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# REPRESENTATIONS OF THE COURTESAN IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY VENICE: SEX, CLASS, AND POWER

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## ABSTRACT

Towards the end of the fifteenth century in Italy an upwardly mobile, morally questionable, and highly erudite woman appeared on the social and literary circuit: the courtesan. Technically a prostitute, she rose above her often dubious beginnings to bask in the prestige accorded to society's elite. Although revered by some, her blatant transgression of traditional gender roles and class hierarchies offended many others. The writings of her detractors attempted to lower the courtesan's status to that of a common prostitute, by ridiculing her intellectual achievements and by depicting her as unclean and diseased. This thesis, which focuses on sixteenth-century Venice, will examine six works criticizing courtesans, and demonstrate what each work reveals about the dynamics of power in sixteenth-century gender and power relations, as they manifested themselves in the sexual arena.

## RÉSUMÉ

À la fin du quinzième siècle en Italie une femme des lettres d'une moralité douteuse montait aux niveaux les plus hauts de la société: la courtisane. Effectivement une prostituée, elle contrevient les règles de genre et de caste pour être admirée par les hommes les plus riches et intellectuels. Même si elle était accepter par plusieurs hommes, il y en avait d'autres qui étaient incensés par son succès. Ces derniers écrivaient pour la dénigrer en l'associant avec des souillures de la prostituée, comme la saleté et les maladies, la syphilis en particulièr. Cette thèse, qui se limite à Venise au seizième siècle, discuterà six oeuvres condannant les courtisanes, et montrerà ce que ces oeuvres révèle sur la dynamique de pouvoir entre les classes sociales et les genres, comme elle se manifestait dans les rapports sexuels.

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## Introduction
## Courtesans in Sixteenth-Century Venice

In sixteenth-century Venice, a campaign of words was waged against courtesans, many of whom built their image through their own writings and the writings of their most illustrious clients. The function of courtesans' writings was twofold: to flatter their aristocratic admirers while publicizing their relationships with them, and to establish themselves as capable literary figures in their own right. While courtesans' writings are, for the most part, fairly uniform, consisting of encomia dedicated to their supporters and Petrarchan love poetry addressed to an anonymous desired man, the writings of their detractors range from mild castigation of the courtesan's venal immorality, to virulent poetic assaults on every aspect of the courtesan's body. The variety of styles and tones employed by their detractors reflects the wider scope of their intent, which was to "act out" personal vendettas, to express their discomfort with the high status accorded to courtesans, or to voice their disgust at a corrupt society, symbolized by the courtesan.

The courtesan occupied a troubling position in society, as she transgressed the boundaries both of gender roles and of the rigidly stratified social hierarchy of the time. Her prestige was doubly problematic; her aristocratic image belied her usually humble origins and her body remained her own commodity,[1] as it was not the property of a husband, like the wife's body, nor was it the property of God, like the nun's, nor was it rented, as was the prostitute's body. In a

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[1]For a discussion of Renaissance women's bodies as commodities, both exchangeable (daughters) and private (mothers), see Carla Freccero, "Economy, Woman, and Renaissance Discourse," *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, eds. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 192-208.

sense, she inverted the power relations between men and women. She distributed her favors according to her preferences, based on the social status of the lover and often on emotional or erotic ties as well, which was exactly what men did in choosing their wives and lovers.

The uneasiness fostered by the courtesan's liminal position was exacerbated by her success in the public sphere of literature. This was reflected in contemporary writings, which extol her beauty and refinement while denouncing her greed and pretensions of grandeur and erudition.[2] Because she was, on many levels, an anomaly, to many writers she became a symbol of the chaos of the time. Their writings, especially the more personal invectives, reflect not merely their perception of courtesans, but their perception of themselves, their social status, their actual relationships to these courtesans, and what they felt their position vis-a-vis the courtesan ought to be.

As courtesans constructed an image of themselves through their letters and their poetry, so their detractors aimed at deconstructing those very images. The courtesan wrote to fit into the social elite, and her writings reveal her intent to at least appear to be obeying gender conventions, when in reality, she did not.[3] Many of her detractors' writings attempted to demystify the courtesan, to tear away the myths that shrouded her, and to place her within a context that would have made more sense to the men of this period, that is, to place her in the only traditional female role appropriate to unchaste women, that of the prostitute. While the

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[2]In fact, sometimes both praise and criticism were found in the works of the same author, or even in the same work. Paul Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne des courtisanes en Italie au temps de la Renaissance (Rome et Venise, Xve et XVIe siècles)* (Paris: Hachette, 1975) 126.

[3]Fiora Bassanese, "Selling the Self; or, the Epistolary Production of Renaissance Courtesans," *Italian Women Writers from the Renaissance to the Present: Revising the Canon*, ed. Maria Ornella Marotti (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State, 1996) 78.

writings of courtesans, and of their supporters, made a distinction between the *cortigiana onesta* and the *meretrix*, or *puttana*, the works condemning the courtesan refute this distinction, and refer to courtesans as simply *puttane*.

The position of the prostitute in society is always an ambiguous one. She is necessary in order to allow men a measure of sexual freedom while ensuring they do not indulge in practices destructive to the fabric of society. The sixteenth century in Italy was a time when prostitution, and in particular courtesanry, flourished, especially in large cities like Venice, where, towards the end of the century, prostitutes and elegant courtesans had become a famous tourist attraction. In a way, these wealthy, cultured, charming, beautiful, and relatively independent women served as a metaphor for Venice itself. As a maritime city whose main source of wealth was trade, it had a large transient population of foreign businessmen,[4] which may have contributed to the high demand for prostitutes. Some estimate the number of prostitutes in Venice at that time to have been as high as ten per cent of the population.[5]

In Renaissance Venice practices deemed destructive to society included fornication with an honorable man's wife, daughter or other relative, and homosexuality. However, as a woman's honor, and more importantly the honor of the men who shared kinship or marital bonds with her, was bound to her chastity, prostitutes, who provided men with a sexual release outside of marriage, were looked upon with contempt. The hatred and disgust felt collectively towards prostitutes may also have been intensified by the rapid spread of syphilis, which first made its

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[4]Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 170n4.

