

Article

Teaching Widowed Women, Community, and Devotion in Quattrocento Florence with Lucrezia Tornabuoni and Antonia Tanini Pulci

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Abstract: In the Middle Ages and the early modern period, a woman's social identity changed when her husband died. She became both a symbol of his loss, and a living monument to his legacy—an ambassador between the living and the dead. Responsible not only for preserving his memory on earth, a widow was also expected to pray on behalf of her husband's soul, to work to rescue him from the torments of Purgatory through her dutiful appeals. Widows were at once asked to pray quietly alone, and tasked with work central to society: the salvation of souls after death. This dual identity—sometimes isolated, yet of fundamental importance—makes the widow an opportune subject for students of early modern conceptions of the relationship between religion and gender. In this essay, I look at widows in Lucrezia Tornabuoni's *Judith*, *Hebrew Widow* and Antonia Tanini Pulci's *The Destruction of Saul and the Lament of David*. Taught side-by-side, these texts provide students with multiple, interconnected ports of entry into the early modern world, encouraging an investigation of how the two women writers worked to place widows at the center of their respective stories, rather than relegated to the margins.

Keywords: widowhood; women writers; *sacre rappresentazioni*; Quattrocento Florence; Medici family; Lucrezia Tornabuoni; Antonia Tanini Pulci; digital humanities

"Like a modern Saint Judith, if we consider the Old Testament . . . she was a widow."

From Fra' Antonio Dolciati's description of Antonia Tanini Pulci, 19 August 1528.¹

"There was a judge in a certain city, who feared not God, nor regarded man. And there was a certain widow in that city, and she came to him, saying: Avenge me of my adversary. And he would not for a long time. But afterwards he said within himself: Although I fear not God, nor regard man. Yet because this widow is troublesome to me, I will avenge her, lest continually coming she weary me."

Luke 18.2–5.²

1. Introduction

In Canto X of Dante's *Purgatorio*, Virgil leads the Pilgrim along the rocky precipice of the Terrace of Pride. The images carved into the walls represent history's greatest examples of humility, artfully designed by God as instructive images for the shades of Purgatory to observe and study. The first

¹ Pulci et al. (2010). Translation of letter by Fra' Antonio Dolciati by Elissa Weaver, p. 476.

² (Holy Bible 1989, Douay-Rheims Version).

frieze depicts the Annunciation, with the Virgin Mary bowing humbly before the angel Gabriel as he tells her she is pregnant with the Son of God; the second is of King David, naked and dancing with joy before the ark as Michal glowers in the background. The third is of Trajan and the widow—a grieving woman begging the emperor to avenge her murdered son before he sets out to battle.

The poet's description of the widow focuses intently on the outward evidence of her grief: she is identified from the first *terzina* of her story as a "vedovella" or "little widow": "e una vedovella li era al freno, di lagrime atteggiata e di dolore," ("a poor widow woman was at his bridle, in an attitude of tears and grief") (Dante 2004, *Purgatorio* X.77–78).³ Her abject, feminine display of grief is in conspicuous contrast to the traditionally masculine symbols of war that surround Trajan: his bridle, the "cavalieri," the imperial golden eagles on battle-ready flags blowing in the breeze. We are told nothing about her husband or the circumstances of his death; although she is labeled "vedovella," the widow makes her bold demand to Trajan not on behalf of her dead husband, but on behalf of her dead son.⁴ After initially rebuffing the widow's pleas for justice, Trajan relents, delaying battle in order to answer the determined pleas of a single citizen.

The story of Trajan and the widow presents the shade-readers of the walls of Purgatory—and the living readers of Dante's *Purgatorio*—with several layers of intercession to ponder. It was by witnessing a representation of Trajan's great act of humility in the Roman forum that Pope Gregory would later intercede on the virtuous Pagan's behalf, posthumously "Christianizing" him and fast-tracking him to Paradise. It is through God's artistic depiction of Trajan's act, carved into the walls of Purgatory, that the Pilgrim is witness to this same act, and the Poet is able to recount the story to his Trecento readers. But it is thanks to the persistence of the widow, and her persuasive speech, that Trajan is humbled, and that Gregory is moved to intercede centuries later. Gregory may be the one who finally places Trajan in the eyebrow of the eagle in Paradise, but it is the widow who began the process. Thus, when Trajan reappears in *Paradiso* XX, so does the widow, and the emperor is identified only by his relationship to her: "colui che più al becco mi s'accosta/la vedovella consolò del figlio" ("he who is closest to my beak consoled the widow for her son") (Dante 2013, *Paradiso* XX.44–45).

