Normal Schools for Poor Spinsters. A New Approach to Welfare in the Reform Project of Pietro Leopoldo, Grand Duke of Tuscany

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Escaping from poverty through education, work, and moral and religious instruction—this was the goal of the Normal Schools for spinsters, founded by Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo I of Habsburg-Lorraine in 1778, and destined to last for centuries, despite internal changes.[1] The so-called Leopoldine Schools introduced a new approach to welfare for women: secular, state-run, and aimed at preventing poverty—instead of remedying it through charity or confinement—through the professional and scholarly training of useful citizens who actively contributed to the welfare of the state. The institution aimed to transform the lives and identities of poor girls—future women—by enabling their cultural and professional development, and thereby granting them an active role in society and a new sense of dignity and personal and social worth. Their education conformed to a specific ideal of womanhood and was shaped by a very clear vision imposed from above. Nevertheless, the Leopoldine Schools represented a significant innovation in eighteenth-century Italy, given their secular nature and their focus on improving the condition of women and the poor within the framework of a distinctly civic and eudemonistic perspective.

This institution was meant to be one of the reforms through which Pietro Leopoldo profoundly transformed Tuscan society, aligning with his political and intellectual vision.[2] Furthermore, the schools reflected Leopoldo's particular focus on education—especially female education, a key issue in contemporary debates on the role of women and the modernisation of eighteenth-century society.[3]

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[1] I would like to thank Franca Orlandi, Daniela Lombardi, Corine Maitte, Angela Orlandi, Giampiero Nigro and the staff of the Archivio Storico del Comune di Firenze for their precious advice. On the documentation, see MÓNICA VÁZQUEZ ASTORGA, *Le Scuole leopoldine di Firenze e la loro storia (1778-1976)* (Florence: Comune di Firenze, 2019). LUIGI PASSERINI, *Storia degli stabilimenti di beneficenza e di istruzione elementare gratuita della città di Firenze* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1853), 775–84. Cf. also the bibliography cited in the following footnotes, *ad ind.*

[2] GAETANO GRECO, *Storia del Granducato di Toscana* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2020), *ad ind.* (with bibliography); LUIGI MASCILLI MIGLIORINI, 'L'età delle riforme', in FURIO DIAZ, LUIGI MASCILLI MIGLIORINI and CARLO MANGIO, eds, *Il Granducato di Toscana. I Lorenaa dalla Reggenza agli anni rivoluzionari* (Turin: Utet, 1997), 247–421; ADAM WANDRUSKA, *Pietro Leopoldo. Un grande riformatore* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1968). Cf. also the following footnotes.

[3] In addition to the bibliography cited above in footnote n. 2, see MARTINE SONNET, *L'éducation des filles au temps des Lumiéres* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987); LINDA TIMMERMANS, *L'accès des femmes à la culture (1598-1715)* (Paris: Champion, 1993); GAETANO GUERCI, *La sposa obbediente. Donna e matrimonio nella discussione dell'Italia del Settecento* (Turin: Tirrenia, 1988); GUERCI, *Per una storia delle donne nell'Italia del Settecento*, ed. ELISA STRUMIA (Turin: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2023).

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Despite the importance of the Leopoldine Schools, both in their own right and within Pietro Leopoldo's broader reform efforts, as well as the wealth of available documentation, they have not yet received enough scholarly attention.[4] This essay presents the initial findings of research that remains open to further expansion. The study will focus on the establishment of the Schools and their students. To fully grasp their significance, it is essential to begin with a concise analysis of the Grand Duke's views and policies, with particular attention to the issue of education.

A final note: this essay addresses a topic that follows the main theme of this special issue chronologically. However, it is conceptually consistent in light of the connection first identified by Eugenio Garin between Humanism and the Enlightenment, namely the focus on the development of both men and women through education, the affirmation of human freedom, and the acquisition of a new dignity—secular, industrious, and independent because of its grounding in critical thought—for the overall improvement of society.[5] *Mutatis mutandis*, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Erasmus's voice found a renewed resonance in the great educational culture of the eighteenth century.[6]

Pietro Leopoldo: Reforming Sovereign and Educator

During his 25-year reign (1765–1790), Pietro Leopoldo pursued a reformist agenda that transformed the Grand Duchy of Tuscany into a modern, unified state, making it a model both within Italy and Europe. His actions were marked by strategic planning, realism, and above all, a coherent and comprehensive vision. This vision reflected a unique synthesis of Enlightenment, cameralist, and Jansenist-leaning ideas, combined with his family's governing experience and the model of Austrian rule implemented by his mother, Maria Theresa, and his brother, Joseph II.[7]

Pietro Leopoldo's guiding principles were unity, rationality, equity, humanity, and social well-being. His primary objective was eudemonistic—that is, to achieve the well-being of the state and the happiness of its subjects, through cultural, economic, and social progress, beginning with the lower classes. This goal aligned with the concept of the *Polizeistaat*, a model embraced by eighteenth-century absolutist rulers who pursued reforms marked by contradictions, centralisation, and social control, but also by genuine utopian aspirations.[8] However, Pietro Leopoldo was ahead of his time

[4] The only text is MÓNICA VÁZQUEZ ASTORGA, *Le Scuole leopoldine di Firenze e la loro storia (1778-1976)*. Reference will be made to this text in the description of the organisation of the Schools, without further quotations. The documentation is preserved in the Archivio Storico del Comune di Firenze (from now on: ASCFI), Fondo Leopoldine (online archive), and is comprised of 900 archival units.

[5] Cf. now OLIVIA CATANORCHI and VALENTINA LEPRI, eds, *Eugenio Garin. Dal Rinascimento all'Illuminismo. Atti del Convegno. Firenze, 6-8 marzo 2009*, with a preface by MICHELE CILIBERTO (Rome–Florence: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura-Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, 2011).

[6] JEAN-CLAUDE MARGOLIN, *Érasme, précepteur de l'Europe* (Paris: Juillard, 1995).

[7] CHARLES W. INGRAO, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1618–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[8] ALESSANDRA CONTINI, 'La città regolata: polizia e amministrazione nella Firenze leopoldina (1777-1782)', in *Istituzioni e società in Toscana nell'età moderna. Atti delle giornate di Studio dedicate a Giuseppe Pansini*, ed. CLAUDIO LAMIONI (Roma: Poligrafico Zecca dello Stato, 1994), 426–508.

in conceiving a constitution which, had it been implemented, would have provided a comprehensive framework for his reforms, integrating them into the structure of a new state system.