[5]Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991) 78.

appearance in the last decade of the fifteenth century.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the rise of a new kind of prostitute, the "honest courtesan," who was refined, well-educated, and whose clientele ideally consisted of the highest nobility. She was often valued as much, if not more, for her intellectual gifts as for her sexual services.[6] Courtesans were often the daughters of other courtesans or prostitutes, as were Veronica Franco (1546-1591),[7] Andriana Savorgnan (c. 1557-?),[8] and Cassandra Lizzari,[9] but at least one courtesan was an ex-nun who found convent life too restrictive.[10] Because the chastity of upper-class women was heavily guarded, they were far less likely to become prostitutes of any kind, and were normally channelled into the socially acceptable and "honorable" roles of wife or nun,[11] which explains why such a large number of courtesans were of lower and middle-class origins.[12]

Venetian noblewomen tended to lead very secluded lives, and often did not or could not

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[6]Fiora Bassanese, "Private Lives and Public Lies: Texts by Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30, no. 3 (1988): 298.

[7]Lynne Lawner, *Lives of the Courtesans: Portraits of the Renaissance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) 55.

[8]Guido Ruggiero, *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage and Power at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 42.

[9]Cassandra was brought before the Holy Office in 1590 for the use of witchcraft in binding men in love. There is no information available on the years of her birth and death. Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 44-45.

[10]Ruggiero, *Boundaries* 83.

[11]Stanley Chojnacki, "'The Most Serious Duty': Motherhood, Gender, and Patrician Culture in Renaissance Venice," *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, eds. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 143.

[12]Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne* 45.

participate in the intellectual and cultural world of their husbands. The courtesan supplied an erotic yet erudite feminine presence at these intellectual gatherings;[13] she was both a prostitute without the lower-class stigma or the *mal francese*, and a refined woman of aristocratic tastes whose sexual activity posed no threats to anyone's honor.[14] Although some noblewomen were well-educated,[15] generally the noblewoman's role was not a social one in the modern sense, but rather a domestic one: to create kinship bonds between families, maintain the household, and bear children.[16] The restrictions placed on the speech and movement of noblewomen, meant to preserve their chastity, may have contributed to the success of courtesans, who were often prized for their clever repartee.

In addition to possessing qualities that the noble wife lacked, the courtesan also may have been valued because she was seen as providing an alternative, and thus a deterrent, to homosexuality,[17] not only because she combined the intellectual prowess of a man with the body of a woman, and so could inspire heterosexual love in a man who might otherwise desire a man because he was his intellectual equal, but also because she could safely fulfill male homosexual

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[13]Bassanese, "Private Lives" 296.

[14]Bassanese, *Gaspara Stampa* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982) 27.

[15]Paul Grendler suggests that most noblewomen were educated, at least in the vernacular, and occasionally also in some basic Latin. Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 95. Fiora Bassanese points out that the literacy of courtesans was quite impressive, given that the female literacy rate overall was only about 12 percent. Bassanese, "Selling the Self" 70-71.

[16]Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani: The Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 42. See also Chojnacki, 133.

[17]Bassanese, *Gaspara Stampa* 17.

fantasies in a socially acceptable way, that is by dressing like a boy.[18] Homosexuality was, of course, condemned by the Catholic Church, but in Venice homosexuality was also considered potentially subversive, as the formation of such strong bonds between men was seen as a threat to the state.[19]

The acceptance of courtesans into aristocratic circles may also have been facilitated by trends in art and literature. The humanist revival of ancient texts, which subsequently led to the interest in all aspects of ancient Greco-Roman culture, lent a certain cultural prestige to courtesans during the Italian Renaissance. Prostitution was an accepted institution in ancient Rome, as it was in the Middle Ages, but in Greece and Rome there were also *hetaerae*, or courtesans. It is possible that the courtesans in Italy at this time were, in part, a revival of this ancient institution.[20] Courtesans understood the importance of the revival of Greco-Roman culture, and often chose names that would identify them with it, as demonstrated by the *Catalogo de tutte le principal e più honorate cortigiane di Venezia* (1565) in which names like Cornelia, Diana, Elena, and Lugretia (Lucrezia), appear with some frequency.[21]

Works of art also reflected the link between courtesans and ancient culture, as courtesans often served as models for Renaissance painters, and the subjects of these paintings were often

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[18]Lawner, 20. This is also mentioned in Pietro Aretino, *I Ragionamenti* (Bologna: Sampietro, 1965) 124.

[19]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 176.

[20]Bassanese, "Private Lives" 296.

[21]In *Il catalogo de tutte le principal e più honorate cortigiane di Venetia*, the appendix to Rita Casagrande di Villaviera, *Le cortigiane veneziane nel Cinquecento* (Milan: Longanesi: 1968) 275-293, the name Cornelia appears eleven times, Diana three times, Elena seven times, and Lugretia nine times.

taken from Greco-Roman mythology.[22] Popular subjects in sixteenth-century artwork included Flora, a Roman goddess and also a Roman courtesan who were fused into one mythological figure around which a festival, the Floralie, was constructed.[23] Other figures painted frequently in this period were Venus and Danae, a girl impregnated by Jove when he came to her in a shower of gold. The connection between these mythological figures and the role of the courtesan is fairly obvious, especially that of Danae, and it leads to an important question: were the courtesans capitalizing on the popularity of these mythological figures, by posing for these paintings, and thus casting themselves as modern Venuses, Florae, or Danae, or did the art of this period, and the choice of these figures reflect the popularity of and/or common opinions about courtesans? Sixteenth-century painting, at least in part, reflects the prestige of courtesans, but also indicates a valorization of sensuality which, when extrapolated to the whole of Venetian society, could help explain the rather stunning success of the courtesan.

The eroticism and elegance predominant in paintings of the time were reflected in literature as well as lifestyle. The sixteenth century in Italy was a time of enormous political upheaval, and one way in which the aristocracy reacted to this was by immersing itself in idealized reflections of reality. While the works of the Quattrocento had attempted to imitate nature, Cinquecento works sought to improve upon nature, to obscure an often harsh reality with *maniera*, an artificial elegance and style.[24] Mannerist paintings exaggerated the aspects of nature that were considered elegant, while omitting the aspects considered distasteful. In an analogous

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[22]Lawner, 111.

