time either. Aside from the fact that, as Berman argues, there is evidence for both male and female Cistercians from the start of the twelfth century, situating the women's origins in a set of decrees that regulated against their inclusion implies wrongly that they were a nuisance to the order in its entirety from the very start of their existence. Similarly to the Cistercians, there is no evidence in Franciscan sources produced prior to *Quoties cordis* that would suggest that the friars were opposed to the idea of administering pastoral care to the nuns. Even in later sources, aside from one concerted effort made by Crescentius of Jesi, the Franciscan Minister General at that time, to release the friars from the care of the women, complaints made by friars against their obligation to the *cura monialium* – the care of the nuns – were isolated. However, whilst there is no reason to believe that the *cura monialium* caused tension between the male and female contingents of the Franciscan order prior to *Quoties cordis*, it is also the case that there is nothing to suggest that Gregory had built his decree upon any form of historical or canonical basis.

Celano's origin narrative might then be read as an attempt to create such a basis and to give greater definition to the women's identity. His portrayal of the relationship between Francis and Clare creates a very specific type of symbolic link between the order of friars and the order of nuns. The order in which he places the events of Clare's conversion and the subsequent formation of the women's order serves to posit the establishment of the women's order as a phenomenon that was secondary to the formation of the men's. Clare's conversion – and that

<sup>30</sup> Constance Hoffman Berman, 'Were there Twelfth-Century Cistercian Nuns?', in *Medieval Religion: New Approaches*, ed. Constance Hoffman Berman (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2005), 217–47. For scholarship that argues against the existence of Cistercian nuns in the twelfth century, see Sally Thompson, 'The Problem of Cistercian Nuns in the Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries', in *Studies in Church History Subsidia 1: Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 227–52; and Brenda Bolton, *The Medieval Reformation* (London: Holmes and Meier, 1983), 89.

<sup>31</sup> Berman, 'Were there Twelfth-Century Cistercian Nuns?', 35.

of the other women who follow her – occurs ‘after the beginning of the order of brothers’. Albrecht Diem, writing on the relationships between gender and the development of monasticisms in the late antique and early medieval periods, has pointed out the tradition in monasticism of the creation of a ‘little sister’ who would follow in the footsteps of the male monastic founder.<sup>32</sup> These ‘big brothers’, he argues, were usually depicted as having been tasked with adapting the religious life that they had created to fit within the limitations that the female gender posed to the ability of the ‘little sisters’ to follow the same religious life as that of their male counterparts, such as enclosure.<sup>33</sup> Diem’s paradigm refers predominantly to – what purported to be – ‘real-life’ big brother/little sister relationships, such as that of Pachomius (d. 346) and Maria, and the time period that he discusses is much earlier than that of Francis and Clare. Moreover, Francis is not represented in hagiography as having shaped the San Damiano community, but solely as the community’s instigator. Yet Celano’s narrative still provides evidence that the big brother/little sister motif continued into thirteenth-century texts concerned with the formation of monastic identity. Even if Clare was not portrayed as Francis’s ‘little sister’, she and her sisters occupy in Celano’s *Life* the same position as the ‘little sisters’ of early monastic tradition: they were younger, their lives were more restricted, and they had less agency than their brothers. To borrow a phrase from Diem, the female institutions are portrayed by Celano as having grown ‘like ribs from a male monastic backbone’.<sup>34</sup>

Celano’s positioning of Clare and her followers in the ‘little sister’ role, combined with his placement of Francis at the origin of the women’s order, functioned predominantly as a means of provoking admiration for Francis amongst the readership of the *vita* by depicting Francis as having fulfilled one of the traditional roles of the male founder. For the papal commissioner of the *vita*, however, this part of Celano’s text served two specific purposes. By connecting the houses of poor women who did not share a uniform juridical identity with Francis’s order of brothers – which had received formal approval as an order with a rule in 1223 – Celano strengthened the identity of the women as one that was uniform and papally approved. The relationship between Francis and Clare also creates a myth of a shared spiritual inspiration between the two orders, fabricating a sense of closeness that would have given the papacy a base from which to negotiate the friars’ care of the women.