The diminutive "vedovella" in the *Commedia* serves not only as an example to all Christians of the power of prayer, but as a specific reminder to widows of their rich persuasive potential: a widow's words can work miracles, her actions changing the course of political history, deflating the pride of powerful men. Trajan's encounter with the widow is by no means the only instance when the persistence of a "little widow"—a "vedovella" or "vedovetta"—has paid off. Nancy Vickers has argued convincingly that Dante is thinking not only of Trajan and the widow in *Purgatorio* X but also of the widow in the Book of Luke, who was so persistent in demanding justice that a proud judge relented in order to quiet her. Christians, Vickers explains, "are to be like the widow [in Luke], to persist in their prayers to the divine judge, and they too will be avenged" (Vickers 1983, p. 73). The widow thus serves as a model for all Christians, a person from whom to learn. In another pertinent example, the biblical widow Judith, one of the most popular heroines of the Quattrocento, changed the course of her people's history through her actions: leaving behind her life of widowed isolation, talking her way into the camp of the Assyrians, seducing the general Holofernes, and summarily executing him. Jane Tylus points out that Petrarch, Luigi Pulci, and Lucrezia Tornabuoni all refer to Judith as a "vedovetta," (Tylus 2001, p. 119); like Trajan's *vedovella*, the diminutive reminds us of the widow's humility. It does not diminish her actions, however, but rather exalts them.⁵

³ Translation by Robert M. Durling.

⁴ In the *Golden Legend*, one of many versions of a story with which Dante would have been familiar, the widow's son has been, rather neatly, killed by Trajan's son.

⁵ Throughout this essay, I will quote from Jane Tylus and Elissa Weaver's introductions to translated editions of Lucrezia Tornabuoni and Antonia Pulci's works. When citing from the introduction, I will cite as Tylus (2001) and Weaver (2010); when citing from the texts themselves, Tornabuoni (2001) and Pulci et al. (2010).

In this essay, I examine the ways in which the role of widows in the Middle Ages and early modern period can be studied in the college classroom, and why widowhood in particular—as a themed day’s lesson, or even a full course—offers students an especially trenchant perspective on the condition of early modern women and their relationship to devotion. The widow is a complex figure in Italian literature—by definition associated with death and loss, she is a character at times to be pitied, and at times to be feared. In the Middle Ages and the early modern period, a woman’s fundamental social identity changed when her husband died. She became both a symbol of his loss, and a living, corporeal monument to his legacy—an ambassador between the living and the dead. Responsible not only for preserving his memory on earth, a widow was also expected to pray on behalf of her husband’s soul, to work to rescue him from the torments of Purgatory through her continuous, dutiful appeals—what Katherine Clark has described as a kind of “spiritual housekeeping” (Clark 2007, p. 169). Widows were at once relegated to the margins, expected to pray quietly alone, and tasked with work central to society: the salvation of souls after death. This dual identity—peripheral, yet of fundamental importance, a model often viewed warily—makes the widow an opportune subject for students of early modern conceptions of the relationship between religion and gender.

Canonical Italian texts including Dante’s *Commedia* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron* grapple with this complex social and allegorical figure, and they can be richly utilized in the classroom on this subject (indeed, the story of Trajan’s widow is a particularly popular one in my classes). Here, however, I focus our attention on sacred works by two widowed Florentine writers of the Quattrocento—Lucrezia Tornabuoni’s *Judith, Hebrew Widow*, and Antonia Pulci’s *The Destruction of Saul and the Lament of David*—both of which are, happily, available in beautiful modern English translations through *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe Series*.⁶ In the pages that follow, I present these two early modern female-authored texts, and offer some suggestions for supplementary readings and ways to engage with the subject of widowhood with students.

It is not by accident that in this study I have chosen to consider ways to teach two authors who have been richly explored in this context before. *Teaching Other Voices: Women and Religion in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr.,⁷ has been a formative text for me in how to marry my own teaching and research, and the works of Tornabuoni and Pulci have helped shape my understanding of early modern widowhood; I was fortunate to begin my own graduate training when the *Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* series was in full swing, and to benefit from meticulously edited and readily available women-authored texts.⁸ In *Teaching Other Voices*, Jane Tylus and Elissa Weaver look at their respective translated editions of Tornabuoni and Pulci, each suggesting innovative ways to teach the two texts, separately, in undergraduate and graduate classrooms.⁹ Both Tylus and Weaver also suggest looking at the two authors together—an important suggestion I have taken to heart in my own work and classroom, by connecting them through the particular lens of widowhood (Tylus 2010, p. 71; Weaver 2010, p. 84). In this essay, I look at these two texts in concert with each other, weaving together the two scholars’ important research and analysis of Tornabuoni and Pulci, and elaborating on how one might make use of the rich material in new ways, by playing on both the similarities between the two texts, and their differences. Taught side-by-side, Tornabuoni and Pulci’s works provide students with multiple, interconnected ports of entry into the early modern world: a particular window into family life and hierarchy in patrician late-fifteenth-century Florence; the relationship

⁶ (Pulci et al. 2010; Tylus 2001).

⁷ King, Margaret L., and Albert Rabil. 2008. *Teaching Other Voices*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁸ Jane Tylus and Elissa Weaver themselves have also both been formative teachers for me, and I thank them both warmly for introducing me to Tornabuoni and Pulci, and for my rich experiences as a student in seminar rooms in New York and Chicago. I also thank Virginia Cox for first handing me an edition from the *Other Voice* as I began graduate school at NYU.

⁹ Tylus is both editor and translator of Tornabuoni (2001); Weaver is editor of Pulci et al. (2010), in which the *sacre rappresentazioni* are translated by James Wyatt Cook, and Weaver translator of all appendices, including the important letters by Jacopa Tanini Pulci and Fra’ Antonio Dolciati. Pulci et al. (2010) takes up from Pulci (1997), edited and translated by James Wyatt Cook and Barbara Collier Cook.

between early modern Italian women and devotion; and the divergent ways in which the two woman authors worked to place widowed women at the center of their respective stories, instead of relegated to the margins.