[23]Lawner, 97.

[24]John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) 18-19.

way, mannerist works of literature, which included behavior manuals such as the *Cortigiano* (1527), presented an embellished image of the aristocracy as extremely cultured, gracious, and urbane, while excluding any unpleasant realities. Perhaps the rise of the "honest courtesan" constituted one aspect of mannerism: the courtesan was, in part, an artificial construction, an ultra-refined, idealized version of a prostitute, or even of women in general. In order to be successful, the courtesan had to present herself as an elegant, sophisticated and cultivated counterpart to the aristocrat, and this was reflected in her stylized, elaborate letters and poems. However, the courtesan was not simply the creator of works of literature, she was herself a living work of art. Her person, her image, and her writings fulfilled the same purpose as that of mannerist literature and art; to replace a sordid reality with a refined fantasy, to veil the meretricious with the meritorious.

The *cortigiana,* as the name suggests, was ideally the feminine counterpart to *il cortigiano,*[25] and thus had to have similar attributes, namely those of charm, erudition, musical talent, and *virtù.*[26] Given that female virtue was so strongly tied to chastity, the courtesan walked a tightrope: she had to be a sexually available erotic figure in order to attract a clientele, yet if she transgressed certain boundaries, she risked being identified with a common prostitute. Given the similarities between Castiglione's idealized description of the nobility and the attributes of courtesans, it seems that the courtesan's function was to provide the aristocracy with an idealized reflection of itself.[27] The most successful courtesans lived in lavish surroundings in the most

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[25]Lawner, 74.

[26]Baldessar Castiglione, *Il libro del cortigiano*, ed. Michele Scherillo (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1928) 100-103.

[27]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 42.

fashionable palaces of the city, even those along the Grand Canal,[28] and held salons for the most prestigious literati and nobility. Frequenting a prostitute was, if not exactly shameful, certainly nothing to boast about, but frequenting the opulent palaces of courtesans who lived like princesses, in the company of the most respected members of the intellectual and social elite, was actually a means of elevating one's personal prestige.[29] Courtesans often used the money they made to hold lavish banquets, and to purchase clothing and household items of the finest quality,[30] so that guests felt that they were visiting someone on the economic, and thus social level of royalty. In the fifteenth, and especially in the sixteenth century, conspicuous consumption was rampant among the ruling classes of Italy, as the display of riches was, in effect, a display of power.[31] The courtesan used this practice to her own advantage: if a prince could be perceived as more powerful than he actually was by wearing silks and precious jewels and holding huge feasts to display his wealth, the courtesan could create a similar effect using the same techniques. Her lovers and acquaintances, then, could add to their prestige by associating with the courtesan, as she could by associating with them.

The courtesan created a rarefied, highly cultured atmosphere not only through her home, but also through her person. She disguised her often humble origins by dressing nobly, by displaying her knowledge of important works of literature, and by writing in the Petrarchan and

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[28]Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne* 69-73.

[29]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 40.

[30]Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne* 69-73, 76-83. See also Cathy Santore, "Julia Lombardo, 'Somtuosa Meretrize': A Portrait by Property," *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988): 44-83.

[31]Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City States in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988) 233.

Latinate styles fashionable at the time.[32] The greatest courtesans seem to have been highly literate, although courtesans in general may not have been so well-educated. Courtesans were one of the rare, if not the only examples of self-made women at this time, and they carefully cultivated their image through their dress, surroundings, manners, and letters, as their image was the key to their success.[33]

The honest courtesan was respected as an intellectual rather than on the basis of chastity, yet her situation was extremely precarious, as underneath the trappings of nobility and refinement, her profession was still technically that of a prostitute.[34] The courtesan's juxtaposition of intellectual and erotic prowess is especially striking when compared to the treatment of other Italian female intellectuals in the Renaissance. In order to be accepted into the traditionally male sphere of literature, a female writer effectively had to erase her sexuality by becoming either a *virago*, a masculine woman, or a woman epitomizing *virtù*, a word with many implications for a man, but only one for a woman: chastity.[35] Even female intellectuals who were generally admired for their chastity fell prey to accusations of promiscuity.[36] These charges disparaged her intellect by reducing her to a whore, thus emphasizing her sexuality and her

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[32]Bassanese, "Private Lives" 295, 297. See also Bassanese, "Selling the Self" 70, 72.

[33]Bassanese, "Selling the Self" 69. On self-fashioning in the Early Modern period, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 2-3.

[34]Bassanese, "Private Lives" 297.

[35]Juliana Schiesari, "In Praise of Virtuous Women? For a Genealogy of Gender Morals in Renaissance Italy," *Women's Voices in Italian Literature*, eds. Rebecca West and Dino S. Cervigni, Vol. 7 of *Annali d'Italianistica*, 1989: 69.

[36]Schiesari, 73.

femininity to the detriment of her literary accomplishments. A connection was made between an open mouth (writing, speaking publicly) and the other open mouth (promiscuity), reflecting the association between chastity and silence,[37] and the fear that women empowered through speech would become sexually disobedient.

The courtesan, to some extent, reveled in her sexuality, which may have been permissible because of her lower social origins, as her sexuality was less threatening to the social order than that of nobly-born women.[38] However, the numerous writings belittling the courtesan suggest that she was in fact perceived as a subversive element in society. While many female intellectuals strove to be taken seriously by vigorously defending their chastity and thus maintaining some semblance of obedience to traditional values, the courtesan was neither chaste nor silent. As such she was punished, even violated, in the same forum in which her transgression was most apparent, the literary arena.

Although Venetian courtesans were, to a certain extent, celebrated, their position was always insecure. The power of words was substantial, and a courtesan's reputation could be destroyed by slander. The "honest courtesan" had to maintain an appearance of exclusivity and modesty, and had to respect certain unspoken rules, such as the one forbidding marriage between herself and the nobles she frequented. Courtesans who transgressed their boundaries lost their veil of respectability. Andriana Savorgnan, a Venetian courtesan who married a nobleman,

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[37]Schiesari, 73-77. See also Margaret W. Ferguson, "A Room Not Their Own: Renaissance Women as Readers and Writers," *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, eds. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 99-102.