Nearly three decades passed between the dissemination of Celano’s origin narrative and the canonisation of Clare in 1255. Clare died in 1253. Around 1231, Gregory IX had begun to refer to communities that had previously been given vague designations such as ‘poor enclosed nuns’ or ‘poor ladies’ as being

<sup>32</sup> Diem, ‘The Gender of the Religious’, 435–6.

<sup>33</sup> Diem, ‘The Gender of the Religious’, 435.

<sup>34</sup> Diem, ‘The Gender of the Religious’, 435.

of the ‘Order of San Damiano’.<sup>35</sup> A move that was quite possibly influenced by the Monticelli community’s desire to follow the same form of life as that of San Damiano, it gave the poor women’s communities a collective identity which implied a degree of juridical uniformity, upon which Innocent IV built in 1247 when he issued a form of life ‘to all the abbesses and enclosed nuns of the Order of San Damiano’.<sup>36</sup> It is important to note, however, that the papacy was only able to encourage uniformity within the order; this uniformity could not be fully enforced by them. In the 1240s and early 1250s, the papacy’s endeavours to inspire consistency across the women’s designations and forms of life, as well as their efforts to secure the *cura monialium* from the Franciscan friars, would be met with challenges. Throughout the 1240s, the papacy issued a number of decrees which exhorted bishops across Latin Christendom to threaten with excommunication groups of unenclosed female religious who claimed falsely to be of the Order of San Damiano.<sup>37</sup> In 1245 the Minister General of the Friars Minor, Crescentius of Jesi, petitioned the papacy to release the friars from their responsibilities towards the women.<sup>38</sup> In 1253, a few days before Clare’s death, Innocent IV approved a form of life that Clare had composed herself with papal support, but not all houses across the order would adopt this form of life.<sup>39</sup>

The death and subsequent canonisation of Clare gave the papacy an opportunity to create a stronger link between the friars and the communities of the Order of San Damiano, and to develop Clare’s image as an exemplar and a reference point around which the identities of other communities of poor women could be shaped. Alexander IV canonised Clare in 1255, and the prose *legenda* of Clare’s life tells us that it was Alexander who commissioned the text.<sup>40</sup> Most

<sup>35</sup> The first instance in which Gregory uses such a formulation can be found in a 1231 letter addressed to the community of Faenza. See Francesco Lanzoni, ‘Le antiche carte del S. Chiara in Faenza’, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 5 (1912), 261–76 (270).

<sup>36</sup> ‘Dilectis in Christo filiabus universis abbatissis et monialibus inclusis Ordinis Sancti Damiani’. *Escritos*, 242. By this point in time, the order had spread far beyond Italy.

<sup>37</sup> The first letter in which this type of decree was made was Gregory IX’s 1241 ‘Ad audientiam nostram’, *Bullarium Franciscanum* 1, 290. It was reissued by Innocent IV in 1246, 1250 and 1251. For more information on these ‘unlicensed’ women’s movements see Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi*, 37–8.

<sup>38</sup> See Benvenuto Bughetti, ‘Acta Officialia de Regimine Clarissarum durante saec. XIV’, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 13 (1920), 90.