2. Tornabuoni and Pulci, Florentine Contemporaries

Both Tornabuoni and Pulci took Old Testament stories and reinterpreted them in their writing—Tornabuoni in sacred narrative poems in *ottava rima*, Pulci in plays or *sacre rappresentazioni*, also in *ottava rima*.¹⁰ Tornabuoni's *Judith*, *Hebrew Widow*, and Pulci's *The Destruction of Saul and the Lament of David* work particularly well together in the classroom for several reasons. For the purposes of my particular lesson plan, the most immediate factor is that the two writers were themselves most probably already widowed when they were writing their respective works (Tylus 2001, p. 120; Weaver 2010, p. 61).¹¹ Apart from that biographical tidbit, with which either much or little can be done, as I discuss further below, the two writers constitute the most significant women writers in Quattrocento Florence, both of them “firsts”: Tornabuoni the first published secular woman, Pulci the first published woman playwright (see especially (Cox 2008, 2013; Tylus 2001, 2010; Weaver 2010)). The women were contemporaries, members of important Florentine families, certainly knew of each other, and as both Judith Bryce and Weaver have suggested (Bryce 1999; Weaver 2010), very likely knew each other personally.¹² The two wrote exclusively in the vernacular, a practice characteristically Florentine in the period, and both wrote works similar to ones written by their male relatives—from Tornabuoni's son Lorenzo de' Medici's *sacre rappresentazioni*, to works by Pulci's husband Bernardo, to the great chivalric epic *Il Morgante* by Tanini Pulci's brother-in-law, Luigi, which was commissioned by and dedicated to Tornabuoni herself.¹³

Tornabuoni (1425–1482) was Florence's “First Lady” of the period: born into the powerful aristocratic Tornabuoni and Guicciardini families, she was married to Piero di Cosimo de' Medici (nicknamed “Il Gottoso” because of his long plight with gout, 1416–1469) and was mother to Lorenzo Il Magnifico, (1449–1492), the cunning ruler of Florence.¹⁴ In her own right, Tornabuoni was an influential figure in Florentine politics, first as wife to Piero and then specifically in her role as Lorenzo's mother, a benefactress as well as a writer and commissioner of important literary works—a highly unusual role for a woman in the conservative and republican city. This can be attributed, at least in part, to the noble credentials she brought to the Medici family through marriage (Najemy 2006, p. 268). She was the author of sacred narratives on the figures of Judith, Susanna, Tobias, Esther and John the Baptist, which can be read in Tylus (2001), as well as six *laude*, first published in a Florentine anthology of *laude* in 1486. Virginia Cox suggests that these *laude* are likely the earliest poems in print written by a secular woman; one, “Echo el re forte,” is available in translation in Cox 2013 (Tylus 2001; Cox 2013).

A rich selection of Tornabuoni's letters is also in print in Italian, a wonderful resource for students who read Italian; many are also available in translation (Maguire 1927). The letters demonstrate Tornabuoni's canny sense of her own influence, and how best to frame appeals to her son Lorenzo. A particularly enjoyable letter for classroom reading is a 1467 letter to her husband Piero about her future daughter-in-law, the Roman Clarice Orsini, which reveals Tornabuoni's shrewd attention to

¹⁰ See Weaver (2010, pp. 78–79) on Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni*.

¹¹ Just how much of Tanini Pulci's work was written during her widowhood is a matter of some debate. Most recently, Nerida Newbigin has argued quite plausibly that the first edition of her plays predated her husband's death; as I will point out, however, this would not include the particular play discussed in this chapter, which was most certainly written in the 1490s. See Najemy (2006).

¹² Tornabuoni, as a member of the old Florentine aristocracy by birth and the wife of the ruler of Florence, was certainly of higher social standing; Tanini Pulci came from the merchant class, and only married into aristocracy through her marriage to Bernardo Pulci, although the Pulci family itself was quite impoverished. See (Najemy 2006) on the Medici, the Tornabuoni, and the Florentine aristocracy, especially pp. 22–29, 313–14.

¹³ See Cox (2008) for a contextualization of Tornabuoni and Pulci's writings within 15th century literary culture, especially pp. 13–15, and Milligan (2011b, especially pp. 538–39).

¹⁴ (Milligan 2011a). See also (Tylus 2010, especially pp. 57–58).

detail and her careful observations (Tornabuoni 1993, pp. 62–63) Tornabuoni would spend the year following her husband's death negotiating the important marriage with the Roman Orsini family; her brother, Giovanni, was the director of the Medici bank in Rome (Najemy 2006, p. 333). Tornabuoni's letters also reveal the remarkable number of Tuscan women, many of them widowed, who wrote to her to request that she act on their behalf. As Gerry Milligan has pointed out, in her letters "we see . . . a promoter of peace as well as of reconciliation" (Milligan 2011b, p. 542). We also see a clear awareness of her role as an agent or intercessor on behalf of the Florentine people, writing often to her son to intervene on behalf of poor widows who have written to her.¹⁵ Jacopa Tanini, Antonia Tanini Pulci's mother, would write such a letter requesting aid from Tornabuoni's now-daughter-in-law Orsini in 1475. After thanking Orsini for her prior assistance, Tanini explains that she is in great financial distress and debt, "la magior parte ingiustamente" ("most of which unjustly"), and asks if Orsini might speak to her husband Lorenzo on her behalf: "Pensate dove io mi truovo et al.tro rifugio che lla Magnificentia vostra non mi resta . . ." ("Think of where I find myself and I have no resort left except your magnificence.") (Pulci et al. 2010, trans. Weaver, pp. 468–69).¹⁶

