

Laura Quadri, *Una fabula mystica nel Seicento italiano. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi e le Estasi (1609–1611)* [Biblioteca della Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa, Studi 35]. Olschki, Florence 2020, xvi + 320 pp. ISBN 9788822266804. € 38.

Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, from one of the oldest and most powerful families in Florence, entered the Carmelite convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli in 1582 at the age of sixteen. Thanks to her visions, revelations, miracles, invisible stigmata, and ecstasies she soon acquired a reputation for sanctity. Although she herself wrote nothing, her fellow nuns noted all her utterances—the four massive manuscripts which they filled were not published until 2016—and copied out the letters which she dictated. When she died in 1607 the members of her convent set into motion the process which led to her beatification and canonization. She was beatified by Urban VIII in 1626 and canonized by Clement IX in 1669. This satisfactory turn of events owed much to Vincenzo Puccini who, from 1605 to 1626, was the confessor and governor of the community of Santa Maria degli Angeli and who, basing himself on the reports of the other nuns, wrote her biography, the hagiographical *Vita della Madre Suor Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi fiorentina*. Dedicated to Maria Maddalena's childhood friend Maria de' Medici, the queen of France, it was first published in 1609 and appeared in a much expanded edition in 1611. Laura Quadri's *Una fabula mystica nel Seicento italiano* is a detailed analysis of Puccini's work.

Puccini's main object was to present an image of Maria Maddalena which answered the criteria of canonization of the early seventeenth century. To do so required caution. Mysticism had long been regarded with suspicion by the ecclesiastical authorities. In themselves mystical experiences were far from sufficient to provide grounds for canonization. The new post-Tridentine saint was supposed to be an imitable model of behaviour distinguished above all by asceticism, the practice of the virtues, and good works. Even if Puccini emphasized Maria Maddalena's part in a Carmelite tradition, Laura Quadri argues that the traditions that inspired her and that she should be shown to have represented were by no means essentially Carmelite. This was partly because the convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli was open to other intellectual streams. Like many religious houses in central and northern Italy, it was regarded as part of civic life and was largely controlled by the secular clergy.

Puccini's biography brings out two main currents of thought which affected Maria Maddalena. On the one hand there was a Dominican tradition. The influence of the greatest of the Dominican tertiaries, St Catherine of Siena, was evident in Maria Maddalena's mystical experiences, but at the same time there was the figure of Girolamo Savonarola who, particularly in Florence, continued to occupy a prominent position in the tradition of the Order of Preachers. In

the early seventeenth century attempts were afoot to rehabilitate the friar who had been executed for heresy, and to appreciate his writings and his prophetic visions of reform. Maria Maddalena too, especially in her later years, dreamt of a renovation of the Church, and there is evidence that Savonarola had many admirers amongst her fellow nuns. Here again, however, caution had to be exercised by Maria Maddalena's biographer since the other tradition to which she adhered was that of the Jesuits. She had been strongly influenced by Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, and such an influence responded to the requirements of asceticism posited by the authorities. Yet the increasingly powerful Society of Jesus was strongly opposed to Savonarola, so popular in the Protestant world and suspicious because of his claims to divine guidance when he was meddling in politics. Any emphasis on his importance for the prospective saint had to be modified by the introduction of other currents.

One of the main reasons for the diffidence which mysticism inspired amongst the ecclesiastical authorities was the quietism often regarded as an essential part of the final stage of union with God. At this point the soul would abandon any activity of its own and rest on the divine will. In order to obviate such suspicions, which could also lead to associations with Protestantism, it was necessary to insist on the role of the freedom of the will. This Maria Maddalena did. Her position came close to that of the great Spanish theologian Luis de Molina, energetically supported by the Jesuits but opposed with equal vigour by the Dominicans.

In his spiritual biography of the prospective saint Puccini stresses other features of her mysticism. Laura Quadri emphasizes his insistence of suffering. Even if the mystical experiences of Maria Maddalena could lead to moments of joy, a greater part of her itinerary was one of pain and misery caused by temptations of the devil and ill health. In the second edition of his book, moreover, at the time when Puccini was officially initiating the process of Maria Maddalena's beatification, he placed a new emphasis on her appeals to 'sapienza' or wisdom, which fires the will and which is given by the Holy Spirit or 'infused grace.' The human being is thus recreated by grace received in a spirit of humility which again bridges the gap between asceticism and mysticism, the act of God and the act of man. Man has to struggle against temptation, but he can only do so successfully with the help of grace.

*Una fabula mystica nel Seicento italiano* is an interesting and highly informative study. It sheds light on the new post-Tridentine criteria of sanctity and it touches on a number of contemporary controversies such as the dispute between the Jesuits and the Dominicans about the freedom of the will. Laura Quadri displays an impressive knowledge of mysticism in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and of the shifting attitudes of the authorities

regarding it. The book, however, is written for the specialist and not for a general readership. It assumes that the reader knows all there is to know about Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi's life and background. On this it provides no information whatsoever, and although the author emphasizes Puccini's decision to write her biography shortly after her death, she never even gives the date of her death. Students of the period will unquestionably benefit from this close reading of Puccini's work, but mere amateurs interested in the subject of mysticism and attracted by the title might be disappointed.

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