A cornerstone of Pietro Leopoldo's reformist work was the reorganisation of territorial and administrative structures. This was based on the creation of the Comunità and the Camera delle Comunità, new representative bodies elected according to a census-based system (without religious or feudal discrimination). The community reform aimed to promote the participation and autonomy of citizens in public affairs, improve living conditions, and rationalise both local governance and relations between local and central authorities.[9]

Therefore, the community reform was intrinsically linked to the reform of public education, which, in turn, intersected with the renewal of welfare through the establishment of the Leopoldine Schools. Everything revolved around the issue of youth education, as the possibility of building a new state was (and still is) founded on investment in education—starting with the lower classes and women. For Pietro Leopoldo, this issue was crucial, to the extent that it became the most solid guiding principle of his governance.[10] The sovereign had a genuine and profound passion for—indeed, a true 'obsession' with—the topic of education at all levels. To address this, he relied on his most trusted advisors (Fabbroni, Neri, Mormorai) and the great Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Before initiating institutional transformations, he also devoted writings and reflections to the subject, which produced a unique 'Leopoldine pedagogy'. In order to provide the appropriate conceptual framework for Leopoldo's initiatives, a brief examination of this pedagogy is necessary—albeit limited to the specific aspect of schooling under discussion.

As evident from his *Notes sur l'éducation* (1775), Pietro Leopoldo drew many insights from pedagogical and Jansenist literature—such as e.g. the works of Fénelon, Locke, La Chalotais, Rousseau, Nicole, the Abbé Fleury, de Noailles, and from the vibrant Enlightenment debates of the time. He also looked to theoretical models (besides Pestalozzi's, probably also Basedow's revolutionary *Philanthropinum*) and practical examples of school reform implemented by rulers in Prussia, France, Italy, and especially the Austrian and Italian Habsburg domains, where such reforms were introduced in 1775.[11] His determination was fuelled by the state of education in

[9] BERNARDO SORDI, *L'amministrazione illuminata. Riforma delle comunità e progetti di costituzione nella Toscana leopoldina* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1991); GIULIO MANETTI, *La costituzione inattuata. Pietro Leopoldo Granduca di Toscana: dalla riforma comunitativa al progetto di costituzione* (Florence: Centro editoriale toscano, 1991); GIORGIO LA ROSA, *Il sigillo delle riforme. La 'Costituzione' di Pietro Leopoldo di Toscana* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1997).

[10] LUCIANA BELLATALLA, *Pietro Leopoldo di Toscana granduca- educatore. Teoria e pratica di un despota illuminato* (Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 1984); TERESA CALOGERO, *Scuole e comunità nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo*, with a preface by RICCARDO NENCINI and an introduction by LUIGI LOTTI, 3 vols (Florence: Edizioni dell'Assemblea, 2010); FILIPPO SANI, *Collegi, seminari e conservatori nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo. Tra progetto pedagogico e governo della società* (Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 2001); WANDRUSZKA, *Pietro Leopoldo*, 529–37.

[11] PIETRO LEOPOLDO DI TOSCANA, *Scritti inediti sull'educazione*, ed. LUCIANA BELLATALLA (Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 1990); JAMES VAN HORN MELTON, *Absolutism and the Eighteenth-Century Origins of Obbligo Schooling*

Tuscany, which was revealed through field investigations (later summarised, as usual, in his *Relazioni*). Education was entrusted to religious orders, almost exclusively reserved for the upper classes (with the exception of the Scuole Pie run by the Piarists), and was, overall, inconsistent and largely insufficient.[12]

These influences merged with Pietro Leopoldo's political and cultural vision, shaped, as noted, by movements and experiences that were flourishing in eighteenth-century Europe. The sovereign thus conceived a school aimed at forming new citizens—invested in and responsible for the economic and cultural development of the state, capable of acting rationally, independently, and with common sense, morally upright, and inspired by a sober religiosity. In Leopoldine thought—as in that of other reforming rulers—ideal and instrumental goals were intertwined: on the one hand, the pursuit of public happiness and societal growth through culture; on the other, the strengthening of the absolute state and its control, as well as the expansion of the administrative and economic workforce.[13]

In the *Notes sur l'éducation*, Pietro Leopoldo outlined the means to achieve these educational objectives: fostering knowledge and a passion for learning, practicing method, adherence to moral and spiritual precepts, and constant practical experience. He also provided a wealth of precise textual, didactic, and pedagogical guidelines; humanistic inclinations were highly valued alongside science.[14] Indeed, as Garin noted, 'the Enlightenment outcome […] was not a negation of humanism; it was the declaration that one can speak of human education only in a society of free individuals'. Pietro Leopoldo would have added: individuals who were well-regulated by and for the state.[15]

Removing education from Rome's traditional monopoly, was, in fact, the foundation of Pietro Leopoldo's school project—which was destined to advance initiatives already undertaken by Giulio Rucellai in the 1750s.[16] However, the revision of relations between the Tuscan state and the Catholic Church from a jurisdictionalist perspective was, in fact, a cornerstone of the Grand Duke's entire policy. In his ecclesiastical policy, Pietro Leopoldo was certainly more moderate than his brother Joseph II, and his decisions were not always consistent or successful, partly due to the resistance and challenges he faced. Nevertheless, in line with his deep adherence to Jansenist positions—particularly in their Italian adaptation—and his close relationship with its proponents, foremost among them the Bishop of Pistoia, Scipione de' Ricci, he consistently worked in favour of religious reform and against the centralism,

in Prussia and Austria (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); MARINA ROGGERO, *L'alfabeto conquistato. Apprendere e insegnare nell'Italia tra Sette e Ottocento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999).

[12] Cf. n. 9. PIETRO LEOPOLDO DI TOSCANA, *Relazioni sul governo della Toscana*, ARNALDO SALVESTRINI, ed., 3 vols (Florence: Olschki, 1969–1974), vol. 1, 16–18.

[13] On state control cf. SANDRO LANDI, *Il governo delle opinioni. Censura e formazione del consenso nella Toscana del '700* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000).

[14] PIETRO LEOPOLDO DI TOSCANA, *Scritti inediti sull'educazione*.

[15] EUGENIO GARIN, *L'educazione in Europa, 1400/1600* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1976), 281.

[16] CALOGERO, *Scuole e comunità nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo.*

absolutism, and interference of the Roman Curia in public life.[17] To implement the secularisation of education and welfare, the state took over the assets and functions of many religious institutions that were then suppressed. At the same time, Pietro Leopoldo experienced his political mission with a religious fervour, a product of his profound evangelical spirituality: ensuring the cultural development of his subjects was also a means of providing for their salvation.[18]

The ecclesiastical issue proved to be particularly significant concerning the condition of women. Pietro Leopoldo's primary objective was to remove women from the Church's control over education, but that was not his only goal.[19] He also intervened in the administration of dowries—private donations traditionally managed by religious and secular institutions—by transferring their management to the State.[20] Furthermore, the Grand Duke expressed deep disapproval of the widespread practice of monachisation, which, as is well known, was linked to family strategies but, in his view, had become 'excessive'. He also condemned the ignorance imposed on young girls by both society and their families, who often entrusted their education to nuns, restricting it to acts of piety.[21] Similarly, the care of girls and women without family ties was also taken away from religious institutions. Believing it a duty of the State to provide for the care and education of women and thus to ensure their redemption, he strongly promoted the creation of new institutions. Moreover, Pietro Leopoldo was a firm supporter of the views that, in Tuscany—thanks to figures such as Rucellai, Neri, Gianni, Scipione de' Ricci, and Mormorai—and in eighteenth-century Europe, recognised women's fundamental natural rights, intellectual capacities, and an active role in society, albeit without fundamentally departing from the traditional paradigm of the 'obedient wife'.[22] Although he continued to see women primarily as mothers within the family, the sovereign nonetheless assigned them a significant place in economic and social life—as workers, educators, and citizens. Men and women alike were called upon to contribute equally to the implementation of Pietro Leopoldo's eudemonistic vision.