<sup>39</sup> For the text of Clare’s form of life, see *Escritos*, 271–94.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Suscitavit propterea pius Deus virginem venerabilem Claram, atque in ea clarissimam feminis lucernam accendit; quam et tu, Papa beatissime, super candelabrum ponens, ut luceat omnibus, qui in domo sunt, virtute cogente signorum, Sanctorum catalogo adscripsisti ... Sane placuit dominationi vestrae meae parvitati iniungere, ut, recensitis actibus sanctae Clarae, legendam eius formarem’. *Escritos*, p. 133. For the bull of canonisation, *Clara Claris Praeclara*, see *Fontes Franciscani*, ed. Erico Menestò et al. (Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 1995), 2331–7.

of the scholarship on the text estimates that the *legenda* was released between 1255 and 1256 to support Alexander's canonisation of Clare, although it could have been published at any point during Alexander's pontificate (1254–1261).<sup>41</sup>

The first few chapters of the text function in part as an origin narrative for the women's order. The author of the *legenda* describes in detail the relationship between Clare and Francis, Clare's conversion, and how Clare inspired countless other women to convert to religious life. In the text, Clare flees her family home in Assisi on Palm Sunday, after having been inspired by the preaching of Francis to embrace a religious vocation based on absolute poverty. Francis tonsures Clare himself, and then takes her to two monasteries, before finally settling on the church of San Damiano. The text mentions, unsurprisingly perhaps, that it was Francis who rebuilt the church.<sup>42</sup> After placing Clare in San Damiano, the author describes how her reputation spread quickly throughout Christendom, and how she inspired 'virgins', 'married women', 'noble and illustrious women' to follow her example.<sup>43</sup> The text also employs Isaiah 54:1 by way of positing Clare as the mother of the order of nuns: 'Many are the children of the barren one, more than her who has a husband'.<sup>44</sup>

The story of Clare's conversion and of the origin of the women's order in the prose *legenda* of Clare seems to serve a similar political purpose as Celano's origin narrative in the *Life of St. Francis*. Again, the nuns of the women's order derive their spiritual authority from Francis, via Clare. Francis's spirituality is

<sup>41</sup> Regis J. Armstrong has outlined the debate over the date on which the *Legenda Sanctae Clarae* was composed, within the context of his discussion of the authorship of the text. While Armstrong settles on 1255 as the date on which the text was composed, Chiara Augusta Lainati has estimated that it was commissioned by Alexander at some point between 1255 and 1256, and a Dutch edition of the text which estimates that it was composed at some point between the canonisation of Clare and Alexander's death in 1261. See, in particular, Armstrong, 'The *Legenda Versificata*' 78 and Regis J. Armstrong, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (New York: New City Press, 2006), 272–5. See also Chiara Augusta Lainati, 'Scritti e Fonti Biografiche di Chiara d'Assisi', *Fonti Francescane* 4 (Assisi: Movimento Francescano, 1977), and *Clara van Assisi: Geschriften, Leven, Documenten*, ed. Angela Holleboom et al. (Haarlem: Gottmer, 1984).

<sup>42</sup> 'Haec est illa ecclesia, in cuius reparatione Franciscus miro desudavit studio, cuiusque sacerdoti pecuniam obtulerat pro opere reparando. Haec est in qua, dum Franciscus oraret, vox ad eum de ligno crucis dilapsa insonuit: "Francisce, vade, repara domum meam quae, ut cernis, tota destruitur." In huius locelli ergastulo, pro caelestis amore Sponsi, virgo se Clara conclusit'. *Escritos*, 142–3.

<sup>43</sup> 'Festinant virgines eius exemplo Christo servare quod sunt; maritatae castius agere satagunt; nobiles et illustres, amplius contemptis palatiis, arcta sibi monasteria construunt, atque pro Christo in cinere et cilicio vivere magnam gloriam ducunt'. *Escritos*, 144.

<sup>44</sup> 'Tanta haec salutis germina virgo Clara suis parturiebat exemplis, ut in ea videretur impleri propheticum illud: Multi filii desertae magis quam eius quae habet virum'. *Escritos*, 144.

once again portrayed as an authoritative unifying concept. The connection between Clare and Francis undoubtedly served to reinforce the ideological basis, and to provide a model, for the friars' care of the women.