[38]Ferguson, 103.

Marco Dandolo, was called a "public whore" after her marriage, whereas before the marriage, and even after her arraignment for the use of magic in securing the love of this Marco Dandolo, she was referred to as a courtesan.[39] A major distinction was made between a courtesan and a public prostitute, and removing this distinction by calling a courtesan a public whore or by asserting that she had sexual relations with more than a certain number of men would remove the mystique surrounding her, and could have dire consequences for her business.

The control they had over their lovers, while lending them prestige and success, could also become a liability. Not only were they constantly at risk of being punished by angry or jealous admirers, they also were often castigated by the authorities for wielding this strange and misunderstood power over their lovers. What nowadays is referred to as romantic love, in the sixteenth century was often perceived as a form of magic, the result of spells cast by women who wanted to "bind" men to them.[40] Courtesans, as well as other women trying to "bind" men's love, often used a blend of Christian and illicit magic to try to garner affection, or in some cases, marriage.[41] While common prostitutes did not need to attach their clients to them, as they could count on large numbers of often anonymous men, love was part of the illusion sold by

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[39]In 1581 the courtesan Andriana Savorgnan married a nobleman, Marco Dandolo. Shortly thereafter, accusations of witchcraft were brought against her. A search of her home revealed olive branches, which had been used in conjunction with holy water to cast a love spell on another nobleman. Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 28-33.

[40]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 85-87.

[41]The use of a combination of licit, or Christian, magic and illicit, or demonic, magic seems to have been quite common in Italy at this time. The invocation of Jesus, Mary, and the Christian saints, and Christian prayers, holy water, holy oil, and even the consecrated host were used frequently to cast love spells. A popular method of divining whether or not one was loved was that of throwing beans, in which the pattern of beans represented the closeness of people to one another. Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 29-30, 93, 108.

courtesans,[42] and served as a sort of guarantee that their clients would remain with them for a certain period of time, which in turn could enhance their reputations.

In Venice, the "mad" love of noblemen for women of low social status, including courtesans, was often explained as the effect of witchcraft, which was indeed practiced by a number of women. The widespread belief in the omnipresence of supernatural influences meant that the use of magic was taken fairly seriously by all concerned. In the 1480's a certain Gratiosa was accused of having used witchcraft to make the nobleman Domenico Contarini fall in love with her.[43] In Gratiosa's case as well as in the aforementioned case of Andriana Savorgnan, it was thought that these men had no control over their actions, that they were under a spell. The association of love and magic in particular was reflected in phrases like "that old black magic called love," and "mad with love," which, although nearly meaningless today, were meant literally in the sixteenth century.[44] Magic could also help explain the otherwise unheard-of inversion of the power relationship that took place when the courtesan was controlling her client, instead of the opposite.[45]

In addition to potential slander and accusations of witchcraft, the courtesan had to face even more serious threats to her physical integrity. The myths about courtesans, which were often created by the courtesans themselves as a kind of public relations stratagem, do not accurately reflect what was in reality a harsh and dangerous lifestyle. Courtesans were not

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[42]Lawner, 74.

[43]Ruggiero, *Boundaries* 34-35.

[44]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 30.

[45]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 32.

protected from violence or starvation the way "respectable" women were. Wives and nuns had some legal protection and, depending on their families, enjoyed the protection of their male relatives, since an affront towards a woman, sexual or otherwise, was often interpreted as an offense to the honor of her husband, father, and brothers. Even in cases of domestic violence, there was some, albeit limited, recourse, as illustrated by two fourteenth-century cases in which abusive husbands were ordered not to beat their wives under penalty of fines.[46] Because of her liminal position, the courtesan lacked traditional sources of security; offenses to her person (such as gang-rape or mutilation) damaged no one's honor but her own.

Courtesans were often the victims of physical violence from disgruntled lovers, the worst vengeance (with the exception of disfigurement) being the *trentuno*, or worse still, the *trentuno reale*.[47] The *trentuno* was essentially a gang rape of the courtesan, orchestrated by the vengeful lover and carried out by thirty-one men from the lowest level of society. The *trentuno reale* was a similar gang rape, but by eighty men. As well as the trauma it inflicted on its victim, the *trentuno* destroyed the courtesan's claim to exclusive and upper-class status, thus adding weight to accusations that she was a "public whore" and dramatically reducing her desirability. Another deterrent to potential clients was the risk of contracting syphilis.[48] Although rape was a crime, the lovers who organized these horrific forms of retribution were too powerful to be prosecuted, especially since a courtesan's reputation was already so damaged by such a gang-rape that taking a former client to trial could only further alienate the ranks of the aristocracy from which she

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[46]Romano, 39.

[47]Lawner, 75.

[48]Lawner, 77.

drew her clientele. A courtesan's reputation could also be injured by the mere rumor of a *trentuno,* even if the gang-rape had never actually occurred.

Even if a successful courtesan managed to escape such occupational hazards as the *trent'uno*, syphilis, mutilation, slander, and accusations of witchcraft, the passage of time would eventually ruin her body, and thus her livelihood. As the courtesan aged, she was less in demand, and could well end up impoverished and alone. To avoid this, many courtesans adopted pretty young girls from orphanages, educated them, and taught them everything they knew, so that they might be supported by them in their old age.[49] Often, these "daughters" of courtesans were taught to read and write, as literacy, in addition to good manners, dramatically increased their chances of success.[50]

Although not all courtesans possessed these skills, those who did used their intellect to amass a fair amount of wealth and fame. Because courtesans wrote in order to create an image, while their detractors usually wrote with the intention of destroying that image, their works should be seen as weapons, rather than as an accurate portrayal of the courtesan's person or lifestyle. As such, the surviving writings by and about courtesans provide important clues as to what the dynamics between courtesans and their noble lovers may have been.

The more educated courtesans emphasized their literary identities both in order to downplay their actual professions and to gain prestige by associating themselves with the illustrious men venerated in their Petrarchan verses.[51] The great courtesans of Rome, Imperia

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[49]Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne* 140.