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[17] BRUNA BOCCHINI and MARCELLO VERGA, eds, *Lettere di Scipione de' Ricci a Pietro Leopoldo 1780-1791* (Florence: Olschki, 1992).

[18] DANIELE EDIGATI, 'L'abolizione della giurisdizione temporale della Chiesa in Toscana. Linee ricostruttive di una lunga e complessa riforma leopoldina (1776-1784)', *Studi senesi* 121, nos 2–3 (2009): 281–336, 455–517; MARCELLO VERGA, 'Italienische Jansenisten', in *Italien in Europa: Die Zirkulation der Ideen im Zeitalter der Aufklärung,* eds FRANK JUNG and THOMAS KROLL (Paderborn: W. Funk, 2014), 185–200; WANDRUSKZA, *Pietro Leopoldo*, 494–519, 529–37.

[19] CALOGERO, *Scuole e comunità nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo*, vol. 1, 144 ff.; MARTA PIERONI FRANCINI, 'L'istruzione femminile nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo', *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* 2, no. 2 (1991): 7–24; CARLO FANTAPPIÉ, 'I conservatori toscani nell'età di Pietro Leopoldo: genesi e significato dell'istituto', in *Annali di Storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni ecclesiastiche* 2 (1995): 39–57; MARIA GRAZIA BIANCHI, *Le zitelle povere a Firenze e in Toscana. La condizione femminile sotto il governo di Pietro Leopoldo di Lorena* (Florence: Semper, 2005).

[20] MARIA LEUZZI FUBINI, *"Condurre a onore". Famiglia, matrimonio e assistenza dotale a Firenze in Età Moderna* (Florence: Olschki, 1999).

[21] PIETRO LEOPOLDO DI TOSCANA, *Relazioni*, vol. 1, 216.

[22] See note 3.

Based on these intellectual and political premises, Pietro Leopoldo undertook his groundbreaking school reform beginning in 1774 with the establishment of the Deputazione for public schools.[23] Numerous initiatives were launched to transform the existing deficient and disorganised educational landscape into a unified and systematic school system, placed under state control and managed by local communities, fostering a collective sense of responsibility for education. Schools were established in most communities, ensuring uniformity in both the curriculum and the recruitment of staff (through public competitions). Education was extended to all social classes and adapted accordingly, providing either a more comprehensive cultural instruction or a more professionalising one, but always accompanied by moral and religious teaching.

However, the reform faced resistance, practical difficulties, theoretical opposition, and compromises—particularly regarding the involvement of the clergy—that undermined its full implementation. The final act, the promulgation of the *Regolamento per tutte le scuole pubbliche* in 1788, remained unenforced due to the sovereign's transfer to Vienna and the outbreak of the French Revolution.

A significant innovation in female education was the restoration of the conservatories in 1785.[24] Inspired by Ricci, Pietro Leopoldo altered the traditional moral and religious purpose of ecclesiastical conservatories—originally intended to house repentant women and vulnerable girls—giving them a secular identity and an educational function. The new institutions were managed by public officials and lay educators. The conservatories, located in suppressed convents and monasteries, housed widows, women in unhappy marriages, poor girls, and children from various social backgrounds, providing them with both cultural and, to some extent, professional training. Education was tailored to different social classes: noblewomen, 'second-class' girls, and 'poor spinsters' followed distinct curricula. While poor girls continued to receive instruction in religious doctrine, basic schooling (reading, writing, and abacus), and female manual skills, young noblewomen and bourgeois girls were taught French, music, and drawing (but not dance), with financial contributions from their families.

Activities in conservatories were hindered by various practical issues: insufficient funds—drawn from church assets and only partially supplemented by state treasuries—spatial and structural inadequacies of the buildings, the decentralisation and limited number of institutions, lack of discipline on the part of the students, resistance from families, and uncertainty regarding the placement of the remaining

[23] CALOGERO, *Scuole e comunità nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo*; SANI, *Collegi, seminari e conservatori nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo*; MÓNICA VÁSQUEZ ASTORGA, *Scuole elementari comunali della città di Firenze: edifici, ordinamenti e metodi d'insegnamento* (Florence: Comune di Firenze, 2017).

[24] See note 18; CARLO FANTAPPIÉ, *Riforme ecclesiastiche e resistenze sociali. La sperimentazione istituzionale nella diocesi di Prato alla fine dell'antico regime* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986); MARCELLO VERGA, *Per "uno Stato terzo delle dame". Alcune considerazioni sul dibattito politico e culturale e le riforme ecclesiastiche nella Toscana del Settecento*, in *Storia religiosa dell'Austria*, eds FERDINANDO CITTERIO and LUCIANO VACCARO (Milan: Centro Ambrosiano, 1997), 253–94.

nuns, etc. Nonetheless, the conservatory reform represented a lasting and fruitful legacy of Pietro Leopoldo's educational policy, leading to significant theoretical and practical developments in nineteenth-century Florence.

The conservatories were an important component of the sovereign's response to various aspects of the 'female question', which had emerged in conjunction with broader societal transformations. The establishment of the Leopoldine Schools in 1778 represented a second key element, completing the structure of the new system.

This institution, as we will see, was situated at the crossroads of education and welfare. For Pietro Leopoldo, the latter issue represented the flip side of literacy for the lower classes and women, aligning with the Cameralist perspective. He saw the cultural, professional, moral, and religious education of children as an essential prerequisite for curbing poverty at its source—a social ill that also plagued Tuscany and required barriers to safeguard social order and the well-being of the State.

The Grand Duchy was no exception to the general and chronic economic precariousness typical of ancien régime societies, where the risk of falling into destitution was ever-present. The phenomenon of poverty, which worsened in the latter half of the eighteenth century, was driven by both structural and contingent factors: population growth, inadequate employment opportunities, relative food shortages, and constant threats such as famines, wars, epidemics, meagre harvests, and restrictions on the labour market.[25] Institutional responses, which for centuries had been entrusted to religious and private entities, were by then clearly revealing their limitations—characterised by a bloated nature, lack of oversight and consistency, uncoordinated structures, and financial shortages, leading to abuses and severe deficiencies.

