Chapter 5
Augustine's Concessions and Other Failures: Mourning and Masculinity in Fifteenth-Century Tuscany

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History is in mourning and eloquence is dumb...

Augustine, according to Botticelli, has writer's block (see figure 5.1). That is to say, in the Uffizi panel dated to the 1490s, the delinquent-turned-Divine Doctor appears to be scholastically challenged: Cloistered and cramped, he struggles with rewrites and revisions; surrounding him, limp and broken quills and illegible scraps signal exhausted efforts, if not defeat. In striking contrast to this frustrated Augustine, Botticelli also painted a scripturally talented Augustine, this one of a decade earlier in the church of the Ognissanti in Florence (see figure 5.2). Inspired and enlightened, this prolific Augustine demonstrates his productivity, the fruits of his calligraphic labor on display. Why two different characterizations of this Church father—the latter procreative, the former seemingly impotent? Further, why is the fourth-century Roman North African philosopher-saint twice repositioned by a fifteenth-century Florentine artist within a Renaissance studiolo? In other words, why so many conversions? A recent survey of Italian Renaissance art history recognizes these two conflicting characterizations of Augustine, though the comparison is employed mainly to call attention to the increasingly spiritual interests of the artist and the corresponding stylistic change evident in his work during the last decade of the fifteenth century. Stylistic differences aside, split personalities and anachronisms point toward a double and divided subject, suggesting that there may be something covert about this Christian convert.
Figure 5.1  Botticelli, *Saint Augustine in his Cell*. Uffizi, Florence.
Figure 5.2 Botticelli, *Saint Augustine in his Study*. Chiesa di Ognissanti, Florence.
Within the context of grief and gender, I wish to examine episodes from the life of Augustine, specifically those surrounding the death, burial, and mourning of his mother, Saint Monica, both as recounted in his *Confessions*, written between 397 and 401, and as illustrated approximately one thousand years later in early modern Tuscany. Central to this discussion, I propose, is the rise of the Italian cult of Monica, the patron saint of widows at this time. In particular, I read the early modern literary and visual texts of Augustine’s mourning of Monica in conjunction with the early modern discourse on mourning: the socio-political re-orchestration of public grieving from Francesco Petrarca to Leonardo Bruni. But even beyond this, I examine the gender dichotomy implied there, suggesting that insofar as the popularity of Augustine’s *Confessions* can be interpreted as contributing to a legitimation and perpetuation of gendered mourning patterns in early modern Tuscany, Augustine’s *concessions* ultimately challenge and complicate those gender codes, specifically the cultural construction of masculinity.

By way of introduction, I cite Augustine’s account of his mother’s death and funeral, as described in Book IX, chapter xii of the *Confessions*:

I closed her eyes and an overwhelming grief welled into my heart and was about to flow forth in floods of tears. But at the same time under a powerful act of mental control my eyes held back the flood and dried it up. The inward struggle put me in great agony. Then when she breathed her last, the boy Adeodatus cried out in sorrow and was pressed by all of us to be silent. In this way too something of the child in me, which had slipped towards weeping, was checked and silenced by the youthful voice, the voice of my heart. *We did not think it right to celebrate the funeral with tearful dirges and laments*.... But in your ears where none of them heard me, I was reproaching the softness of my feelings and was holding back the torrent of sadness. It yielded a little to my efforts, but then again its attack swept over me—yet not so as to lead me to burst into tears or even to change the expression of my face.... When her body was carried out, we went and returned without a tear. Even during those prayers which we poured out to you when the sacrifice of our redemption was offered for her, when her corpse was placed beside the tomb prior to burial, as was the custom there, not even at those prayers did I weep.

In contrast to Augustine’s “inward struggle” to repress “an overwhelming grief,” Monica “never ceased,” by Augustine’s account, her grieving for *him*, albeit her mourning is a loss of a different sort—Augustine’s loss of faith. Book III, chapter xi of the *Confessions* reads as follows:
For my mother, your faithful servant, wept for me before you more than mothers weep when lamenting their dead children. ... You heard her and did not despise her tears which poured forth to wet the ground under her eyes in every place where she prayed. ... During this time this chaste, devout, and sober widow, one of the kind you love, already cheered by hope but no less constant in prayer and weeping, never ceased her hours of prayer to lament about me to you.  