[50]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 43.

[51]Bassanese, "Private Lives" 295.

(1481-1512), her daughter, Lucrezia, known as Matrema-non-vole (1500-?), and Tullia d'Aragona (1510-1556), were highly literate. Imperia, immortalized in a famous novella by Matteo Bandello,[52] was visited and admired by many highly respected intellectuals of the time, such as scholar and poet Bernardino Capella, and the humanists Angelo Colocci and Filippo Beroaldo,[53] as well as one of the wealthiest men of the sixteenth century, the banker Agostino Chigi.[54] Matrema-non-vole[55] knew Latin works as well as the standard vernacular writings, and counted ambassadors, dukes, and marquesses among her guests.[56] Her impressive knowledge of literature, ironically, was highlighted in a work denouncing courtesans, the *Ragionamento dello Zoppino* (1534):

> Ha tutto il Petrarca e 'l Boccaccio a mente; e infiniti e bei versi latini di Virgilio e d'Orazio e d'Ovidio e di mille altri autori. Io conosco venticinque gentiluomini, che fanno professione di bei

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[52]In Bandello's novella, a Spanish ambassador visiting Imperia's apartment chooses to spit in the face of his servant, explaining that his face is the most vulgar thing in the room. The ambassador's genuflection towards the possessions of Imperia reveals her high status, especially striking when compared to one of Machiavelli's letters, in which he describes vomiting on a prostitute. As Guido Ruggiero explains, "The cruelty in both stories worked as humor, in large measure because of a strong sense of hierarchy in society and in prostitution. Vomit and spit did not so much demean as measure the immense social gap that yawned between the common prostitute and the courtesan." Matteo Bandello, *Novelle*, ed. Giuseppe Guido Ferrero (Turin: UTET, 1974) part 3, novella XLII, 748-750. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Florence: Sansoni, 1971) 1112. Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 35.

[53]Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne* 99.

[54]Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne* 101-102.

[55]According to Larivaille, "My-mother-doesn't-want-me-to" was young Lucrezia's response to the advances of her mother's suitors. *La vie quotidienne* 105.

[56]Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne* 106.

parlatori, che sanno men dire e men parlare di lei.[57]

Tullia d'Aragona was a great poet, and was well-respected by her contemporaries, especially the Medici, to whom she addressed several encomia.[58] The daughter of the famous Roman courtesan Giulia Campana, she spent most of her childhood in Siena, where she became proficient in Tuscan. During her teens she lived as a courtesan in Rome, but from 1531-1548 she travelled throughout Italy.[59] She resided briefly in Venice in 1535, and is mentioned in the *Tariffa delle puttane di Venegia* (1535), a poem degrading the most prominent courtesans in Venice at that time. In spite of this, she became increasingly famous for her intellectual accomplishments, a renown which was only augmented by Sperone Speroni's inclusion of her as one of the main interlocutors in his *Dialogo d'amore* (1542).[60]

Of her own writings, her most famous work is the *Dialogo della signora Tullia d'Aragona della infinità di amore* (1547), in which she argues that, while purely physical love is finite and ends after its consummation, true, virtuous, spiritual love is infinite. Through her writing, she established herself as being above the level of a prostitute, as indicated by an

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[57]*Il ragionamento dello Zoppino*, in Pietro Aretino, *I Ragionamenti* (Bologna: Sampietro, 1965) 258. This dialogue, although included in this edition of the *Ragionamenti*, does not appear to have been written by Aretino. See "Opere di Pietro Aretino e di Anton Francesco Doni," ed. Carlo Cordié, in *La letteratura italiana: Storia e testi*, vol. 26, tome II, eds. Raffaele Mattioli, Pietro Pancrazi and Alfredo Schiaffini (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1976) 16.

[58]Bassanese, "Private Lives" 299-300.

[59]For biographical information, see Rinaldina Russell, "Tullia d'Aragona," in *Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. Rinaldina Russell (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 26-27. See also Rinaldina Russell, introduction, *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, by Tullia d'Aragona, trans. and ed. Rinaldina Russell and Bruce Merry (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) 22-23.

[60]Russell, 27.

incident in which Cosimo de' Medici himself exempted her from wearing the yellow veil that designated Tuscan prostitutes, saying, "Fasseli gratia per poetessa."[61] Tullia also wrote numerous obsequious verses to her lovers, all of which sound almost exactly alike.[62] She did this in order to maintain her good standing with the men who supported and protected her: although the courtesan enjoyed a measure of freedom, her reputation and fortunes depended on the good-will and generosity of these men.[63] Another example of this is the courtesan Camilla Pisana,[64] who used Latinate syntax in her letters to her lover, the banker Fillippo Strozzi, to create the impression that she was on the same cultural plane as he, all the while affirming his superiority throughout.[65]

Two of the most famous Venetian female poets, Gaspara Stampa (1523-1554) and Veronica Franco, were also reputed to be courtesans. It remains unclear whether Gaspara Stampa was indeed a courtesan, but she possessed many of the characteristics associated with courtesanry, such as musical and literary talent, and an apparent lack of chastity. Her tumultuous affair with the Friulian aristocrat Collaltino di Collalto, well-documented by her love poetry, a possible affair with the Venetian patrician Bartolomeo Zen,[66] and an anonymous sonnet calling

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[61]Bassanese, "Private Lives" 299-300.

[62]Bassanese, "Private Lives" 301.

[63]Bassanese, "Private Lives" 301.

[64]The exact years of her birth and death are unavailable, but she lived in the early part of the sixteenth century. Lawner, 48-49.

[65]Bassanese, "Selling the Self" 72-73. See also Lawner, 47-51.