Altogether, the welfare system in the Grand Duchy had fewer shortcomings.[26] In particular, Florence boasted an extensive network of institutions with an ancient

[25] From the rich bibliography, I would only cite GIORGIO POLITI, MARIO ROSA and FRANCO DELLA PERUTA, eds, *Timore e carità. I poveri nell'Italia moderna* (Cremona: Libreria del convegno, 1982); STUART J. WOLF, *Porca miseria. Poveri e assistenza nell'età moderna* (Rome: Laterza, 1988); PHILIPP GAVITT, *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410-1536* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990); MARINA GARBELLOTTI, *Per carità. Poveri e politiche assistenziali nell'Italia moderna* (Rome: Carocci, 2016); NICHOLAS TEPSTRA, *Cultures of Charity. Women, Polititics and Poor Relief in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); FRANCESCO AMMANNATI, ed., *Assistenza e solidarietà in Europa Secc. XIII-XVIII = Social assistance and solidarity in Europe from the 13th to the 18th Centuries* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2013); GABRIELLA PICCINNI, ed., *Alle origini del welfare. Radici medievali e moderne della cultura dell'assistenza* (Rome: Viella, 2020); DANIELA LOMBARDI, *Madri nubili e padri incerti. Secoli XVI-XIX* (Rome: Viella, 2024) (with bibliography). A very important source on the Florentine situation in the eighteenth century is ALESSANDRA CONTINI and FRANCESCO MARTELLI, eds, 'Il censimento del 1767. una fonte per lo studio della struttura professionale della popolazione di Firenze', in *Ricerche Storiche* 23, no. 1 (1993): 77–121.

[26] In addition to the aforementioned bibliography *ad ind.*, cf. DANIELA LOMBARDI, *Povertà maschile, povertà femminile. L'Ospedale dei mendicanti nella Firenze dei Medici* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988); STUART J. WOOLF and CAROLINE KAUFMANN, 'Charité, pauvreté et structure des ménages à Florence au début du XIX^e^ siècle', *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations* 39, no. 2 (1984): 355–82; GIOVANNI GOZZINI, *Il segreto dell'elemosina. Poveri e carità legale a Firenze, 1800-1870* (Florence: Olschki, 1993); PHILIPP GAVITT, *Gender, Honor and Charity in Late Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); NICHOLAS

tradition, managed by various entities but structured in a fairly organic manner, with a functional internal organisation divided by social class and age group. This system was the result of a series of reforms beginning with Cosimo I de' Medici, aligning it with new trends in centralisation, selectivity, and workforce integration (or coercion), which had gained prominence within the context of welfare management throughout Catholic and Protestant Europe since the sixteenth century.[27]

A crucial element was the central role assigned to labour, which became the primary means of escaping poverty—framed not only as a redemptive act in response to original sin, but also as a tool for controlling individuals potentially dangerous to social order, and as a source of economic utility for the city and the State. This work ethos materialised in forced labour within specialised institutions of confinement for able-bodied poor individuals. With a complete reversal of religious and moral perspectives, almsgiving was instead equated with fostering parasitism and delinquency, with fatal consequences for the social and political community.

In Florence, detention was generally not the preferred choice; however, Florentine institutions hosted an intense productive activity carried out by the assisted individuals since childhood, both inside and outside the institutions, and primarily in the textile industry. This labour force did contribute to the growth of the city's manufacturing or to the improvement of the individual condition of the poor.[28] However, like wage labourers, these manufacturers remained 'fragile and intermittent' figures, so much so that their social status was not fully defined.[29]

Since 1773, Pietro Leopoldo gave a strong boost to the Tuscan tradition of public welfare reform, demonstrating unique precocity in Italy, before the transformations of the French Revolution. The sovereign completed the process of rationalising and controlling state (and communal) institutions by suppressing religious entities and corporations, taking over the administration and funding of welfare, reorienting welfare institutions towards educational and professional training—especially for the most vulnerable (children)—and creating new institutions. The Grand Duke also promoted the adoption of laws regulating child labour and ensuring more humane working conditions, recognising the importance of human dignity in the economic context. Even the newly established 'House of Correction', intended for

TEPSTRA, *Lost Girls. Sex and Death in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010); TERPSTRA, *L'infanzia abbandonata nell'Italia del Rinascimento. Strategie di assistenza a confronto: Bologna e Firenze* (Bologna: Clueb, 2014). As a source, LUIGI PASSERINI, *Storia degli stabilimenti di beneficenza*, remains fundamental.

[27] THOMAS M. SAFLEY, ed., *The Reformation of Charity. The Secular and the Religious in Early Modern Poor Relief* (Boston: Brill, 2003); L. TORRES and H. RABAEY, eds, *Pauvres et pauvreté en Europe à l'époque moderne (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris: Garnier, 2016).

[28] LOMBARDI, *Povertà maschile, povertà femminile*, 102 ff.; CORINE MAITTE, 'Donner du travail aux pauvres: les logiques laborieuses dans les institutions charitables florentines aux XVII[e] et XVIII[e] siècle', in *Le istituzioni caritative come luoghi di lavoro (secc. XVI-XX)*, eds ANDREA CARACAUSI and CORINNE MAITTE, special issue, *Mediterranea. Ricerche Storiche* 48 (2020): 97–122.

[29] GOZZINI, *Il segreto dell'elemosina*, 12 f.

disciplining the 'young', the 'idle', and women leading a 'bad life', prioritised educational rather than punitive purposes.[30]

At the conclusion of his reign in Tuscany, Pietro Leopoldo could rightfully take pride in his work:

> Uno degli oggetti che fino dal nostro avvenimento al trono abbia maggiormente interessato la nostra attenzione è stato certamente quello della pubblica istruzione della gioventù. Persuasi che molti dei disordini, i quali turbano la quiete derivano in gran parte dalla ignoranza e dalla cattiva educazione, non abbiamo mancato in diversi tempi di arrecarvi i più efficaci rimedi.[31]

An 'effective remedy' was the establishment of the Leopoldine Schools in Florence, Pisa, Pistoia, Castiglion Fiorentino, Arezzo, Livorno, Montepulciano, Pietrasanta, Prato, and Siena.[32]

Leopoldine Schools: An Institution for the Emancipation from Poverty through Work and Education

On April 9, 1778, a royal *motuproprio* established the Normal Schools for spinsters, dedicated to the 'education and proper guidance of the spinsters of the city of Florence, particularly those who, due to their poverty, neglect, or the poverty of their parents, are the most ignored and deserving of greater care and provisions'.[33] In the Regulation written in 1782 by Senator Marco Covoni, Superintendent of the Schools, all details were outlined with extreme precision, including the features, functioning, and objectives of the schools, as well as their activities, educational goals, target audience, internal staff organisation, required professional profiles, building locations, administration, detailed scheduling, roles, duties, and daily commitments. The overall picture that emerged was one of new institutions, founded on an alternative conception of public assistance and women education. Despite some traditionalist aspects, these institutions aimed to promote a shift in women's personal identity and social role while improving their living conditions.

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[30] SARA DELLA VISTA, 'Varcare la soglia della casa di correzione: disciplinamento di discoli e oziosi e "donne di mala vita"', *Annali di storia di Firenze* 12 (2017): 11–42.

[31] 'One of the issues that has most attracted our attention since our ascension to the throne has certainly been the public education of the youth. Convinced that many of the disorders disturbing the peace derive largely from ignorance and bad education, we have not failed at various times to bring effective remedies'. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Esteri*, ins. 5, c. 1: cited by PIERONI FRANCINI, *L'istruzione femminile nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo*, 10.