Read in conjunction, these two passages call attention to a distinct dichotomy between male and female manners of mourning: Monica’s loud and constant lamentation is countered by Augustine’s stoicism and silence; presumed female hysteria is checked by male composure.

The Death of St. Monica and Return to Carthage, a fifteenth-century fresco in the choir of the church of Sant’Agostino in San Gimignano, illustrates the importance of Augustine’s account one thousand years later (see figure 5.3). Painted by Benozzo Gozzoli and dated to 1465, the scene depicts Monica’s burial at Ostia and Augustine’s subsequent departure for Rome. This representation of a melancholic Augustine...
follows the prescriptions and proscriptions of male mourning as self-imposed in the *Confessions*, including the physical and emotional separation implied there. The prototype, *The Burial of St. Monica and St. Augustine Departing for Africa*, a miniature in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, also dated to the fifteenth century, is especially suggestive (see figure 5.4). 8 Just as the literary text presents the reader with a distinct dichotomy, there is a marked split—or cleavage—between the two realms of the miniature. Divided down the center, the left half depicts Monica's body enclosed in a sarcophagus, which is tightly framed by a ciborium; to the right, Augustine, depicted in a traditional melancholic pose with his head tilted and supported by one arm, sets sail, departing from the architectural structure that retains the boxed-in body of Monica.

Of particular curiosity, the Fitzwilliam miniature is cut from a choir book; thus, the words and music are hidden by the mount. What might

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Figure 5.4 Master of the Osservanza, *The Burial of St. Monica and St. Augustine Departing for Africa*. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
this obscurity, in turn, reveal? In other words, does the concealment of the score reflect the stoic silence of Augustine, or does it point toward a different sort of cover-up? Similarly, might the drawn curtain of the constricted studiolo in the Uffizi Augustine unveil more than just writer’s block? That is to say, if Augustine’s self-flattering discourse of control and composure can be interpreted as privileging a masculine manner of mourning, the early modern humanist critique of public grief and mourning offered from Petrarch onward, insofar as it can be generally characterized as discouraging, if not restricting altogether, female lamentation within public space, also reveals a gender politics at work.9

In a letter written in 1373 to Francesco da Carrara, Lord of Padua, and entitled, “How a Ruler Ought to Govern His State,” Petrarch specifically argued for a reconceptualization of the role of women within the death ritual, advocating the banishment of women’s vocal mourning practices, what he called “loud and uncontrolled shrieks,” from the public streets:

What then am I asking? I shall tell you. A coffin is carried out, a crowd of women bursts forth, filling the streets and square with loud and uncontrolled shrieks, so that if anyone does not know what is happening were to come on the scene, he could easily suspect either that they had gone mad or that the city had been captured by the enemy. Then when they have arrived at the church door, the horrible outburst doubles; and where hymns ought to be sung to Christ or devout prayers poured out for the soul of the departed in a subdued voice or in silence, their sad complaints echo and the sacred altars shake with the wailing of women, all because a mortal has died. This custom, because I consider it contrary to a decent, honorable society, and unworthy of your government, I not only advise you to reform, but if I may, I beg you. Order that no women should set foot outside her house on this account. If weeping is sweet for those in misery, let her weep at home to her heart’s content, and not sadden the public spaces.10

A century earlier, Boncompagnus of Signa, in chapter 26 of *Antiqua Rhetorica*, offered the following description of the very “habits of mourning”—inarticulate utterances, wails, and ululations—Petrarch found so disturbing and uncivilized: “In Tuscany there is [by women] lacerating of the face, rending of garments, and pulling of hair.”11

The female voice, put simply, was problematic at this time, and a considerable amount of legislation was enacted to restrict such female lamentation within public space. For example, in Lombardy, in Milan and Como, as early as 1210, rulers tried to separate male citizens from
what was deemed “the business of women.” More specific were the laws passed in 1255 in San Gimignano, whereby women were not only prohibited from directly following the funeral cortège but were also banned from using the church door through which it entered. In Siena, according to extreme laws passed in 1262, all women were excluded entirely and at all times from the procession, and, in Bologna, beginning in 1276, where legislation was only slightly less restrictive, women were prohibited from leaving the house until after the body had been buried.