[66]Fiora A. Bassanese, *Gaspara Stampa* 16-19.

her "donna e reina di quante unqua puttane fur tra voi"[67] were enough for later writers, notably Abdelkalder Salza,[68] to assume that she was a courtesan. Conversely, the Romantics portrayed Gaspara Stampa in an entirely different light, as a noble maiden destroyed by her ill-fated love for the heartless Collalto.[69]

Gaspara Stampa came from a wealthier background than most; her father was a well-to-to merchant who possessed property and who was able to afford the best for his children.[70] Well-educated, extremely cultured, charming, and intelligent, she held and attended literary salons for the most renowned *letterati* of her time. Her love poetry reveals their influence. Emulating Petrarch, she bemoans the indifference of Collalto. Gaspara also wrote other poems praising her contemporaries, which seems to have been a common practice among the literate classes of the sixteenth century and particularly among courtesans.[71] Lauded for her wit and beauty, esteemed as an intellectual, Gaspara Stampa possessed all the ideal attributes of a courtesan, yet, judging from the aforementioned sonnet, was still stigmatized as a *puttana*, the result of her refusal to remain silent and chaste.

Veronica Franco, another respected literary figure in sixteenth-century Venice, was the

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[67]Quoted in Piero Lorenzoni, *Erotismo e pornografia nella letteratura italiana* (Milan: Il Formichiere, 1976) 234.

[68]Bassanese, *Gaspara Stampa* 26.

[69]Bassanese, *Gaspara Stampa* 24-26.

[70]Bassanese, *Gaspara Stampa* 2.

[71]Bassanese, *Gaspara Stampa* 300.

greatest courtesan of the late sixteenth century. Although the daughter of a courtesan,[72] she also belonged to the *cittadino* class,[73] which considered itself a kind of secondary aristocracy.[74] She married early, and was separated from her husband at age eighteen. She bore six children of different fathers, one of whom was reputedly the eminent patrician Andrea Tron.[75] She owed her fame and fortune in great part to her literary gifts, which won her the support of powerful patricians like Marco Veniero, with whom she had an apparently happy relationship, and Domenico Veniero, Marco's uncle and the host of a prestigious literary academy. The peak of her fame came in 1574, when Henry III of Valois, the king of Poland and future king of France[76] visited her during a trip to Venice. After 1580 she seems to have sunk into relative obscurity, and died of a fever in 1591.[77]

Veronica promotes herself through her letters and her poetry: she presents herself as a caring, sensitive, humble and intelligent woman who sleeps with kings, frequents literary salons with the most prominent intellectuals, and defends and tries to protect other women. The diverse personae that emerge from her letters, clearly meant for public consumption,[78] constitute the

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[72]Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) vii.

[73]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* vii, 287.

[74]Romano, 156.

[75]Lawner, 55.

[76]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 102.

[77]Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne* 123.

[78]Veronica Franco gave a copy of her published letters to Michel Montaigne when he was visiting Venice in 1580. Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 116.

ideal attributes of a courtesan: she is a love goddess and an intellectual. However, she is also a kind, honest, religious woman who fears for the well-being of the bodies and souls of others. For example, she writes erotically loaded verses to Henry III:

> Nel mezo del mio cuore Ella ha lasciato delle sue virtù eroiche e del suo divino valore- cambio per me troppo aventuroso e felice....[79]
>
> E come 'l tuo immortal divin valore,
> in armi e in pace a mille prove esperto,
> m'empie l'alma di nobile stupore....[80]

Her words radiate desire and create an image of Veronica/Venus genuflecting at the feet of the virile, militaristic Henry/Mars.

In the following letter, she proclaims that she is drawn to learned men, and that she would spend all her time discussing intellectual questions with them, if only she could:

> Voi sapete benissimo che tra tutti coloro che pretendono di poter insinuarsi nel mio amore a me sono estremamente cari quei che s'affatican nell'essercizio delle discipline e dell'arti ingenue, delle quali (se ben donna di poco sapere, rispetto massimamente alla mia inclinazione e al mio desiderio) io sono tanto vaga e con tanto mio diletto converso con coloro che sanno, per aver occasione ancora d'imparare, che, se la mia fortuna il comportasse, io farei tutta la mia vita e spenderei tutto 'l mio tempo dolcemente nell'accademie degli uomini virtuosi.[81]

Here she is the cerebral yet humble woman who, although claiming in her false modesty to be relatively uneducated, wants to surround herself with books and scholars. In another letter, she implores a friend not to make her daughter a courtesan, because to do so would not only leave

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[79]Veronica Franco, *Lettere dall'unica edizione del MDLXXX*, with introduction and notes, ed. B. Croce (Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1949) 7.

[80]Franco, *Lettere* 8.

[81]Franco, *Lettere* 28.

the girl vulnerable to physical harm, but also would threaten both the daughter's and the mother's souls:

> Non è questa vita tale che in ogni essito non sia sempre misera. Troppo infelice cosa e troppo contraria al senso umano è l'obligar il corpo e l'industria di una tal servitù che spaventa solamente a pensarne. Darsi in preda di tanti, con rischio d'esser dispogliata, d'esser rubbata, d'esser uccisa, ch'un solo un dì ti toglie quanto con molti in molto tempo hai acquistato, con tant'altri pericoli d'ingiuria e d'infermità contagiose e spaventose....Credete a me: tra tutte le sciagure mondane questa e l'estrema; ma poi, se s'aggiungeranno ai rispetti del mondo quei dell'anima, che perdizione e che certezza di dannazione è questa?[82]

This is the most poignant of her letters, as it reveals what were probably Veronica's deepest fears, ranging from physical violence to eternal damnation, as well as her worst experiences. She mentions robbery; indeed, it seems that much of the wealth she amassed over her lifetime was stolen.[83] She speaks of others who prey on courtesans, perhaps referring to her own experience as the victim of literary as well as legal assaults.[84]

Personally, she had to fend off the poetic attacks of Maffio Veniero (Marco's cousin) in 1574 and the charges brought against her by her son's tutor, Rodolfo Vanitelli, in 1580. As a result of these charges, Veronica was summoned before the Holy Office, where Vanitelli accused her of using witchcraft, of not going to Mass, and of gambling.[85] Franco admitted to using a

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[82]Franco, *Lettere* 38.

[83]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* vii.

[84]Veronica's letters were published in 1580, the same year that Rodolfo Vanitelli accused her of witchcraft, although it is unclear whether the letter was written before or after this incident. On the publication of Veronica's letters, see Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 116-118. On Vanitelli's accusations, see Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 46-47.