Jacopa's husband Francesco Tanini had died in 1467, leaving her with seven children (Weaver 2004). Antonia Tanini Pulci (1452–1501) would have been roughly fifteen when her father died; she married Bernardo di Jacopo Pulci, of the influential literary family, in 1470 or 1471, and was left widowed and childless herself by 1488. At least three of her *sacre rappresentazioni* were published by the 1490s; Weaver attributes the printing of her books to her connections to the Medici. Like many widows in this period, she became a tertiary; as is documented by Fra' Antonio Dolciati, her protégé and biographer, she spent much of her time following her husband's death at her mother's house writing in solitude, leading Dolciati to compare her to the Old Testament's Judith (Weaver 2004; Pulci et al. 2010, especially pp. 470–71).¹⁷

3. Florentine Widows in History and in Literature

Tornabuoni and Pulci lived in a period that has been richly documented by social historians, and a class discussion of Quattrocento widowhood through Tornabuoni and Tanini Pulci would ideally include readings by, at least, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Richard Trexler¹⁸, and Nicholas Terpstra¹⁹; Ann Crabb's²⁰ work on Florentine widowhood through the lens of the Strozzi family would also prove very helpful. In the landmark *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, Klapisch-Zuber asserts that the typical Florentine widow of the early modern period was an oppressed figure, caught between the financial and political interests of her own family and those of her husband's.²¹ Klapisch-Zuber's famous "cruel mothers" were young eligible widows forced to abandon their own children after the death of a husband, and quickly married off a second time by their families in order to make good use of their dowry, which in many cities was returned to a widow upon her husband's death. Klapisch-Zuber also argues that the typical Renaissance widow was seen as a social danger, a potential time bomb like the lascivious, sinful widow of Boccaccio's *Il Corbaccio*.

¹⁵ Regarding Tornabuoni's public role as intercessor for the people of Florence, Tylus points especially to the presence of an ex voto statue of her in the Duomo Tylus (2010, p. 72).

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that Jacopa chose to write not to Tornabuoni, but to Orsini. It is likely that they knew each other in Rome; Jacopa was originally from Trastevere, and it would have made sense for her to appeal to a fellow Roman transplant to Florence.

¹⁷ On widows as tertiaries see Baernstein (1994).

¹⁸ Trexler, Richard C. 1993. *Power and Dependence in Renaissance Florence*. Vol. 2, *The Women of Renaissance Florence*. Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies.

¹⁹ Terpstra, Nicholas. The DECIMA Project. Available online: <http://decima-map.net/a-new-way-to-study-florence/> (accessed on 31 December 2017).

²⁰ Crabb, Ann. 2000. *The Strozzi of Florence: Widowhood and Family Solidarity in the Renaissance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

²¹ Klapisch-Zuber (1986, p. 131).

According to the famous Florentine *catasto* (census) of 1427, widows made up an extraordinary 25% of the general population in the city of Florence; the percentage was 13.6 in other Italian cities (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, pp. 214–22).²² Eighteen percent of women over 40 were widowed; 45% of women over 50 were. Widowers, on the other hand, were far fewer in number: they accounted for less than 5% of the Florentine population in 1427 (Klapisch-Zuber 1986). This discrepancy was in part due to the marked age gap between men and women that typified most marriages. Furthermore, property-owning men of all ages across Quattrocento Italy routinely remarried after the deaths of their respective wives. Women generally remarried only if they were still comparatively young when their husbands died; by the time a woman was 35, it was unlikely that she would remarry after the death of her husband. There was also a remarkable disparity in the age at which men and women first married: according to the *catasto*, the average age for a Florentine woman to marry was 17.6; men tended to marry in their late 20 s, and some were married for the first time at 50 or older (Klapisch-Zuber 1986, p. 120).

Quattrocento Florentine literary texts that engage with widows are rich and many, no doubt in part due to the demographic prevalence of widows in the city. The widow “type” that has received the most scholarly attention, and figures most prominently in contemporary works, is that of the “merry widow”: a woman who spends her widowhood engaged in reckless sexual behavior while neglecting her sacred duty to memorialize her dead husband through somber behavior and dutiful prayer. This type is perhaps most famously expressed in Boccaccio’s strange and incongruous *Il Corbaccio* (1365), in which a Dantean lover laments his heartbreak over a widow who has left him for another, and is comforted by none other than the dead husband, who is enraged at having been forgotten after his death. In his *Intercenales* (1440), Leon Battista Alberti depicts a widow impregnated by a lover; when she is neglected by him, she attempts to kill herself and her unborn child by fasting.²³

These texts speak to the anxiety felt over widowed sexuality, also evident in much conduct literature of the time. In *De re uxoria* (1416), the Venetian humanist Francesco Barbaro speaks with great warmth of the classical exemplum of Camma, who, rather than marry the man who killed her husband, poisoned herself and her husband’s murderer as they stood at the wedding altar (Barbaro 1978, p. 200).²⁴ on Camma’s fortunes in the Renaissance. While Barbaro praises Camma for her unchecked devotion to her deceased husband, Girolama Savonarola, the firebrand preacher who would rule Florence from 1494–1498, following the death of Tornabuoni’s son Lorenzo in 1492, actively disparages those widows who remarry, writing in his tract, “On the Life of the Widow,” that such women “are widows only physically, and to these we do not direct our words” (Savonarola 2003, p. 197).