This attempt on the part of the new humanist elite to territorialize public space by suppressing women’s mourning, calling for an end to dramatic ostentation and display, has been called “the defeminization of the public sphere.” Indeed, the desired result of this strategic revision of female lamentation was a masculinization of the death ritual and the spaces of that ritual. Thus, concerning the role of women within ritual, there is a notable shift from ritual sound to ritual silence, from in comprehensibility to inaudibility, and even, at times, from ephemerality to total absence. If the “domestication of female lament served to deprive women of a public voice of memorialization,” and if women, traditionally, were considered memory specialists, how, then, does the female mourner compensate for the fact that within the symbolic realm of language, to which she has been given limited access, she has no voice? In other words, having been muted and silenced, yet still required, how can the female mourner, seen and not heard, do her job? The censoring of the female mourner, though relatively successful, created a new set of challenges for the early modern humanist. In sum, ritual silence threatened masculine memory. The task of mourning—of marking memory—would have to be reassigned.

An exemplary (and, therefore, necessarily male) memory specialist soon emerged—the early modern humanist. In keeping with prescribed gender codes, the critic-turned-actor displayed outward decorum and control. For example, upon the death of his wife, Piera, Coluccio Salutati, echoing Augustine’s mourning of Monica, prided himself on the sense of civic order conveyed by his composure at her funeral: “I dried my tears, I ended my weeping and, giving thanks to God, I composed myself with his assistance so that, feeling the loss, I was made absolutely insensible to the pain.” Of note, Salutati left the funeral early in order to attend to his professional duties. A new memorial form—the funeral oration—accompanied this newly scripted and choreographed manner of mourning. Written and spoken by men and for men, the classicizing oration not only contributed to the socio-cultural
construction of masculinity, insofar as it celebrated male rhetoric over female emotion, but it also helped to perpetuate masculine memory. For example, in addition to stressing political and civic accomplishments, the humanist oration also publicly praised the masculine ethos considered to be responsible for such achievements.

And yet, this new memorial form did not immediately take center stage. The political and rhetorical strategy of translating what had been women's inarticulate vocality into a more civilized, commemorative language developed gradually and coexisted with other memorial forms. Indeed, if rituals, as has been said, "speak with many voices," the various styles and practices of commemoration "meant that Florentines no longer enjoyed a standard set of death rites as their common cultural property." Thus, the "many voices" of the death ritual were competing, if not literally screaming, for attention; I am precisely interested in this cacophony and what has been interpreted as a result of this early modern humanist re-orchestration—cleavages dividing women and men.

Women in Florence, for example, were excluded from the particularly masculine convention of the funeral oration. Instead, if there was praise for Florentine women, it took the form of the private consolatory letter. Exchanged between close family and friends and meant to be read privately or at least semi-privately, these letters acknowledged women's accomplishments but only insofar as those accomplishments revolved around family matters. If Florentine women did demonstrate political or administrative acumen, recognition was only contingent upon the successful accomplishment of their domestic duties. Leonardo Bruni's letter to Nicola di Vieri de' Medici upon the death of Bice reads as follows:

Being detained by some necessary public business, I was unable to attend the sad funeral of that excellent woman and best of mothers; I can only try to fulfill my duty in this literary fashion.... The excellences of a woman's life are reckoned to be (unless I am mistaken) good family, a good appearance, modesty, fertility, children, riches, and above all virtue and a good name.... And married to a most fortunate man, the outstanding man of his day in our city for his wealth, resources, and celebrity of name, she bore a numerous progeny, and lived to see a multitude of grandchildren, nieces and nephews sprung from her.... The greatness of her prudence can be estimated from the way she governed a very large household, a large crowd of clients, [and] a vast and diversified business enterprise for more than thirty years after the death of her husband. So great were her powers of administration that no one felt the loss of her husband's advice and prudence, and there was no falling-off in the regulation of morals, or
the discipline and standards of integrity and honor... let us not then, I pray, lament or weep for her good fortune. Finally, she herself, who was all benevolence, would surely bear it ill that we are overcome by grief, and would bid us cease and desist. Let us obey her even though she is dead, set aside our grief, and as far as nature allows, bear our loss with moderation.  