[85]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 46-47.

magical procedure called the White Angel, in order to discover who had stolen some objects of value from her, but denied all the other accusations. A shrewd and diplomatic woman, she defended herself well, maintaining her innocence, and perhaps more importantly, her humility, which Ruggiero argues saved her in the end.[86]

Veronica Franco was an exceptional courtesan; she voiced her fears, and refused to be a passive victim, whether of Vanitelli's accusations or Veniero's slander. Indeed, the latter's anonymous attempts to defame her character spurred her on to fight (and win) a verbal duel with him. Although other courtesans wrote to augment their prestige, they did not defend themselves from the literary attacks of their detractors, either because they were intimidated, or because they assumed that this was an occupational hazard, a negative by-product of their fame and success. Veronica's unusual courage and initiative in responding to Veniero's assaults will be discussed at length in the next chapter, in an attempt to glean more precise information about the motives underlying the detractor's slander.

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[86]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*, 48.

## Chapter one
## Insults and Power: The Defamatory Verses of Lorenzo and Maffio Veniero

The works of Lorenzo Veniero (1510-1550) and his son Maffio (1550-1586) contain virulent, personal attacks on two famous and successful courtesans. *La Zaffetta*, first published in 1531 in Venice, is the tale of the gang rape of Angela Zaffetta,[1] orchestrated and recounted by the angry Lorenzo. The *Libro Chiuso*, written by Maffio Veniero between 1574 and 1575, is a collection of poems in Venetian dialect criticizing, often venomously, the great courtesan and poet Veronica Franco. These works emphasize the negative traits generally ascribed to courtesans, such as greed, pride, and disease, alluding to the real problems of power and control posed by their existence. Lorenzo and Maffio Veniero were disturbed by the fact that the unchaste Angela and Veronica both transcended the normally submissive female role, whether in a relationship (Angela) or in society (Veronica), and their defamatory verses were an attempt to humiliate them into acting "properly."

Lorenzo Veniero's *La Zaffetta* was an attempt to publicly shame Angela Zaffetta, as well as to exact respect from other courtesans. In the poem, the noble Lorenzo arrives at Angela's home and finds her with another man. To punish her, he arranges a *trent'uno reale*, the gang-rape which seems to have been a fairly common way for a disgruntled lover to punish a courtesan.

The first part of the poem is a description of Angela, in which Lorenzo echoes frequently-expressed criticisms and fears elicited by courtesans, namely that they were greedy

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[1]The exact dates of her birth and death are unknown, but she was probably a few years younger than Lorenzo.

and diseased. These accusations and the use of the term *puttana*, which suggests that the courtesan is nothing more than a wealthy, pretentious prostitute, are found in most sixteenth-century writings about courtesans:

> Ecco, Signora Angela Zaffa, in tanto
> Che 'l mal francese occulto scoprirete,
> Di voi il Trent'un, qual Vangelista, canto;
> E s'io punt'erro, mi correggerete,
> Perche il fatto v'è noto tutto quanto;
> E meglio tutto a mente lo sapete,
> Che non sà la Zaffetta, al Trent'un corsa,
> Cavar l'anima el cuore d'ogni borsa.
> Puttane infami, che tanto sdegnate
> Tener un gentil'huom per vostro amante,
> D'un gentil'huomo un arlasso ascoltate
> Fatto da una gentil porca galante [2]

The mere rumor of an encounter between a courtesan and a member of the lower classes could temporarily diminish her reputation and her "aura,"[3] since the readers of this poem were probably men of similar social standing who also frequented courtesans, and who would identify with Lorenzo's fears of syphilis, monetary exploitation, and betrayal.

Normally, courtesans were distinct from common prostitutes not only for their better education, musical talent, and lavish surroundings, but because their clients belonged to the upper classes. As their clients were so select and so few, courtesans were less likely to be carriers of syphilis than were common prostitutes. The *trent'uno*, in a sense, was an attempt to remove some of the distinctions between courtesans and prostitutes, by associating them with members of the lower class, and by augmenting the number of men with whom they had had

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[2]Lorenzo Veniero, *La Zaffetta*, with an introduction by Gino Raya (Catania: Libreria Tirelli di F. Guaitolini, 1929) 9.

[3]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 233. See also Lawner, 77.

sexual contact, which in turn increased their chances of having contracted syphilis. Except for certain types of mutilation such as face-slashing, which also was used, the *trent'uno* was the most effective way of making a courtesan lose her clientele.[4]

The *trent'uno* in this case has another important function as well, that of bringing Angela's sexuality under male control. Whereas the sexual behavior of nuns and wives was regulated and controlled by men, that of courtesans was not. They chose lovers who would support them financially, but their bodies were not "rented," as prostitutes' bodies were. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of relationships with courtesans, especially for men of Lorenzo's stature, was the fact that in many instances the traditional power structure was reversed. The courtesan was financially dependent on her lover, but when she used "love magic" to disempower him,[5] he desired her favors more than she did his, and this placed her above him. The love that overpowered these men was seen as strange, and was often thought of as the effect of an evil spell which had been cast over them. Early in the poem, Lorenzo warns his peers of this grave danger:

> Perdonatemi, giovani; l'amore
> Ch'io vi porto fa dirmi ciò ch'io dico.
> Sapete ben che vi son servitore,
> Non pur compagno, fratello et amico.
> Poi ne la lingua io hò quel c'hò nel core;
> L'hò detto, et hor di nuovo lo ridico:
> Le vostre gare, e non gratia o bellezza,
> Hanvi abbassati, e lei posta in altezza.[6]

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[4]Lawner, 75.

[5]Incidentally, this is a major theme in two sixteenth-century epic poems, the *Orlando Furioso* (1532) of Ludovico Ariosto, and the *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) of Torquato Tasso.

[6]Veniero, *Zaffetta* 13.

