

Soundscapes of the Silenced

[Erin Maglaque](#) [The New York Review of Books](#) [December 5, 2024 issue](#)

In late Renaissance Florence one in five women lived behind institutional walls whose rule was sensory mortification. Historians are struggling to recover their inexpressible secrets.



Metropolitan Museum of Art

Women reeling silk; engraving by Karel van Mallery, after Johannes Stradanus, circa 1595

Reviewed: [A Veil of Silence: Women and Sound in Renaissance Italy](#) by Julia Rombough

“Just as our body has five senses,” one sixteenth-century priest wrote, “there are five windows through which death enters into us.” If we were to crack the windows, what else would rush in? The urine-tinged stink of a tannery. Bells ringing on sex workers’ hats, a silvery erotic thrill. The rustling of the dry leaves of mulberry trees. Carriage wheels clattering on cobblestones. Women whispering through a hole in a wall. Silkworms boiling in a vat. Steam and more stink. Silk thread through fingers—blood beading from a palm pricked by a needle. Tiny rounds of marzipan softening on the tongue. Rushed prayers. Slow gossip. A ball struck by a mallet, smacking against a cloister wall. Rocks ringing out against windows. Chestnuts cracking open in a hawker’s broad hands. Cards shuffling, dice tripping on stone. Laughter over cards, during Mass, from inside a bare convent cell. Children’s high and wild singing echoing off the piazza, and nuns murmuring inside. All historians learn to live with the longing to know what’s vanished, but surely historians of the senses are in pursuit of the most transient of all: the archaic sensorium. Lots of questions can be answered by the archives, but “What did Renaissance Italy sound like?” is not one of them. Or more precisely: we can know the sounds of the past only in theory, through abstraction, by our insufficient intellect alone. We can know that Florentine sex

workers were required by sumptuary law to wear bells on their hats, but what we want to know—not *that* the bells rang but *how*, and how it felt to be advertised by their tinkling—that is unknowable.

For historians interested in the lives of premodern women in particular, the problem intensifies. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Florence, one in five women lived behind the walls of an institution. The rule of the cloister: silence. It is hard enough to hear the bells, the music, the voices. But to listen in the archives for the sound of hushed women? What is there to make out? Maybe a knife dropped clumsily on the stone floor of the convent refectory, a brief pause in the nuns' chewing. We might catch the scrape of a ladder, the heavy and final thud of a key in a lock, as the abbess of the convent of Le Murate brought a ladder with her each evening to "go everywhere to see who was talking," to lock the women in their cells for the night.

But what of the women themselves? Their silence was loud; it echoed throughout the city. Nearly half of Florence's noblewomen were cloistered. The seventeenth-century Venetian writer Arcangela Tarrabotti argued that parents were "burying [girls] alive in the cloister for the rest of their lives." She would have known: her father forced her into a convent at sixteen. One in five women. The statistics are sterile, but the sound of absence hums: their voices missing from the kitchens, the markets, the churches, the streets of Florence, muted instead inside convent walls.

In 1427 there were about five hundred nuns in Florence; by 1632 there were nearly four thousand—one nun for every seventeen people. Le Murate, Sant'Orsola, Sant'Onofrio: a 1632 census of the city found forty-six convents. Renaissance Florentines were at the mercy of an intensely competitive marriage market; dowries were high enough that even relatively wealthy families might be able to afford to marry off only one daughter. There was a fee to enter a convent, too—known as a "spiritual dowry"—but it was cheaper to marry Christ than a Florentine. So the city's convents filled up with daughters. For women from noble families, enclosure doesn't appear to have altered their lives too much: they conducted family business, sold and purchased property, and wielded political power from inside. But convents held plenty of nonelite women, too—unmarriageable daughters from ordinary families whose honor would be preserved by the cloister.

And it wasn't just nuns behind walls. In the sixteenth century new Catholic residential institutions for women and girls were founded across the city. There was the Convertite, a home for penitent sex workers; the Malmaritate, a shelter for "badly married" women—abused, pimped out, abandoned, destitute; the Ospedale della Carità, for poor young women; and the Orbatello, for poor widows. There was the Mendicanti, for poor women and their children; the Santa Caterina, for girls at risk of becoming sex workers; and the Innocenti, the city's foundling hospital, which took in abandoned infants but could keep children into adolescence. Vast networks of charitable institutions sprang up across Italy in the second half of the century, part of the wider movement of religious purification and revival known as the Catholic Reformation.