Despite Bruni’s self-congratulatory beginning (he could not attend her funeral precisely because he was “detained by some necessary public business”) and his purposeful privileging of mind over body (“I can only try to fulfill my duty in this literary fashion...”), and despite the obvious limitations of what he considers to be the primary “excellences of a woman’s life,” Bruni does acknowledge her accomplishments during widowhood. Still, taking full advantage of this literary form, Bruni’s rhetoric is self-complimentary.

Similarly, most women were praised only as a means of mourning, again, other men—fathers, husbands, or sons. For example, when Piccarda Bueri died in April 1433, Carlo Marsuppini wrote a consolatory letter for her sons, Cosimo and Lorenzo de’ Medici; it was, precisely, for _them_. The letter, written on the occasion of Piccarda’s death, addressed _their_ achievements and, further, provided a strategic tool for reshaping and idealizing the public, political image of Cosimo. By contrast, several distinguished women, residing north of Florence, did receive praise in the same or similar format as their male contemporaries—that is to say, in the form of a particular text, the humanist oration. For example, Elisabetta Malatesta and Caterina Visconti were eulogized anonymously in 1405 in Pesaro and in 1410 in Milan, respectively; Guarino da Verona eulogized Margherita Gonzaga in 1439; and Antonio Lollio praised Laudomina Piccolomini, the sister of Pius II, at mid-century. Of particular note, some of these women, such as Elisabetta Malatesta, who, again, lived outside of Florence, were even praised for their eloquence. Moreover, a eulogy read by Giannantonio Campano commended Battista Sforza, who, at the age of four, had herself delivered a Latin oration, a rhetorical skill frowned upon by humanists such as Bruni.

To reiterate, one objective of the humanist oration was to praise the deceased in order to set an example for the community. Another was to reconfirm social placement and privilege. And yet, despite the rhetorical insistence upon stressing—and praising—difference, there was also a need to communicate across groups, and, in order to gain a large share of the listening audience, the orator had to compete against other memory specialists. Yet, “orators have always worked in the realm of probable truth. By approaching truth as probable,
humanists could blur distinctions...." Inadvertently, perhaps, in a desire to accumulate more mourners and, thus, to ensure masculine memory by securing ceremonial participants, the humanist and his oration inevitably blurred certain distinctions, which, according to his own personal and political agendas, should have remained cleavages or divisions.

A paradox soon becomes apparent: audiences were large and diverse. How, then, did the orator compensate for the fact that within the early modern community, his listening audience was deaf? In other words, how many members of his listening audience actually understood his Latin? If the audience turned a deaf ear to what seemed to be Bruni’s babble, this caveat posed a particularly large challenge, especially if the goal was to reindoctrinate the community. According to Bruni, the early humanist orator, like the Roman orator, had to distinguish between the majority of listeners, who could understand the eulogy just as they did an average Latin mass, and the ruling class, whose comprehension skills would be more refined. Thus, by directing oratory mainly toward fellow humanists, and rulers, bureaucrats, lawyers, doctors, and merchants—in short, toward men—Bruni’s political campaign, to rewrite the codes of public mourning, fails to convert the masses; moreover, his personal agenda, to be mourned and remembered, poses even greater problems—for both himself and the larger humanist ideology concerning public mourning practice. As a short aside, we might look toward Bruni’s tomb, made by Bernardo Rossellino in 1444, in the church of Santa Croce in Florence, as evidence of this failure. The inscription, written by Carlo Marsuppini, reads as follows: “History is in mourning and eloquence is dumb, and the Muses, Greek and Roman alike, cannot restrain their tears.” Ironically, on the funerary monument of one of the strongest advocates of a reorchestration of the type and amount of mourning within the public death ritual, rhetoric is challenged and tears are unrestrained.

And worse, for those for whom the humanist orator did not seem to be speaking in tongues, some of the most famous Florentine orations, those by Leonardo Bruni for Nanni Strozzi, and by Poggio Bracciolini for Niccolò Niccoli and for Lorenzo di Giovanni de’ Medici, were never delivered. That is to say, circulated only in written form, these texts were never read aloud. Thus, if the audience never heard, the deceased was never mourned, at least not according to the new humanist standard, whereby the reading of the Latin text during the requiem, which translated what had been women’s inarticulate vocality into a more civilized language, was meant to commemorate the deceased and celebrate
a specific community in a particularly ordered manner. Like the female mourner before him, whose "loud and indecent wailing," according to Petrarch, he sought to counter, the early modern humanist, ultimately, is silenced. His memorializing speech interrupted, might we consider these "widowed words"?33 Fragmented, ruptured, incomplete—we might now even say feminized—how does the early modern humanist perform his text?