[32] GIOVANNI RESTI, *L'istruzione popolare a Siena nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1987); GUIDO SONNINO, 'La scuola elementare pubblica e privata a Livorno dalle origini all'anno 1866', *Bollettino storico livornese* 3, no. 1 (1953): 3–43. Other schools have not been studied.

[33] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 16, *Filza I. Affari spediti delle Reali Scuole Normali delle povere zittelle della città di Firenze dall'anno 1787 al 1790*, fasc. 1. The regulation was published by Gaetano Cambiagi, the printer for the Grand Duke, under the title *Stabilimento delle scuole erette in Firenze a benefizio delle zittelle povere sotto la protezione di sua Altezza Reale il Serenissimo Pietro Leopoldo I arciduca d'Austria, Granduca di Toscana*: ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 34, *Affari spediti* 1865-1869, fasc. 5, *Comunicazione*, 1869. From this point onward, I will cite these documents without repeating the reference and in my own English translation.

The Leopoldine Schools were public and secular, managed with relative autonomy by a superintendent and staffed with teachers and other personnel, whom we will discuss below. They were located in the four neighbourhoods of Florence, in convenient and easily accessible locations so that 'no candidate was deprived of such a benefit'. They were created within two years, in buildings of pre-existing institutions. The first was the School of St. Catherine, located in the suppressed Conservatorio di Santa Caterina degli Abbandonati, and designated for the San Giovanni neighbourhood. The School of San Salvatore took over the former Conservatorio dei Mendicanti in the Santo Spirito neighbourhood. The School of San Giorgio was placed in the ancient military hospital called the 'Cavalleggeri' in the Santa Croce neighbourhood. Finally, the School of San Paolo was established in 1780, in part of the suppressed San Paolo Hospital called 'dei Convalescenti' in the Santa Maria Novella neighbourhood.[34] The Schools were funded with income from various real estate properties, the manufacturing activities carried out within them, and funds from the Royal Depository, and administered by the Confraternity of the Bigallo through land rents, interest-bearing loans from private individuals and public entities, which covered all personnel expenses, building maintenance, furnishings, as well as machinery and textbooks, which were provided free of charge to the students.[35]

The Schools were intended for girls from the age of seven until marriage, though the duration could extend beyond that depending on additional admission requests. Letters of sponsorship from priests or other public figures were not required. However, strict regulations governed access to the schools. Specific registers were created, listing the student's name and parents, neighbourhood, parish, street address with house number, age, date of admission and departure from the school, the school they were admitted to, and sometimes comments on their conduct. These records were intended for proper administration but also served to closely monitor their behaviour, 'with the effect of being able to track them in case of improper absences, and providing guidance and regulation for those managing them'. Priority for admission was given to girls residing in the same neighbourhoods as the school.

An innovation was that students attended the Schools only during the day, arriving accompanied by a family member—a clear indication of the different nature and purpose of the Schools compared to conservatories. Attendance was required daily, except on holidays and feast days, according to a schedule posted in each school.

The curriculum also had new features, albeit aligned with Pietro Leopoldo's general vision. Completely free of charge, the education aimed at cultural, moral, religious, and, most importantly, professional development. The Schools provided 'the daughters of the lower classes with religious education and catechism, as well as intellectual education, reading, writing, arithmetic', alongside 'general notions of

[34] The Schools were located on via delle Ruote, via di Camaldoli, Corso dei Tintori and in Piazza di Santa Maria Novella.
[35] Tracing the assets of the Leopoldine Schools—well-documented in the rich records of the Fondo—is not the purpose of this paper.

history and geography' and 'rules of decency and elegance appropriate to the girls' status'. However, their primary goal was teaching 'women's work, such as knitting, sewing, and weaving, whether ribbons, linen cloths, or wool of any kind'. These activities shaped the student into 'an industrious worker and a good mother', as well as a modest woman, 'little, if at all, attached to luxury and fashion'. Such occupations were intended 'as the basics for each woman', in her family and social life, and as such, the students were expected to focus on them primarily. Given their significance, practical instructions were also provided on work methods: for silk weavers, it was necessary to start 'methodically, from threading and everything needed to form a good weaver', while for wool weavers, it was essential to 'first learn to spin and then weave tight and loose cloths, thus combining a broader understanding of the craft with a more versatile and easier way to earn'.

Yes, to earn. The Leopoldine Schools indeed offered the students solid prospects of accumulating money—both for themselves, to build the dowry needed for marriage, and for their families, for whom their earnings generally represented the 'only heritage'. The manufacturing production of the Schools was ordered and sold to external parties, both private individuals and public entities, with the proceeds distributed among the workers. We will discuss below the exact proceeds and the initiatives taken by the person in charge to preserve and improve manufacturing production. For now, it is important to highlight the moral criteria underlying this activity: the works, especially those involving sewing, should never follow 'indecent fashions' and must not be 'contrary to modesty and good manners'. The earnings were paid to the students both as compensation for the work performed, according to established tables ('as a reward'), and to encourage them to improve, serving as a prize with significant symbolic value. It was in fact granted in coincidence with 'the annual exercises and public functions of moral building', which had been introduced specifically to 'inspire the aforementioned girls to distinguish themselves in the benefit they derive from such establishments'. Aligning with professional and mercantile rationale, the manufactures were not made 'for the schools' profit'. Experience showed that 'dealings on behalf of the public administration, in addition to encountering the hatred of the merchants and the public […] were less motivating for workers due to the suspicion that others might exploit their labour'. As part of efforts to protect the students, when the workload required late hours, the superintendent of the Schools would set the schedules and methods, 'in order to combine proper economy with necessary precautions, ensuring that the girls are well supervised and returned to their relatives'.

In addition to their income, the most deserving students with eight years of school attendance could receive one of the twenty annual dowries, each amounting to a substantial 140 scudi, from the bequest of Carlo Del Sera. The dowries were very attractive, given their fundamental importance in the lives of women during the ancien

régime.[36] Indeed, as we will see, they were the main object of negotiation for students. Additional rewards and prizes for professional merits and conduct were also available.

Daily organisation and disciplining behaviour contributed to the formation of the students according to specific moral and social standards. The school schedule was from October 1 to March 31, from 8 AM to 12 PM and from 2 PM until half an hour before the Angelus prayer at sunset; during other months, from 7 AM to 12 PM and from 3 PM onward. During the break, lunch was consumed either at home or in designated areas under supervision, but never in the classrooms 'to avoid disturbing the order and cleanliness of the school' and to allow rest for the teachers. Inside the Schools, a strict rule of 'absolute and constant silence' was enforced, to prevent 'confusion or disturbance'; speaking in a low voice was only allowed in cases of necessity. The students' behaviour was under continuous and public supervision by the teachers of the manufacturing activities. Each day, the teachers had to display a table with the students' names, attached to the door of the classrooms, indicating their shortcomings and significant achievements, later recorded in the school register. In case of negligence and inappropriate behaviour, the girls were corrected by the teachers 'with zeal and charity', towards 'silence and obedience, as well as modesty in attire, morality, and external conduct'; in severe cases, the superintendent would intervene. Education continued beyond the Schools, as students were required to attend religious instruction in their parish on holidays, reaffirming the central role of religion in female education.