That Reformation is probably remembered now mostly for the Council of Trent—twenty-five sessions of ecumenical wrangling over the hard theological questions posed by the Protestant schism. Original sin, salvation, saints, the role of images, even dueling: starting in 1545, it took the Council eighteen years to distinguish and defend Catholic belief from its Protestant challengers. But the movement was about more than just theological arcana. Lay people were energetically involved in purifying, expanding, and dramatizing belief through confraternities, official and unofficial saints' cults, elaborate and fantastically popular rites and rituals. The women's residential institutions emerged at the intersection of lay and elite religious renewal, reflecting both an enhanced spirituality given form through charity and an equally intense social commitment to reforming female sexual morality.

Were these institutions charities, or were they prisons? Women and girls were dependent on male family members and particularly vulnerable to economic troubles, plague, famine, and war. The Catholic charitable homes would shelter and feed them if they could not work or had no male relatives to rely upon for help and protection. At times women entered them willingly, even eagerly. Twenty-two women, some with dependents, requested shelter at the Orbatello in 1631; only six apartments were available. Others fled domestic violence

and found safety at the Malmaritate. A young woman named Lessandra, who had grown up in the Innocenti, wanted to work but couldn't; she suffered from chronic illnesses. So she applied to the Orbatello, pleading "guardianship for the preservation of her virginity"—the asylum a kind of surrogate father for a woman who had never known life outside the walls of a residential institution.

But women were commonly forced in. Camilla di Silvestro was charged with adultery in 1598 and had a choice: serve ten months in prison or go to the Malmaritate, where the garden was surrounded by a high wall topped with spikes. (One man was sentenced to five years in prison for bringing a rope ladder to the Convertite to help two nuns escape.) These charitable institutions were also protoindustrial manufactories, especially in the silk and textile trades. Most silk in Florence was produced by women on the inside. Their work supported operating costs and was framed as benevolence: the skill would allow them to support themselves by means other than sex work. But theirs was mostly compelled labor, turning a profit for the institution that enclosed them. At the Convertite, over a quarter of the estates of those who died without heirs reverted to the home.

These institutions worked to purify the city of illicit sex. They confined sex workers and women in unstable marriages, along with single women like Luchretia, who petitioned for a room at the Orbatello "because she is pregnant and is a person for whom this is scandalous." The women's children posed a problem, too. Luchretia already had "four girls and one boy that every passing day will give more concern to the magistrates." Luchretia wanted to have the baby and bring her children with her to Orbatello, but for lots of pregnant women the solution was starker: abandon the baby to the Innocenti foundling hospital, where infant mortality rates could be astonishingly high. The system was meant to redeem women's sexual waywardness, but the cost of redemption was at times their own freedom, at times the lives of their children.

The rule inside these institutions was silence: the "complete and perfect mortification of her senses," as one guide for new nuns had it. To effectively stop up the ears, blind the eyes, guard the skin; to enter into an austere and silent darkness. Only a total purification would cleanse a woman's soul. At the Malmaritate home for ill-treated wives, the book of governance was illustrated with a woodcut of Mary Magdalene in the wilderness—the penitent prostitute who abandoned the world, touched only by her own hair. Silence was not the absence of sound but a numinous presence, the texture of women's days—almost physical—and the substance of their redemption. Julia Rombough's *A Veil of Silence* is a sensitive, thoughtful exploration of the soundscapes of these female institutions in late Renaissance Florence, focusing on their attempts to enforce silence and the impossibility of ever doing so.

The Malmaritate's rules stated that women were "to remain withdrawn in silence," for "experience demonstrates that every time resident women talk with others, they are more restless." At the convent of Le Murate, "whoever makes noise by dropping a knife or something else on the floor" during meals in the refectory "rises to her feet before the abbess and makes a visible sign" of repentance. The Convertite ordered its penitent sex workers to stay quiet while eating, reading, or just abiding in their rooms. The Pietà nunnery forbade girls from singing love songs, on penalty of having to kiss the feet of other girls in the home. Silence was broken only by a regimen of purifying noise: bells, prayer, sacred music.