A bull of Urban IV's, issued in 1263, builds on Clare's recently acquired sainthood in order to organise the communities of women associated with the Order of San Damiano around a central figure. The bull, entitled *Beata Clara*, orders that the various groups of female religious who had previously been referred to as 'Sisters, other times Ladies, often [as] nuns, sometimes as the Poor Enclosed of the Order of San Damiano' should be referred to henceforth as the 'Order of St Clare', and follow one rule, which Urban outlines within the bull.<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to tell where the original impetus for this reorganisation stemmed from – whether the papacy, the nuns themselves, local ecclesiastical authorities, or the friars – and his ruling was undoubtedly adapted subsequently by individual female communities to accommodate their own distinct circumstances. What is interesting about this bull, however, is the myth of institutional uniformity that the invocation of Clare was intended to relay to its reader. Although this uniformity reflected only a juridical reality that would continue to be tested, the way in which the bull capitalises on the creation of the new saint lends an important insight into the way in which the saint was shaped into and employed as a unifying concept, and used also to denote a single point of origin for the female contingent of the Franciscan order.

Although the main goal of the hagiographer was to venerate their subject, an examination of the ways in which these authors used Clare's life to create a history of the women's order that would serve the needs of their papal commissioners provides a fascinating insight into the textual power and use of the lives of saints in the thirteenth century. The neat narrative that the origin stories imposed onto the history of the women's order were intended to have worked to support papal efforts to secure the friars' pastoral care of the women, and to encourage uniformity within the women's contingent of the order, at least on a juridical level. Yet the majority of modern scholars who have noted these differences have not recognised the papal agenda behind the origin stories, and instead they reproduce them in their studies as early narrative histories of the women's order.<sup>46</sup> The portrayal by Celano and the author of Clare's *vita* of

<sup>45</sup> 'In hoc autem Ordine, vos et alias ipsum profientes sub nominationum varietate, interdum Sorores, quandoque Dominas, plerumque Moniales, nonnumquam Pauperes Inclusas Ordinis Sancti Damiani ... Nos itaque ... decrevimus *Ordinem Sanctae Clarae*, uniformiter nominandum ...' *Escritos*, 334–5.

<sup>46</sup> The exception to this is Alberzoni, who, when discussing Celano's *Life of Francis* does note the papal agenda behind the women's origin story. She refers in particular to the passage following Celano's description of Clare, in which Celano states that the women received their 'wondrous life and their renowned practices from the Lord Pope Gregory'. She reads the passage, however, as a papal attempt to institutionalise the women away from Francis's

the women's order as a secondary phenomenon is, consequently, also replicated. Given the complete absence of other evidence that would point to the origin of the women's component of the order, it is perhaps not surprising that the origin stories in these texts have been subsumed into modern narratives of the order in its nascent years. The reason that this is problematic is not because the events that they describe did not happen – there is no reason to suggest that Francis did not restore San Damiano or that he did not inspire Clare directly to embrace her vocation – but because their presentation of these events is so heavily endowed with symbolism and is governed predominantly by his use of extended metaphor. However, when scholars use this narrative as evidence for the order's origins without considering the hagiographical authors' use of symbolism, or the context in which the texts were produced, the women are made to appear in modern scholarly narratives as the copy derived from the male original. Unfortunately, the widespread endorsement in the field of the 'male monastic backbone' myth has resulted in a set of histories of the Franciscan order that perpetuate the homogeneous, androcentric, and artificial idea of an ideal Franciscan identity. As it was impossible for the women to perform their spiritual devotion in the same way as the men did, due to the increasing emphasis that was placed by the papacy on the enclosure of female religious, the women's religious life could never constitute an exact reproduction of the men's. Instead of recognising how a set of ideals that were shared by men and women were taken up and shaped by different types of Franciscan community – gendered, socio-economic, geographical – modern scholars have instead chosen to measure women's Franciscan status against this androcentric ideal, which causes the female organisations within the order to appear as a lesser, 'diluted' form of a male Franciscan order.