Schools were organised according to a clear hierarchy. At the top was the superintendent. Appointed by the king and not salaried, the superintendent had full responsibility in managing the Schools in all areas, from financial, administrative, disciplinary, and productive matters to staff coordination, with staff chosen by him and then approved by the sovereign authority. Senator Marco Covoni Girolami Bettoni, commissioner of the Confraternity of the Bigallo (in charge of managing the former assistance institution and its associated estates) and creator of the model statute of the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, held this position from 1778 until 1804.

However, the direction of the Schools was assigned to female teachers of professional training—which highlighted the unprecedented public valorisation of women in both the personal and professional spheres. The teachers were five or six, one for each subject, such as weaving, sewing, etc. The requirements for appointment were both moral and professional, as candidates had to be 'of proven honesty, capable of teaching with zeal and charity'. A very important and strongly emphasised principle was the obligation not to belong to ecclesiastical orders, meaning they had to have an 'entirely secular status'. Although they were 'not bound by vows or any religious community', their behaviour had to be morally impeccable, 'suitable for the seriousness and delicacy of their duties', and in compliance with the regulations and

[36] On Florence, and for a comparison on the amount of the dowries, see LEUZZI FUBINI, *"Condurre a onore"*; ISABELLE CHABOT, *La dette des familles. Femmes, lignage et patrimoine à Florence aux XIV^e et XV^e siècle* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2011).

'spirit' of the Schools. This rectitude was essential for both personal dignity and the moral edification of the students, as well as for institutional reasons, 'to combine decency, safety, and peace for each individual, as well as good order, unity, and economy for the respective communities'. The private and public spheres coincided, converging toward a single goal: the welfare of the community. With their institutional role, the teachers acquired a new, significant public responsibility in performing their work, which took on an almost sacred function—referred to as a 'ministry'. Personal identity gained more importance in society. Teachers were like Vestals of female education.

Therefore, the teachers were subject to a strict moral code. It was strictly forbidden to accept tips or gifts from students, to avoid injustices or preferences that could damage the 'good order and the common profit'. For the same reason, hosting students for meals and overnight stays was also forbidden. Finally, outsiders were not allowed into the school unless in urgent cases decided by the superintendent.

The teachers' lives were governed by almost monastic rules, though aimed at fostering a strong sense of belonging—the School was considered their 'own home' to which they should give 'common affection'—as well as dignity, and joy for the work they performed for society. Their attire had to be austere, appropriate to their role, especially when going out (when they had to wear the black cap). Outings were highly discouraged, as were contacts with outsiders, to ensure peace while performing their duties; order, decorum, and cleanliness had to prevail even in their homes. Devotional rites (prayers, recitation of theological virtues, rosary, participation in sacraments, etc.) structured their entire day from morning until evening, under the guidance of the priest, who was also the spiritual director and catechism teacher; each school had an oratory or a church. Thanksgiving prayers were to be offered to God for the benefits received and to obtain the grace to fulfil their 'delicate duties' to the best of their ability.

The moral and religious vigilance over the students was, as mentioned earlier, ever-present. After waking early in the morning, the teachers would greet the students upon their arrival to prevent confusion outside the school and reduce the chances for misconduct, immediately imposing prayers and invocations so they could 'awaken the divine presence'; they enforced silence and the recitation of prayers during work and breaks; they checked the cleanliness of the premises at the end of the day. Meals provided a moment of relaxation for the teachers, who ate together in the refectory with the appropriate prayers, followed by a break and walks in the garden or other designated areas. In winter, they were required to gather after dinner in the common room to work together and contribute to 'union and domestic society with good grace and cheerfulness', but only until 10 PM to stay healthy, efficient for the next day's work, and not 'waste light unnecessarily'. Outings had to be rare and in groups, and had to conclude before the communal lunch.

Teaching at the Leopoldine Schools not only granted the teachers social recognition but also good economic conditions compared to other women's jobs.[37] They received a monthly salary of five scudi, were provided with furnished accommodation within the Schools (including bed, linen, lighting, and more), had medical expenses covered, and earned from their manufacturing work. Meals were provided by the custodian or the provisioner, while household chores were performed by a woman. Upon ending their service due to age or illness, they were assigned a pension equal to their salary; if they decided to marry or enter a convent, they could receive a dowry.

Teachers, in turn, were overseen by the first teacher, who was selected by the superintendent based on merit and leadership qualities in various aspects (a 'subject most capable of overseeing the moral and economic direction of each school'). The first teacher was confirmed annually based on considerations regarding the institution's benefit, but also 'in light of the greatest satisfaction of the individuals who comprised it': community spirit inspired this choice as well.

The first teacher had many duties. In collaboration with the superintendent, they involved overseeing the good order of the 'family and respective community', the maintenance of linens, furniture, food supplies, the cook, the teachers' clothing, expenses, managing school costs, income from work, and general domestic economy. All accounts at the end of the month were submitted with her signature. She oversaw the compliance with internal regulations, the schedule of the day (marking the time for lessons, prayers, etc.), and the entry of outsiders.

The first teacher also supervised the work of male instructors who taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, while the teachers collaborated with them to ensure that the students received a good education. However, professional learning held significantly greater importance than theoretical knowledge, which was limited to a few basic notions taught in a handful of hours. Instructors—two for each School—were selected by the superintendent based on their 'well-known probity, prudence, and skill'. However, they could not be alone in the classroom with the students and worked alongside the female colleagues. These colleagues recorded the students' conduct and progress daily, submitting reports to the superior twice a month, and could request additional lessons for students who showed more promise. Instructors were also expected to adhere to a strict conduct and avoid 'chatter, notes, telling tales and visits'. The instructors' duties involved teaching good handwriting, mathematics (including time tables), and reading—although probably not history and geography, as the regulation required—twice a week, as well as correcting the students' homework. According to the available documentation, the financial and working conditions were not very satisfactory. They received eight scudi per month, plus ten annually, which they had to use to cover expenses for ink, paper, etc., and moved between schools for

[37] Cf. for exemple, the salaries of the female workers in the city factories: ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 17, *Affari spediti dalle* R. *Scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1789 al 1794*, fasc. 31.

two lessons a week, for a total of five hours per day, with very large classes of approximately 150 students per school.

The school staff included an accountant, a treasurer, a porter, and a janitor, whose duties, responsibilities, and salaries were clearly specified for the proper management of the institutions and their financial resources. The monthly payment registers, income records and annual school budgets compiled by the accountant and signed by the superintendent are of particular historical significance. The regulations of the institution were also reflected in the supervisory tasks assigned to the porter, who oversaw the students' conduct and behaviour, as well as the cooperative duties of the janitor.

Order, organisation, and new goals defined the life of the Leopoldine Schools. What set them apart as new and exclusive was their nature as institutions managed by women and aimed to bring about a life change for many girls and women, while also creating better life prospects. Their significance was also enhanced by their continuity throughout the nineteenth century. The regulations remained intact through the revolutionary period and the unification of Italy. New research may reveal potential changes in their activities and social function within these altered contexts.