Each sense was a chink in the body's armor against a profane world. The preacher Bernardino of Siena wrote that taste was "the first sensual portal that leads youth to a life of seemingly sodomitical debauchery," by which he meant no marzipan, no little cakes, no candied fruit. But sound was harder to control or eliminate, and therefore riskier to the soul. Following Aristotle, early modern medical texts held that "sound is the fracturing of air," and these ripples and vibrations moved from the exterior of the body deep into its interior. Evil sounds—gossip, madrigals, rousing polyphony—would penetrate and defile the vulnerable bodies of women. Those who lived amid the noisy tumult of the city "are in the mouths of wolves as regards their bodies," wrote one abbot.

And yet sound could also be cleansing. During the plague in Genoa, "everyone continued to sing at the same hour alongside the universal roar of all the bells, and then all of the artillery throughout the city and every vessel of the port responded as a second choir." At a foundling hospital in southern France where infants were dying at

an alarming rate, administrators exploded gunpowder to purify the diseased air. Thunderstorms could be driven away with gunfire to “break up the clouds.”

Urban life was hopelessly contaminated by sound; early modern authors recommended retreating to the countryside, where there weren’t “chimney sweeps and cobblers who shout, the porters and wine porters who clatter, the madams and prostitutes who solicit and ensnare, magicians and charmers who enchant, the soothsayers and witches that foretell.” Sound was involving and inviting, beckoning the senses and the mind. One Dominican preacher in Florence advised that the ears must be treated like “seashells, which are always closed except when the morning dawn breaks.”

Certain pleasant sensations were good for one’s health. Conversation with friends, food and wine; listening to the sweet chirping and whistling of songbirds in aviaries, “looking at the vegetables.” But these were the sensations of the rural villa, where aristocrats could escape from urban noise. Within the city, controlling sound was a way to control the populace. At San Pier Maggiore, a rich convent filled with aristocratic daughters, the nuns complained of “the great racket made in this square all day by [those] playing ball games.” The city nailed a notice to the door of the church: the *ortolani* (greengrocers), *artigiani* (artisans), and *plebes* (no translation required) could not play ball games in the square. But the nuns loved to throw their own elaborate—and noisy—feasts there. The thwack of the mallet in a game of pall-mall was plebeian noise; the clink of fine glassware was ceremonious and pious.

For many cloistered women there was little difference between inwardness and consuming isolation. They couldn’t stand the quiet and ran away to escape it. Ginevra di Baccio Perini was a visionary mystic who was enclosed. She could “not accommodate herself to the religious life,” complained Suor Giustina Niccolini, and “deprived everyone of quiet...tormenting both herself and us.” A woman named Sandrina climbed over the walls of the Convertite with two others and was thrown in prison. Other women simply broke the rules and made noise. They chatted during Mass, brought their loud children into the homes, and sang vulgar songs while working silk. At one particularly dissolute convent a confessor was reprimanded for “chatting and whispering” with Suor Nannina and Suor Aurelia until “one or two in the morning.” At the Convertite, women received cherries from their lovers and plotted their escape.

The women were to make Magdalene’s desert in the city, but the city was no desert. At the Candeli convent the nuns wrote to their higher-ups to complain of “the shouting, noise, and other dishonest words that the nuns experience all night long...caused by the prostitutes who live in Via Pilastrì and near the convent; they are greatly disturbed and molested.” In 1620 one nun described the “evil” sounds suffered by her sisters all night, writing that “my nuns have become defiled by so many wicked words and by the filth that they hear.” All of it threatened to penetrate the bodies of women whose spiritual salvation was at stake.

Yet the institutions were never truly impenetrable. Women continued to sell sex from inside the Convertite; men threw stones at their windows and arranged liaisons at the gates. Some of the girls who had moved from the Innocenti foundling hospital directly into the Orbatello used their rooms there as a comfortable base for illicit sex work. Its administrators put the younger residents in inner apartments and the widows in apartments facing the street, creating a kind of cloister wall of elderly female virtue—or maybe nosiness. Convents shared streets, piazzas, and neighborhoods with women selling sex. Wealthy men drove past convents to buy sex down the street, and the carriage wheels rattling on the cobblestones drove the nuns to distraction. So too did the requisite bells, jingling on hats. One writer dreamed about “cutting out the tongue” of every sex worker.