While it is certainly entertaining to read such tales with students, both the “merry widow” and her foil, the loyal-widow type in the style of Camma, risk a considerable flattening of our understanding of how widows engaged with the rest of society in the Renaissance. The importance of loyalty to one’s husband—or lack thereof—was unquestioned. Equally important, however, was the way a widow interacted with the rest of the world, performing on behalf of other citizens as well as her husband’s memory. We must take into account these often-utilized “classic” widow types, but we can also explore more nuanced representations through texts such as Tornabuoni’s and Pulci’s, and in which widowed characters demonstrate true engagement with society and have a function beyond being a dead husband’s representative on earth. These have proven the richest texts for me to examine with students.

The Tornabuoni text I focus on in this context is her retelling of *Judith, Hebrew Widow* (Tornabuoni 2001, pp. 118–62). Tylus’s preface to the text is an ideal introduction to the famous biblical story for students, explaining and analyzing the history of the story, its early modern fortunes from Petrarch to Luigi Pulci, and Tornabuoni’s particular variation on the tale in a period during which

²² Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber note repeatedly the unique demographics of Tuscan women in early modern Europe. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber (1985, p. 215).

²³ See Levy (2006, pp. 60–61), on the role of Alberti’s widow in the urban landscape of Renaissance Florence.

²⁴ See Panizza (2006)

Judith had become “symbolic of a civic identity linked with the health of Florence” and thus with her own husband, Piero (Tylus 2001, p. 120). The Old Testament Book of Judith tells the story of the young and wealthy widow Judith, who abandons a life of solitude and devotion in order to seduce the evil Assyrian Holofernes, commanding general of Nabuchednazzar’s army, and save the Hebrew people from destruction. In the biblical tale, her superficial and temporary abandonment of the trappings of widowhood plays a central role. She is described as

put[ting] away the garments of her widowhood . . . and cloth[ing] herself with the garments of her gladness . . . And the Lord also gave her more beauty: because all this dressing up did not proceed from sensuality, but from virtue: and therefore the Lord increased this her beauty, so that she appeared to all men’s eyes incomparably lovely. (10.4)

With God’s direct help, she is granted beauty enough to order to gain access to Holofernes, actively changing her appearance from that of widow to that of beautiful seductress to achieve her aim.²⁵ After several days at the camp, she joins the despised general for dinner; he is so besotted with Judith’s beauty that he drinks himself into a stupor. As soon as he is asleep and his servants have left, Judith sneaks her maidservant into the tent, and decapitates Holofernes with his own sword. Her maidservant hides the severed head in a sack, and the two of them leave the enemy camp without being seen. Returning to the elders of the city of Jerusalem, Judith instructs them to hang Holofernes’ head up as a public sign and warning.

Tylus points out that Tornabuoni’s texts “help to refine a question that haunted Tornabuoni’s contemporaries: how could one best practice an authentic Christian life within the Renaissance city?” (Tylus 2010, p. 55) This is never more relevant than in her version of the Judith story, in which the character most similar to the author herself—a recent and wealthy widow—intercedes, doing what the elders of her city cannot and taking matters into her own hands, thus rescuing her people from certain violent destruction. Tornabuoni begins her version of the tale by asking God to help her as He did the “little widow” Judith: “Would that you could grant such favor to me, so that I may turn her tale into rhyme, in a manner that would please.” (Tornabuoni 2001, p. 123). She situates the sin of pride at the center of the story—“whoever would like to tell of kingdoms made desolate through pride . . . would need too much time to name them all.” Judith, introduced in verse 87, is described as very beautiful, and likened herself repeatedly to an angel: “she was so beautifully adorned it seemed that all she lacked were wings”; her identity as a widow, however, is less foregrounded than it is in the biblical story. As Tylus remarks, Judith’s actions lead, indirectly, not only to Holofernes’s death but to the death of the tyrant king of the Assyrians, Nebuchednazzar: like Trajan’s widow, in this story Judith works as an intercessor or ambassador, one smaller deed leading to grand societal triumph; she is a “mezzo” through whom the divine will of God is done. ((Tornabuoni 2001, pp. 122, 146), in translation “God has put it in my heart to meddle in things . . .”). Interestingly, in Tornabuoni’s version of the story, Judith simply disappears when her work is done, rather than returning to her life of widowhood as she does in the biblical version of the story. In the biblical tale, she is widely celebrated following her victory over Nebuchednazzar; she remains a chaste widow devoted to her husband, with whom she is buried at the end of her long life.