Life and Work in the Leopoldine Schools

The documentation on the Leopoldine Schools is substantial, both in quantity and in the variety of research it allows across various fields, from the history of women's labour, to the history of manufacturing economics, the geography of poverty in Florence, school building, and, of course, the history of welfare and education. For the purposes of our research, certain aspects of the institution's activity are more amenable to analysis than others. In particular, the identity and personal stories of the students and staff remain obscure, with only a few scarce glimpses available. However, some data can be extracted about their scope and professional activity, highlighting the value of their role. More generally, this data allows us to understand the impact of the Leopoldine Schools on female welfare, professional, and educational spheres, as well as their influence in the broader society of late eighteenth-century Florence.

Financial reports and documents related to the manufacturing work provide extensive information. First, we can infer that, in the first twenty years of operation, the Leopoldine Schools accommodated a consistent number of approximately 500/600 students. Each year, twenty of them received a dowry, allocated according to criteria unrelated to their manufacturing work, so they were evenly divided between weavers, seamstresses, etc. The students' contribution to the overall financial balance of the schools was substantial, as shown by a comparison of the annual budgets. For instance, the 1784 budget reveals that at the San Paolo School, 171 students generated 944 scudi 6 lire in revenue, against sales valued at 998 scudi 3 lire 12 soldi, with total income of 1,802 scudi 23 lire 6 soldi, and total expenses of 2,173 scudi 6 soldi (resulting in a loss for the Schools of 1,090 scudi 5 lire 6 soldi). In the overall budget, the value of the work done and paid by respective merchants for the four schools amounted to

3,533 scudi 6 lire 4 soldi, with 671 girls receiving a total of 3,542 scudi 6 lire 17 soldi as wages and rewards.[38] An important 1793 report on the silk merchants, spinners, dyers, combers, and folder workers in Florence—aimed at detailing the number of employed and unemployed individuals—showed that 6,309 women were employed, compared to 171 men. In total, 9,630 workers were employed, with 2,607 unemployed, making a total of 12,237 people.[39]

Letters and records related to work commissioned by third parties (recorded in the *Giornali dei lavori*) are equally interesting. The schools received orders for textile products (wool, linen, ermisino, cotton, hemp, veils, ribbons, drapes) and sewing work, depending on the market conditions. Their clients included institutions such as the Confraternity of the Bigallo—which they provided with clothing for orphans (socks, shirts, etc.)—the Order of the Knights of St. Stephen—for whom they wove silk from the Val di Chiana—and the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, as well as private clients.[40] Among the regular customers were well-known local merchants, such as Gasparo Bonaiuti, who sold silk fabrics from the Leopoldine Schools in his shop in the Mercato Nuovo, and the company of Giuseppe Marchionni and Sons, a wool merchant. After three years of a profitable contract with the schools, financed by a substantial investment of 15,000 scudi, Pietro Donarche, a merchant and machinery supplier, became a partner in 1786. However, the partnership ended badly with a legal dispute and the loss of many goods.[41] It is also through these circumstances that we can understand the extent and quality of the work done by the students, as well as the types of materials used and their respective costs.

Subsequently, the schools were commissioned to produce trousseaux for noble families.[42] The financial investment in the manufacturing production was typically borne by the schools, including machinery and labour. The superintendent was very active in securing work for the schools and was attentive to innovations in textile techniques and machinery. This attention was not solely economic; it also reflected the importance placed on the good functioning of the Schools. Indeed, Covoni himself expressed this to the Grand Duke in 1793, requesting permission to purchase a large batch of silk worth 1,500 scudi to allow the students to work and seek commissions. He justified the request by citing the importance of work for the economy and morality against idleness: these 'poor creatures' should not be deprived of the advantage of a good education and a decent livelihood, lest they 'add to the current number of idle and wandering women, who increase disorder and irregularity'. His great fear was the 'fatal consequences they could be exposed to and the bad habits unfortunately […]

[38] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 16, *Affari spediti dalle R. Scuole normali delle povere zittelle dall'anno 1778 all'anno 1796*, fasc. 12.
[39] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 17, *Affari spediti dalle R. Scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1789 al 1794*, fasc. 31.
[40] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 177, *Quaderno di seta cruda*, 1795-1800; Scuole leopoldine, 16, *Affari spediti dalle R. Scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1778 al 1796*, fasc. 5; Scuole leopoldine, 17, *Affari spediti dalle R. Scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1789 al 1794*, fasc. 1.
[41] Ibidem, *ad ind.*; cfr. VÁZQUEZ ASTORGA, *Le Scuole leopoldine di Firenze*, 40 ss. (reporting Donarche).
[42] VÁZQUEZ ASTORGA, *Le Scuole leopoldine di Firenze*, 42.

fomented by idleness and begging, […] which are inevitable in such dire circumstances, unless timely interventions offer some remedy'.[43] In line with this objective, Covoni promoted the introduction in 1789 of a new machine for the reeling of raw silk, which had been presented to him by Giovan Battista Carioni of Cremona and his wife Maria. Covoni praised the machine for the 'intelligence of this type of manufacturing, the evident benefit for the workers, and the ease with which the method could be learned'. In fact, the processing of silk increased by 4/5, reaching one pound in winter and 2/3 in summer.[44]

On the other hand, there is very limited data regarding the students' identity. The enrolment registers do not provide information about their social background or the professions of their parents; similarly, the merit tables or other records kept by the teachers are also unavailable. Additionally, no details are known about their professional or personal lives after receiving their dowries or rewards.

This silence is occasionally interrupted by a few letters regarding the transfer of the dowry to another person. To confirm the importance of this primary 'asset', the beneficiaries tried to ensure that relatives or friends could benefit from it if they did not marry. To justify the transfer, they recounted their lives, offering a glimpse into the condition of the students, and sometimes the teachers. Testimonies from priests regarding the truth of their statements, despite the repetition of formulas, offer additional valuable details. Similarly, Covoni's reports to the ruler on these transfers, particularly those aimed at denying them in accordance with the regulations, are notably detailed.