This idea is perpetuated in particular by scholarly narratives which use the hagiographical origin stories from Clare's *vitae* to argue that Clare and the San Damiano community lived a 'pure' Franciscan life before the papacy institutionalised the women away from Francis's ideals of poverty, either by forcing enclosure on the women and/or by forcing the women to accept property.<sup>47</sup> This understanding has led to the unfruitful scholarly debate over whether Clare or the papacy took the greatest responsibility for the spread of the

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early ideal. Alberzoni, *Clare and the Poor Sisters*, 102–4. I discuss below the problems with this type of interpretation. Joan Mueller also notes this passage of Celano, but does not interpret it as evidence of a papal agenda: Mueller, *The Privilege of Poverty*, 34.

<sup>47</sup> In addition to the examples that I provide below, Lezlie Knox and Roest also make this argument. See Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi*, 31–3; and Roest, *Order and Disorder*, pp. 39–41. See also Joan Mueller, 'Female Mendicancy: A Failed Experiment? The Case of Saint Clare of Assisi', in *The Origin, Development, and Refinement of Medieval Religious Mendicancies* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 59–82.

Franciscan women's order in the thirteenth century.<sup>48</sup> Alberzoni and Roberto Rusconi, for instance, have both argued that Clare should not be seen as the founder of the women's order because Clare saw her community as unique in its connection to the primitive male order and its adherence to absolute poverty.<sup>49</sup> The other women's communities were formed by the papacy in response to the growing number of women who desired to live without possessions as a form of penitential life, but were not linked to Clare – and were therefore not linked to Francis – from the outset and so did not share the 'organic' Franciscan status of Clare and her community.<sup>50</sup>

Alberzoni's reading is particularly interesting because, as stated earlier in this chapter, she cautions against the weaving of later narratives into the chronology of the order in its nascent years. She also argues that the post-1218 evidence to which we have access suggests that the women's institutions dedicated to poverty did not necessarily grow as neat branches from San Damiano, as the hagiography suggests.<sup>51</sup> However, rather than using this to argue in turn that this leaves open the possibility that the women developed their own versions of a life dedicated to poverty without the direct influence of a 'big brother' figure, she instead uses the earliest part of the foundation myth – the description of Clare and Francis's early relationship and the foundation of San Damiano – to support her assertion that only San Damiano can be seen as a direct branch of the male Franciscan order, and that Clare saw herself and her community as separate from all of the other houses of women who were dedicated to poverty.<sup>52</sup> Clare was the first female branch of the otherwise male Franciscan order, but she was not the founding figure that her hagiography makes her out to be. So whilst Alberzoni rejects the latter half of the narrative – that the women's houses were the daughters of San Damiano – she still ascribes to the former.

Other scholars, most recently Joan Mueller, have used similar evidence to argue that Clare played an active role in shaping the religious life of the women's Franciscan order by encouraging other Franciscan women, such as Agnes of Bohemia, to adhere to Francis's original ideals.<sup>53</sup> Where Mueller's argument differs from Alberzoni's is that whilst Mueller's papacy is still an institution determined on taking away Clare's Franciscan identity, the fight made by

<sup>48</sup> Knox discusses this tradition in scholarship in Lezlie Knox, 'Clare of Assisi: Foundress of an Order?', *Spirit and Life* 11 (2004), 11–29.

<sup>49</sup> Rusconi, 'The Spread of Women's Franciscanism', 35–56; Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi and the Poor Sisters*, 29–64. See also Anna Benvenuti Papi, 'La fortuna del movimento damianita in Italia (saec XIII): propositi per un censimento da fare', in *Chiara d'Assisi: Atti del XX Convegno* (Assisi: Società internazionale di studi francescani), 59–106.

<sup>50</sup> See especially Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi and the Poor Sisters*, 44–5.

<sup>51</sup> Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi and the Poor Sisters*, 29–64.

<sup>52</sup> Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi and the Poor Sisters*, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Mueller, *The Privilege of Poverty*.