If incomprehensible and inaudible, how does the humanist orator negotiate this unsuccessful performance within his self-orchestrated mourning ritual? In other words, how does he compensate for the fact that, within the symbolic realm of language, the sights and sounds of which he now orchestrates, he has no voice? Recall that the sanctioned female mourner, muted and silenced, was similarly challenged, having to negotiate the necessity of her role as primary mourner within a newly censored ritual site. Possibly, the very ambiguity of these sites, visual images, and sounds guaranteed the female mourner prolonged access into the mourning ritual of the early modern humanist, who, in a struggle to maintain gender difference while competing against other mourners for control of the listening audience, had to continually redirect his own role as described above.

Social historians have pointed to an inherent ambiguity in the function and meaning of ritual.34 I am suggesting, however, that what was deemed to be the very necessity of ritual performance points beyond an inherent ambiguity toward an inherent anxiety and, thus, toward an always already unstable subject. More specifically, death rites, which have been interpreted by some not as fixed, static models but as social and cultural moments, were constantly in a state of flux, pointing to a marked fluidity and multiplicity within ritual and society. Perhaps more importantly, though, this fluidity of the death ritual can be interpreted as being conditioned by the complexities of early modern gender roles.35 As we have seen, these roles, too, could be reshaped or redirected to suit the particular needs and/or desires of an anxious and vulnerable community. And yet, what happens when too great a transgression occurs?

Returning to Augustine, having understood his Confessions as an early example of the strategic, rhetorical construction of masculinity evident in the humanist re-orchestration of the death ritual, we might now reexamine his performance, calling attention to and considering the implications of his ultimate concession. Augustine eventually confesses in Book IX, chapter xii:
Alone upon my bed... I was glad to weep before you about her and for her, about myself and for myself. Now I let flow the tears which I had held back so that they ran as freely as they wished. My heart rested upon them because it was your ears that were there, not those of some human critic who would put a proud interpretation on my weeping. And now, Lord, I make my confession to you in writing. Let anyone who wishes read and interpret as he pleases. If he finds fault that I wept for my mother for a fraction of an hour, the mother who had died before my eyes who had wept for me that I might live before your eyes, let him not mock me but rather, if a person of much charity, let him weep himself before you for my sins....

The implications of Augustine’s gender transgression—his regressive, feminine performance of mourning—suggest repercussions not only for his own self-fashioning but also for that of the early modern humanist, who, recall, takes cues from the literary and visual texts of Augustine’s mourning of Monica.

One last fresco by Benozzo Gozzoli in the choir of the church of Sant’Agostino in San Gimignano, *The Funeral of St. Augustine*, deserves special attention (see figure 5.5). This historical death scene, perhaps not surprisingly, is set within a well-ordered and organized urban landscape; for example, Augustine’s funeral bier is centrally placed before a Brunelleschian arcade. And yet, in striking contrast to this rationally planned space, one of the contemporary characters, probably a portrait of one of the Augustinians at San Gimignano,\(^{37}\) grieves dramatically, arms flailing and mouth agape, at the feet of Augustine, breaking all cultural and gendered codes of mourning, as prescribed from Augustine to Petrarch to Salutati to Bruni. Of note, two of these figures also appear in *The Death of St. Monica and Return to Carthage* (figure 5.3), although, there, they appropriately play the role of silent and stoic witness. Now, perhaps even as then, transgressions abound, leading us to reevaluate the desired outcome of gender and ceremonial performance for the sake of legitimizing and perpetuating masculinity and its memory. Thus, returning to the Uffizi *Augustine*, we might conclude the cause of the author’s writer’s block. If this confessant’s masculinity is threatened by his ultimate concessions, his attempt to rescript—yet again—his role within ritual becomes urgent. And yet, discarded scraps, still illegible, and phallic instruments, always limp, cannot but suggest constant failure.