For she put off her the garments of widowhood, and put on her the garments of joy, to give joy to the children of Israel . . . And after those days every man returned to his house, and Judith was made great in Bethulia, and she was most renowned in all the land of Israel. And chastity was joined to her virtue, so that she knew no man all the days of her life, after the death of Manasses her husband . . . And she abode in her husband’s house a

²⁵ Returning to the Dantean placement of widows, Tylus reminds us that Holofernes is depicted in Canto XII of *Purgatorio*, an example of pride, while Judith is placed in Paradise alongside Sarah and Rebecca, exemplifying “humility and obedience”; both Ciletti and Tylus discuss the alignment between Judith and Mary, in liturgy around Mary’s feast day, and in medieval artistic typography respectively. (Tylus 2001, p. 119; Ciletti 1991, pp. 42–43).

hundred and five yers, and made her handmaid free, and she died, and was buried with her husband in Bethulia.

(Judith 16.9, 25–26, 28)

In Tornabuoni's version, no mention is made of her widowhood again, except in the description of her:

The goods and treasures of Holofernes were given by Prince Uziah to Judith as eternal memory of her deed for she had cut his life short; thanks be given to God forever, who allowed great vengeance to be carried out through the fearful little widow/such pride brought down by a lowly creature.

(Tornabuoni 2001, pp. 160–61)

Tornabuoni's Judith gives Holofernes's treasures to her handmaiden alone, and is described as being praised by the city elders and celebrating with them. The possibility that she could have married again, or have been physically desired by other men, however, is never mentioned, nor is her quiet return to a long widowhood. Furthermore, the narrator does not say when she dies (Tornabuoni 2001, p. 160n57). Tylus points out that Tornabuoni's Judith thus disappears from her own story—indeed, the lack of resolution seems strange. The absence of any discussion of her widowhood, or the practicalities of being a rich widow with inevitable suitors, seems almost pointed, especially when she is continually described as physically beautiful and in command of her own erotic power. This point seems one of the most salient to bring up with students who have also been aided by the introduction to the story, in which Tylus points up the continual references to Judith using her erotic power. What might be the authorial reasoning behind this? One of my students pointed, quite shrewdly I thought, to the possibility that Tornabuoni herself might have been wary of writing too neat an ending to Judith's story—why relegate a model widow to an isolated existence after her heroic deeds, when the author herself was not at the end of her own story? Tornabuoni's Judith offers an open-ended model of the tale that allows for widows to model themselves on Judith—intercessionary figures working on behalf of their city—without also necessarily denying themselves future husbands or a life actively engaged with their community.²⁶

Following on Tornabuoni's rendition of the Judith tale, I suggest turning with students to Pulci's *The Destruction of Saul and the Lament of David*, in which King Saul and his three sons are defeated and killed by the Philistines. Like the Judith story, the biblical tale details military conflict of the Hebrew people against a foreign threat. Pulci uses widowhood in a superficially different way than Tornabuoni does, and Saul's widow seems at first not to be at the center of the story. In the biblical tale, Saul's wife is mentioned but does not appear as a character. Pulci indicates her departure from this traditional representation from the opening lines, in which an angel announcing the plot of the play incorporates her into it: First, he indicates, the audience will hear about the destruction of King Saul and his sons. Finally, he says, "vo' della reina anche tu senti/come fu morta, però state attenti." (I want to tell you too about the queen—"How she was slain, so closely watch the scene.") (Pulci et al. 2010, pp. 364–65.) After Saul has died, we are treated to a violent and rhetorically daring scene, in which the queen—who does not yet know her husband is dead—is captured, and engages in a fierce war of words with the king of the Philistines, who demands to know where her husband is. She insists she does not know, but is brave and defiant in her answers: "Ma se 'l vi fussi per certo al presente verre'ti voglia

²⁶ Also worth considering in this context is the description of Judith in Agostino Valier's late 16th-century tract on widowhood, in which he urges widows to model themselves on Judith and act as "spiritual warriors" for their neighborhoods in Venice. Valier (2015, p. 4).

di lasciarmi stare?” (“But if I did know surely where he was, Would you then truly leave me be in peace?”) (Pulci et al. 2010, pp. 424–25). This causes one of her captors, Carfase, to comment, in a way that might have been humorous for an early modern audience, that all women are “di pruova” (trying) and “always make you ask repeatedly.” The king becomes impatient with her, and commands his men to take her away, kill her, and tie her to a tree. Once she and her captors have changed locations, she begs that she be allowed to pray, drops to her knees, and begs for news of her husband and the Jewish people. Her captors fall asleep, and an angel appears, who tells her Saul is dead, she is a widow, and bestows on her the martyr’s palm. Her captors then wake up again, and Carfase crudely asks her if she is ready to die. She answers that she is, and they tie her to a tree by her hair; she cries out in pain and distress. Once she is dead, however, the Philistines again fall asleep and angels appear for a second time in the scene, carrying her body away to Limbo while singing, rescuing her corpse from postmortem defilement by the soldiers (Pulci et al. 2010, pp. 432–33). The soldiers, confused, resolve not to tell their king about the strange occurrence, and inform him only that she is dead.