Convents and homes were also susceptible to crumbling infrastructure. It was expensive to keep them properly repaired and fortified. They had thin walls, or low walls, or holes in the walls; unattended gates, windows or doors left open. One convent garden shared a wall with a mulberry grove popular among young men who gathered under the trees, exposing the nuns to “blasphemies and other very scandalous words.” (Maybe it wasn’t the shady grove but the offendable nuns that drew the boys there.) A convent next to a tannery posed a similar problem: the smell disturbed the inhabitants, and men working there “touch[ed] hands and [did] other

problematic things” with the nuns through open windows, “as if the nuns are not cloistered at all.” Institutions wanted to purify the soul by enclosing the body—even as this proved practically impossible.

Under Cosimo I de’ Medici, Florence took a new interest in what Rombough terms “sonic regulation.” The city passed laws that prohibited people from gathering near women’s institutions and convents, from throwing stones at their windows; magistrates prohibited ball games and games of dice and cards in nearby squares, cleared streets and squares of sex workers; children were prohibited from playing and singing in streets outside convents. At the very end of the sixteenth century the city began to mount stone plaques engraved with these laws on the walls of institutions. The one outside San Silvestro read: “The honorable Signori Otto prohibit any person to play any sort of game, to make a racket or tumult, to urinate or to make any other sort of foulness.... Moreover, they prohibit prostitutes or dishonest women of any kind to stay and live near that convent within 100 braccia in every direction under penalty of 200 lire.” There are eighty-six extant plaques in the city. Only three are affixed to male religious institutions.

The historical irony is that we can only reconstruct a litany of Renaissance sounds from attempts to snuff them out. As Rombough writes, the plaques and complaints and laws are not records of silence but of sounds. What is it that historians of the senses are recovering with records like these? Some argue that sensation was culturally constructed; the premodern body and world were different enough that even if we were to recover the meaning of a bell, we could never recover the way its ringing was perceived by the ear. Although Rombough does not deal directly with this problem, by the end of the book I had a vivid impression of the premodern soundscape anyway. Her scholarship conveys the powerful relationship between imagination and the senses that is surely one of our most deeply shared human experiences.

What proves harder to recover are women’s voices and words. Here are some of the terms used in the sources to describe them: evil sounds, chatting, whispering, wicked tongues; blasphemes, filth, dishonest, wicked, and scandalous words. But what was actually said? What were these words apparently too dangerous for scribes to record with any specificity? I recognize such obfuscations and elisions from my own research in Italian archives of this period, and I have struggled to find a way past them. Women’s speech—especially private speech like gossip or whispered intimacies—has proved impossible to precisely transcribe, to translate from fleeting talk to ink on paper.

For historians interested in women’s lives, the silences of the archives are not simply a matter of neglect, a kind of scribal oversight, but a purposeful *damnatio memoriae*. In the statutes of the Malmaritate the governors wrote, “We must reduce only to memory all that these women have been.” It was women’s untoward sexual pasts that gave charitable institutions a reason to exist—and it was their sexual lives that they sought to vanquish. In the case of convents, it was sexuality uncontrolled by the prospect of marriage that was foreclosed. When the institutions required absolute silence, this is what they meant: silence who you are and what you have been. The most inexpressible secret of all was women’s sexuality, and it is only by listening for the meaning of that silence that we can begin to understand this partly obliterated history of female desire.

Of course, women sought the cloister; they petitioned for apartments in institutions, abandoned their children to the foundling hospital, provided for convents and charities in their wills, enclosed their daughters and granddaughters and sisters. Women, not only elite men, participated in this stifling of desire. This is not so mysterious. The suppression of women’s illicit sexuality was fundamental to early modern Catholic society; women were part of that society, part of their own time. And one woman’s prison could be another’s spiritual sanctuary. But if involvement in the institutions that silenced them is perhaps explicable, I find it nonetheless unsettling to be reminded how utterly common and pervasive it was for women to contribute to their own containment, their own oppression.

In 2019 I spent one hot June working in the archives of the Innocenti. I arrived a little early each morning and sat on the steps under Brunelleschi’s austere arches, waiting for the archive doors to open. I saw mothers and fathers pushing strollers, holding hands, unloading children from bicycle seats. Only then did I realize that the

Innocenti now operates a nursery and a preschool. I heard kids chattering away, laughing or distressed, their parents reassuring them. Stroller wheels bumping over rough stone. The voices of those thousands of abandoned children of the past, of their mothers, are vanished: doubly muted, once by the silence of the institution and a second time by the silence of passing centuries. But what we can hear might make real and present to us all that we have lost.

Erin Maglaque is a historian at the University of Sheffield. She is writing a history of the female body.
(December 2024)