Mueller's Clare for the ability to live according to Francis's ideal of absolute poverty was one made for the entire order. In doing so she becomes a sort-of figurehead for the order, but in her own right rather than as a figure that was shaped by the papacy into a founder.

Both of these readings of the source material are problematic. As stated before, this chapter is not concerned with questions of source 'reliability': Clare and Francis may have been in a spiritual relationship, and Clare might have drawn her inspiration directly and wholly from Francis. However, there is simply no source material produced prior to Celano's *Life* that would point to a relationship between Francis and Clare. There is very little evidence for the San Damiano community prior to this date, and the available evidence only tells us that the community existed – it tells us nothing about the form of life to which the community was required to adhere.<sup>54</sup> We certainly do not have any evidence for what Clare might have been thinking at this point. Alberzoni bases her analysis of Clare's mentality on a promise allegedly made by Francis to the women of San Damiano that his brothers would always care for them.<sup>55</sup> The evidence for this promise is found in the Rule that Clare wrote for San Damiano, which was promulgated by Innocent IV in 1253, 25 years after the events of 1228.<sup>56</sup> Clare's Rule does not provide any indication as to when Francis gave her this promise. It states that Francis included it within a written form of life given to the women, but there is no evidence for this form of life produced within Francis's lifetime. Its usefulness as evidence for the early years of the order is therefore extremely limited, especially when used as evidence for Clare's mindset at this given point in time.

It is also important to note that these modern narratives tend to limit Clare's agency and diminish the importance of the communities of women that were formed outside of San Damiano to our understanding of the Franciscan order. If, for the sake of argument, there was evidence to support the idea that San Damiano was an offshoot of the male order, the idea put forward by both sets of scholarly discourse that Clare is motivated by a need to conform to the norms of the Franciscan men – the "real" Franciscans – rather than adapt the ideals of the early Franciscan order to a form of religious life for women is still

<sup>54</sup> The earliest mention of the San Damiano community is a bull issued by Honorius III on 9 December 1219, to the nuns of the Monastery of Santa Maria of the Holy Sepulchre in Monticelli, who followed 'the regular observances of the Ladies of Santa Maria of San Damiano at Assisi'. *Bullarium Franciscanum* 1, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Alberzoni, 'Clare and the Papacy', 44.

<sup>56</sup> According to Clare's Rule, Francis's promise reads thus: 'Quia divina inspiratione fecistis vos filias et ancillas altissimi summi Regis Patris caelestis, et Spiritui Sancto vos disponatis eligendo vivere secundum perfectionem sancti Evangelii, volo et promitto per me et fratres meos semper habere de vobis tamquam de ipsis curam diligentem et sollicitudinem specialem'. *Escritos de Santa Clara*, 283.

a troublesome one. The Franciscan status of the women's communities outside of San Damiano is then assessed by scholars according to how far the forms of life that they followed were similar to male forms of life, and how far they were linked to the primitive male Franciscan order. This reading serves not only to limit Clare's agency and posit the other women's communities as having been somehow less Franciscan, it also perpetuates the erroneous idea that the identity of the men's order was stable or coherent – or even well-evidenced – during the 1210s and 1220s.<sup>57</sup>

That the identity of the men's order was stable or coherent during this time is not only erroneous, it also contributes to an androcentric understanding of what it meant to be Franciscan in the thirteenth century. A subject's maleness has become an indicator of their Franciscan status, where the idea that women could embrace the same religious ideals as the men is made to seem unnatural.<sup>58</sup> In doing so, it perpetuates the very problem that the production of scholarly literature on women was, presumably, intended to solve – the exclusion from mainstream Franciscan scholarship of evidence written on and by women's communities.