This dramatic scene is a remarkable example of authorial daring: while Tornabuoni modifies the story of Judith in subtle ways, adding a manly heart and a romantic undertone to the story, Pulci goes further, inventing an entire scene for Saul’s widow which makes her, as Weaver has pointed out, “an important protagonist of the play, along with Saul and David.” Her horrible death and the gift of the martyr’s palm from the angel clearly marks her as a martyr. Multiple elements of the scene “follow the familiar pattern of the virgin martyr play” and the scene is also the most theatrically dynamic in the play (Weaver 2010, p. 59). She is made central to the story, and also portrayed as a widow who is engaged centrally with the politics of the piece, rather than isolated to a marginal existence. While she grieves her husband’s death, she is more concerned with the fate of her husband’s people than her own survival. Praying to God, she exhorts, “Contented now, my death for you I cherish, But do not let the folk of Israel perish!” (Contenta muoio per te al presente/non lasciar d’Israel morir la gente!) (Pulci et al. 2010, pp. 428–29). Weaver also points out that this scene offers a broader arc within Pulci’s *oeuvre*: the scene of Saul’s widow’s death completes a trifecta of plays dealing with the three important stages of a woman’s life: virgin, wife, and widow (Weaver 2010, p. 61). While Weaver stresses that it may be “going too far to speculate that Pulci wrote the play in her widowhood” (Weaver 2010, p. 61), the fact does remain that, like Tornabuoni, Pulci offers her public a figure who achieves martyrdom as a widow, in a play that was, according to textual evidence, likely written when she herself was widowed.²⁷ It is a biographical question that may not be an ideal one upon which to rest formal textual analysis, but it nevertheless opens exciting doors for students in a classroom who are learning about these authors for the first time, and are eager to understand what writing as a woman *was* in Quattrocento Florence.

Reading Tornabuoni’s story first and observing her subtle but profound adjustments before moving to Pulci’s more daring version of a biblical tale makes students attentive to just how much creativity was involved in the Renaissance practice of imitation. Tornabuoni’s carefully crafted changes and rewording is a study in contrasts with the liberties Tanini Pulci takes with her story. Students are freed from line-by-line comparisons in Pulci’s case and instead thrown into a scene that has no precedent. This allows for rich questions and discussion: what does it mean to break entirely from a canonical story? How can we interpret Tornabuoni’s sly use of the widow as an intercessory figure when we compare her writing with Pulci’s, in which a scene is invented entirely? What can the martyrdom of Saul’s wife tell us about how Pulci interpreted the social role of the widow in the Quattrocento?

²⁷ As I point to above, see Newbigin (2016) for a more recent assessment of when Tanini Pulci authored her plays.

4. Classroom Application

Tylus and Weaver offer excellent suggestions for teaching Tornabuoni and Tanini Pulci's texts, and I recommend reading both of their teaching essays before developing a lesson plan on the two authors together or separately. Of particular note for Tornabuoni is Tylus's discussion of how to incorporate visual materials on Judith into the lesson, from Donatello's famous bronze of Judith (1457–1464) to Botticelli's (1472–1473) and Caravaggio's and Artemisia Gentileschi's later gruesome renderings (1599 and 1614, respectively). Tylus suggests that Caravaggio and Gentileschi's representations of Judith assassinating Holofernes with the help of her maidservant "show that this is the work of *women*, not just a single woman. Holofernes is slain by a female community working together" (Tylus 2010, p. 62); this makes the gift of inheritance by Tornabuoni's Judith to her maidservant a clearly important difference, especially in relationship to the social history of Florentine dowry practices as related in Klapisch-Zuber's "The Cruel Mother." To further reinforce the importance of the Florentine context for these authors, Weaver suggests that, even in classrooms where students are not familiar with Italian, a few octaves of Pulci should be read aloud, to give them a sense of the Florentine rhythms and cadences in the writing. One especially wonderful example I would suggest is from the queen's death scene, in which the queen exclaims to her torturers: "Lasciami stare! O tu ha' tanto ardire che a una reina ponghi mano!" to which her torturer responds: "A questa volta e' ti convien morire, come alla gente tua fatto abbiàno." ("Leave me alone! Oh you are very brash/to dare to lay your hands upon a queen!" To which Carfase responds "At this moment your time to die has come, As all your people have already done.") (Pulci et al. 2010, pp. 422–23). Weaver also suggests that one of Pulci's plays be staged by students as a collective project (Weaver 2010, p. 77); the scene of Saul's wife's martyrdom—what Weaver dubs "the most original in all of Pulci's work"—is an ideal choice to be performed by students in class, or even staged as an end-of-semester standalone performance, after the class discussion on its unusual nature and place in the play.²⁸

In addition to letters by Tornabuoni and the letter in translation by Tanini Pulci's mother mentioned above, a new edition of the letters of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi (1406–1471), a widow, prolific letterwriter, and Florentine contemporary of Tornabuoni and Pulci, is now available from the Other Voice Series, edited by Judith Bryce; Strozzi's letters detail her tireless work on behalf of her family during the years all male Strozzi were exiled from Florence.²⁹ Letters by Margherita Datini, the wife of Pratese merchant Francesco Datini, are also now available in English translation with the Other Voice. Strozzi and Datini's letters and voices will further enrich students' understanding of just how engaged women were in the political and business dealings of their families—connecting back in rich ways to the subject matter of Tornabuoni and Pulci's spiritual writings. A comparison of letters by women and published or circulated writing also opens the door to a conversation about the difference between "public" voices and private ones in the Renaissance.