A few examples. Eleonora Boboli, a student in the textile workshops of the San Paolo School, described herself as miserable, with four sisters, and elderly, disabled parents, and wished to transfer her dowry to her sister Rosa, who could not 'go forward with the engagement due to lacking even a bed'. The marriage of her sister could provide housing for the sisters in case of the parents' death. The priest confirmed that Eleonora was 'extremely poor and frail'.[45] Teresa Moncelli submitted a very touching petition. She asked for half of the dowry she had received after fourteen years of diligent and productive attendance at the knitting, ribbon, and sewing classes at the San Giorgio School, and requested that the remainder be given to a relative who 'is about to receive the ring', since, 'due to her misfortune', she could not enjoy it. The money would be of 'great relief to her very poor household'. She and her three sisters had been orphaned by their father when they were children and were 'oppressed beyond belief by poverty and deprivation of everything necessary to live'. They did not know how to 'procure even the merest necessary sustenance', having exhausted the

[43] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 17, Filza II, *Affari spediti delle reali scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1789 al 1794*, fasc. 23.
[44] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 17, Filza II, *Affari spediti delle reali scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1789 al 1794*, fasc. 31 (including a description of the functions of the machine).
[45] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 17, Filza II, *Affari spediti delle reali scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1789 al 1794*, fasc. 32.

proceeds from selling their few possessions and loans.[46] Giovanna Lampera, a student at the San Salvatore School, asked to transfer her dowry to her sister, a former student, to enter the religious order at the San Benedetto convent in Arezzo, after years of waiting due to the poverty and old age of her father.[47] Margherita Chelazzi, a former student at the San Salvatore School, needed her dowry to start her new job with more dignity: she wished to purchase clothing for her position as a teacher in Siena, a position she had secured due to her professional skill.[48]

The assessments included in the final observations of the enrolment registers are much more cryptic and very rare: 'with grace', 'with propriety', 'with due decorum and propriety', but also 'without any propriety', as in the case of Maria Anna Cianchi, admitted in 1812 and leaving in 1818.[49]

The documentation related to the teachers is also interesting, as it confirms the disparity in treatment between the male and female teachers. Covoni was very attentive to the requests of the female teachers. For instance, he granted a dowry ('ricaduta', i.e. unclaimed) to Anna Buggini, a former ribbon teacher at the San Giorgio School, to fulfil her dream of joining the Salesian convent in Pescia, despite being forty years old, due to her faithful and diligent service and her status as an orphan.[50] Similarly, he provided a pension of five scudi, as well as a bed and a generous quantity of linens, to Anna Dreoni and Caterina Lensi, teachers at the San Giorgio School, because they had become invalids after a long and honourable service.[51] The instructor Giuseppe Farolfi, however, had to write several petitions and submit medical and ecclesiastical certificates to receive a salary increase, followed by a transfer (to the corps of Royal Guards) or retirement. His situation was very difficult. He suffered from kidney disease, aggravated by the effort of teaching large classes and walking between schools. His salary was low, and he could not supplement it with other work, leading to insurmountable debts. His large family of five children and one disabled sister-in-law had been struck by severe hardships (the murder of his eldest son, the death of his wife in hospital due to lack of care, theft of their bed and tableware, etc.), and was living in a pervasive state of poverty, to the point that his daughters had been placed in a convent, 'having found them in a sea of misery, completely naked, and without even beds and linens'.[52]

[46] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 17, Filza II, *Affari spediti delle reali scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1789 al 1794*, fasc. 51.
[47] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 18, *Filza di affari spediti dal 1795 a tutto il 1798,* fasc. 4.
[48] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 17, *Affari spediti delle R. Scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1789 al 1794*, fasc. 6.
[49] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 156, *Registro delle ragazze che si ammettono alle scuole 1798-1824, ad annum.*
[50] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 18, *Filza di affari spediti dal 1795 a tutto il 1798*, fasc. 30.
[51] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 18, *Filza di affari spediti dal 1795 a tutto il 1798*, fasc. 31.
[52] ASCFI, Scuole leopoldine, 18, *Filza di affari spediti dal 1795 a tutto il 1798*, fasc. 52; Scuole leopoldine, 16, *Affari spediti dalle R. Scuole normali delle povere zittelle dall'anno 1778 all'anno 1796*, fasc. 3; Scuole leopoldine, 17, *Affari spediti dalle R. Scuole normali delle povere zittelle di Firenze dall'anno 1789 al 1794*, fasc. 7, 16; Scuole leopoldine, 18, *Filza di affari spediti dal 1795 a tutto il 1798*, fasc. 52, 61.

In the ancien régime society, these were stories of everyday poverty, to which the Leopoldine Schools sought to offer a remedy through work and education.

Conclusions

The pursuit of emancipation from poverty through education, employment, and moral and religious upbringing constituted the central objective of the Leopoldine School established by Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo in Tuscany. They introduced an innovative approach to the social assistance of women: secular, state-administered, and preventative, aiming to mitigate poverty not by mere charity or confinement, but through vocational and educational training intended to form citizens both useful to and participatory in the welfare of the state. The institution sought to transform the life trajectories and identities of poor girls—future women—by enabling their intellectual and professional development, thereby granting them an active societal role along with a renewed sense of dignity and personal and social worth. It is true that the educational model reflected a well-defined, prescriptive ideal of womanhood, rooted in top-down principles of the time. Nevertheless, the Leopoldine Schools marked a significant innovation in eighteenth-century Italy: their secular character and their focus on elevating the condition of impoverished women represented a distinctly civic and eudaimonistic outlook. Though some features remained traditional, the institution endeavoured to reshape both the personal identity of its students and their social functions, improving their living conditions accordingly. The daily structure of the schools was shaped by this purpose. Unlike traditional conservatories, attendance was required only during the day. The curriculum, though in alignment with Pietro Leopoldo's broader vision, contained notable innovations. All instruction was offered free of charge and sought to impart not only cultural, moral, and religious notions but above all vocational skills. The Schools provided religious instruction and catechism, as well as basic intellectual education—reading, writing, arithmetic, general knowledge of history and geography, and lessons in propriety. Their primary aim, however, was to teach domestic skills such as knitting, sewing, and weaving, fostering in the students the qualities of industrious workers, good mothers, and modest women. These occupations were deemed essential for every woman's familial and social life, and were thus a central aspect of the educational program.

Vocational activities offered practical opportunities for students to earn income, thereby allowing them to accumulate savings toward dowries for marriage or to support their families. Particularly deserving and long-serving students could receive one of twenty annual dowries designated by the bequest of Carlo Del Sera—a highly attractive opportunity given the importance of dowries for women under the ancien régime. Additional rewards and distinction for professional merit and conduct were also available. The structure of the daily routine and strict behavioural regulations served to inculcate specific moral and social standards.

The Leopoldine Schools also transformed the identity and social roles of female teachers. Subject to the authority of a principal teacher, they collectively managed

institutional operations—a noteworthy public recognition of women's capabilities. Admission required both professional and moral qualifications, with the explicit stipulation that teachers could not belong to religious orders. The principal teacher, appointed by the schools' superintendent based on merit and leadership ability and reconfirmed annually, was responsible for supervising educational activities, school property, and all staff. Teachers' conduct was required to exemplify strict morality and adherence to institutional norms and ethos; their lives were regulated almost monastically, intended to cultivate a profound sense of belonging essential both to personal dignity and institutional mission. The convergence of private and public interest was directed toward the common good.

Within this institutional role, teachers acquired unprecedented public responsibility, their profession attaining an almost sacred dimension—significantly, it was referred to as a 'ministry'. This conferred on women a new social identity and standing. Teaching at the Leopoldine Schools guaranteed female instructors not only social recognition but also a stable and respectable economic condition

New research focusing on the biographical trajectories of both students and teachers may provide evidence regarding the actual effectiveness of the Leopoldine Schools in enhancing their personal and social identities. Nonetheless, the establishment of these institutions in itself represented a significant opportunity, inaugurating a novel pathway for identity formation in the modern era.