The use of hagiography as institutional biography was a practice that was exercised throughout the Middle Ages, and one which became increasingly common during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the emergence and proliferation of the religious orders. By exploring the points at which discourses of papal power interacted with the narrative delimiters of the story of a saint's life, it is possible to gain a fascinating insight into the ideological mechanisms governing the production of hagiographical texts and, consequently, into the construction of religious identity in the thirteenth century. Through these texts, the papally commissioned authors of hagiography were able to create narratives of the past that served the needs of their present. Whether these narratives had their roots in other sources that might verify their "legitimacy" – however one might choose to define that term – or not, it is necessary that they are read within the contexts of the periods in which they were produced. The progressive chronologies and clear, singular points of origin that are presented in the hagiographical foundation narratives of the women's order are products, at least

<sup>57</sup> On comparing Robert of Arbrissel to Francis, Dalarun shares this anecdote: 'In contrast to Robert of Arbrissel, Francis has no plan for women. But, as Giovanni Miccoli has remarked to me, neither did he have a specific plan for men!' Jacques Dalarun, *Francis of Assisi and the Feminine* (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2006), 52. Originally published as *Francesco: un passaggio. Dona e donne negli scritti e nelle leggende di Francesco d'Assisi* (Rome: Edizioni Viella, 1994).

<sup>58</sup> Berman has examined a similar issue in Cistercian scholarship, arguing that where the Cistercian status of male Cistercian houses is assumed unquestioningly, Cistercian scholarship had traditionally sought an 'unusually high standard of proof' for the Cistercian status of women's houses. See Berman, 'Were there Twelfth-Century Cistercian Nuns?', 217–47.

in part, of an effort to create an order that placed Francis, along with a Clare that was deliberately crafted as his spiritual subordinate, at its roots in order to achieve various ends.

This chapter has demonstrated how the blindness to this practice in Franciscan scholarship has impacted negatively upon modern understandings of the history of the order's development. Such blindness has not only impaired a full understanding of how Franciscan identities were formed during the thirteenth century. In writing the subordination of women by thirteenth-century hagiographers into modern Franciscan histories, scholarship on the nuns has aided in the creation of a basis for the marginalisation of women's evidence within the field of Franciscan studies. By reassessing the ways in which we use saints' lives as evidence, scholars of the Franciscan order can begin to break apart this basis.

## Chapter 14

# Functions of Anchoritic Spaces and the Implications of Omission in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*

Justin M. Byron-Davies

Julian of Norwich was an anchoress<sup>1</sup> and the author of the first Middle English book to be written by a woman. We know relatively little about her life beyond the few precise details and inferences that we can draw from her text because her writings are relatively self-effacing and anchoresses were advised to refrain from involvement with worldly affairs such as business transactions which might have left written records. However, we do know that she was born in 1342 and alive in 1416 since she is mentioned in wills up to this point. Such longevity enabled her to observe and experience several epoch-altering events. There was the terror of the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century, the Hundred Years' War between 1337 and 1453, civil unrest (such as the 1381 Uprising) and the high perinatal mortality rate (although the latter was not confined to the fourteenth century). She would doubtless have been troubled by the Papal Schism – the dual papacy of Rome and Avignon from 1378 to 1417 – and the less than smooth transition from Richard II to Henry IV. Such turbulence and suffering inevitably inform her writing.

In order to become an anchoress a candidate was required to undergo a process which assessed her suitability, with the final decision going to the bishop. She took a vow to withdraw from everyday life in order to devote herself to meditation and intercessory prayer on behalf of the community. An early thirteenth century book which lays out rules and advice for female anchorites is the *Ancrene Riwe*,<sup>2</sup> or *Ancrene Wisse*. This book, which was written by an anonymous author, provides valuable insight into the life that Julian experienced. The anchoress committed to dying to the world, forsaking all material wealth and seeking a life of close communion with God under the auspices of the

<sup>1</sup> The role of the anchorite has its roots in the Desert Fathers of Egypt from the third century AD onwards. The noun *anchorite* dates back to the mid-fifteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Marion Glasscoe and M.J. Swanton (eds), *The Ancrene Riwe*, trans. M.B. Salu (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001).