In recent classes, I have asked students to map digitally the contained universe of women writers and Florentine families about which we read in class—from the Medici properties in which Tornabuoni and Clarice Orsini resided, to the *palazzi* of the Strozzi and Tornabuoni families, to the convent at which Luigi Pulci's *Il Morgante* was first published, and think about the networks in which these women operated. Nicholas Terpstra's important digital humanities project DECIMA, which uses sixteenth and seventeenth-century census data to map demographics in the city of Florence, offers an ideal model for how to visualize the city of Florence through data that has been meticulously analyzed by historians over the last fifty years (<http://decima-map.net/>). Paul D. McLean's *The Art of the Network: Strategic Interactions and Patronage in Renaissance Florence* has also proved useful here, offering students

²⁸ If one is eager to show students further examples of widows in contemporary texts, Pulci's *Saint Francis Play* also includes a vivid depiction of Jacopa da Settesoli, the Roman widow and Francis's friend; Weaver suggests that Jacopa is likely an allusion to Tanini Pulci's widowed mother, the Roman Jacopa (Weaver 2010, p. 81).

²⁹ Macinghi Strozzi (2016).

a theoretical framework for thinking about how these people might have interacted and connected socially in the city of Florence (McLean 2007). Finally, I have found that exploring the way writers like Tornabuoni and Pulci are visible digitally through Wikipedia can be especially enlightening for students, and we often engage in editing activities in which students use the sources we look at in class to update entries for both biblical figures (Judith, Saul's wife) and for the writers themselves, working to bring a richer understanding of these sources and authors to the broader world of the Internet.

5. Conclusions

Here I have limited myself to the teaching of two particular texts, one by Tornabuoni, one by Pulci, for a comparative approach. I have found that looking at these two texts together allows both students and teachers a rich yet manageable focus—how women writers explored the relationship of women—and widows—to politics and devotion in fifteenth-century Florence. If these texts are read in a course on early modern Italian literature, or a course on women writers, however, I would recommend that students are assigned additional texts by each writer, to enrich their understanding of the two distinct authorial voices, and to explore how consistently both authors stress the agency of their female characters across several stories.

When teaching the early modern period, it is often tempting to connect it immediately to the present for students—this can be dangerous at times, but it can often be successful as well. Indeed, Quattrocento Florence lends itself very well to contemporary conversations about tyranny, republicanism, nation-building and identitarian ideologies, and liberty, much as Quattrocento artists and writers under the Medici thumb (or in the Medici family) looked to Old Testament stories to facilitate an allegorical and sanctioned narrative of Medici triumph over tyranny. But leaning too heavily into anachronism (otherwise known as “They’re just like us!” syndrome) can be especially dangerous where questions of women are involved. In teaching early modern texts in the classroom, I have consistently found that my students are initially surprised to discover female characters who demonstrate strength or political agency—ever more so by the fact that women writers were writing and publishing texts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, something the scholarly community now takes as a given. Students often look to more modern texts as a point of reference: Moderata Fonte, they often say, is “like Jane Austen”; in a bolder comparison, Christine de Pizan is “like Gloria Steinem.” The fact that Tornabuoni and Pulci are both dealing with religious texts complicates things further: although it goes without saying that the contemporary relationship between women and religious authorities is markedly different than that of the early modern period, it is understandable that students—and teachers—might be tempted to conflate “now” with “then.” It is important to contextualize the ways in which religion, politics, and gender were enmeshed in Italian early modern communities through the *vita mista*, and the fact that women often found spaces within the religious context in which experiment artistically and intellectually: further to Tylus (2010), helpful secondary readings on this topic include Weaver’s *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Weaver 2002), and Gabriella Zarri’s *Le sante vive: Profezie di corte e devozione femminile tra ‘400 e ‘500* (Zarri 1990).

A final thought on the violence of these tales, and on teaching them in today’s complex world. It is important to consider why Tornabuoni or Pulci might have chosen to look at stories in which women find themselves at the center of great violence—either as perpetrators or as victims. In his forthcoming book, *Moral Combat*, Gerry Milligan is careful to remind us that women often found themselves implicated in war, from Caterina Sforza defending herself after her husband’s death at Forlì, to Eleonora de Toledo accompanying her husband Cosimo I into battle (Milligan 2018; see also Hairston 2000). It is helpful to suggest to students that we don’t necessarily need to approve of or even make moral judgments on the writers themselves, or on their subjects: Tornabuoni was a powerful member of a ruthless oligarchy. Patricia Emison suggests that we consider the Renaissance as “a time of admirable achievement—though not necessarily an admirable time,” which seems to me a productive way to frame discussions for students of texts that are very violent, and sometimes hard to understand

(Emison 2012). Engaging with sacred texts by women writers through the deep and rich context of widowhood in Quattrocento Florence allows students to gain access to a way of thinking that is by no means contemporary, but can help them to question how religion, gender, and the politics of a community can intersect in the early modern period, as well as today.

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