Lorenzo expected to control Angela's sexuality: this, he felt, was his right, as a man and as a wealthy and powerful member of the ruling class. When he discovered another man in his place, not only did he feel hurt and betrayed, he realized that she was in command. To a sixteenth-century patrician this was an intolerable situation that had to be corrected, for the good of other men as well as for his own:

> La traditrice di tante persone,
> Che più fuggir non può, s'ella non vola,
> Ne capelli e ne gl'occhi le man pone,
> Che ben s'accorge che 'l Trent'un vien via,
> Per castigar la sua ribalderia.[7]

The *trent'uno*, then, was an attempt to regain control over Angela's sexuality. Since she did not reserve her expensive sexual favors exclusively for him, he would render them worthless by dispensing them himself to eighty men. In this way, her promiscuity is acted out on Lorenzo's terms, rather than on her own. After the *trent'uno* is finished, Lorenzo explains to Angela that she brought this upon herself, by daring to take another lover:

> E le fa veder che 'l soverchio amore
> E' stata la caggion d'un tanto errore.[8]

In Lorenzo's mind, this poem is not only a message to Angela about who controls her sexuality, it is a warning to all courtesans who entertain the illusion of being above male authority, especially in the realm of sexual behavior. Lorenzo is not only a lover who is avenging himself, but also a gentleman who has taken it upon himself to teach the perfidious Angela, and other women like her, who is in control, so that other men will not suffer at their hands.

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[7]Veniero, *Zaffetta* 33.

[8]Veniero, *Zaffetta* 51.

Ma Dio volesse, puttane mie care,
Che l'esempio di lei vi fusse in core,
Che saria cosa santa il puttanare,
E si c'acquistaria spasso et honore.
Se qualche gentil'huom vi vuol chiavare,
Pensate de la Zaffa al dishonore,
Dicendo voi di sì l'osservereste,
E le vie d'ingrandirvi sarian queste.[9]

Angela is aware that she has made a grave error by refusing to acknowledge Lorenzo's power, yet she continues to act haughtily even after the *trent'uno*,[10] thus displaying her indomitable arrogance. In spite of this, Lorenzo has regained his wounded pride and re-established his insulted honor: he sees the entire ordeal as a struggle initiated by Angela's insult, and which, through this violent act, he has won.

Signora mia, il mondo è fatto a scale....
A Chioggia scende chi a Venezia sale....
Voi rideste di me di carnevale,
Quando ch'io havea del vostr'amor le doglie:
Hor di quaresim'io rido di voi,
E cosi il gioco pari và fra noi.[11]

This passage reflects the high degree of social stratification in sixteenth-century society and also shows how courtesans were placed within it. Angela had climbed up through the ranks of Venetian society by making men like Lorenzo fall in love with her. However, her prestige was extremely precarious, and by angering these influential patrons she could fall back down the social ladder. Although this did not happen to Angela, it did happen to other courtesans who

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[9]Veniero, *Zaffetta* 63.

[10]Veniero, *Zaffetta* 61.

[11]Veniero, *Zaffetta* 41.

overstepped their boundaries.[12]

At the end of the poem Lorenzo expresses his hope that other courtesans will have learned from Angela's experience, and that he will fall in love with a woman who behaves properly:

> Saria pur un piacere a dire: Io amo
> Una donna ch'hà caro il mio servire.
> La qual vien pronta a me quando la chiamo
> Ne mi vuol ingannar ne far fallire,
> E senza lite ogn'hor d'accordo siamo.
> S'io le dò, piglia, e non ardisce dire:
> Dammi, fammi, se non ti faccio o dico,
> Ne la taglia mi pon, come nemico.[13]

There has been some debate as to whether Angela Zaffetta actually was the victim of a *trent'uno* in 1531, the date of publication of the poem,[14] as there are no factual sources (i.e. trial records, diaries, letters) to verify either position. The poem could have been written as a substitute for the *trent'uno*, or in addition to it. In either case, Veniero wanted people to believe that it had taken place, for the purpose of the poem was the same as the purpose of the *trent'uno:* to destroy Angela Zaffetta's reputation and livelihood.

The publication of *La Zaffetta* in 1531 did not have the desired effect on Zaffetta's career. Pietro Aretino, Lorenzo's mentor, wrote a letter to Angela Zaffetta in 1537, praising her

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[12]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 36-37.

[13]Veniero, *Zaffetta* 65.

[14]Antonio Barzaghi claims that Veniero's very words reveal the poem as fictional. Antonio Barzaghi, *Donne o Cortigiane? La Prostituzione a Venezia: Documenti di Costume dal XVI al XVIII secolo* (Verona: Bertani Editore, 1980) 118. Rita Casagrande di Villaviera says that the poem was believed to be true by Lorenzo's contemporaries, but that there is no evidence to this effect. Casagrande di Villaviera, 303. Gino Raya, however, argues that the *trent'uno* undoubtedly took place. In Veniero, *Zaffetta* XXV.

for her honesty, modesty and virtue. Aretino must have read *La Zaffetta*, not only because he and Lorenzo were close friends, but also because he was clearly an important member of the intended audience for the poem, indicated by the opening stanzas, which praise him lavishly as "mezz'huomo e mezzo Dio" and a "vero profeta."[15] This is further substantiated by his references to the *trentuno* of Angela Zaffetta in his *Ragionamenti*, originally published in 1533,[16] and in his comedy *La Cortigiana*,[17] originally written in 1526, and rewritten and published in Venice in 1534.

The contents of Aretino's letter to Angela cast doubt on certain statements made in *La Zaffetta*. First of all, if Angela was indeed infected by syphilis even before the alleged gang rape took place, she would have at least begun to show symptoms of it six years later. (Lorenzo's son, Maffio, died of syphilis only six years after he was said to have contracted it.) If Angela did not have syphilis before being raped by eighty men, her chances of falling prey to the disease as a result of the gang rape would have been fairly high. This in turn would have destroyed her career, which according to Aretino's letter, seemed to be going very well at the time. Therefore, she was either fortunate enough not to have contracted syphilis during her ordeal, or even more fortunate in having received a purely literary punishment from her powerful and angry lover, rather than a physical one. Since Aretino's letter was written several years after the publication of *La Zaffetta*, it is also possible that Angela Zaffetta had changed somewhat, and perhaps more importantly, had learned not to anger potential slanderers. In one of the more ironic parts of this

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[15]Veniero, *Zaffetta* 3.

[16]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 171-173.

[17]Pietro Aretino, *La Cortigiana, Tutte le Commedie*, ed. G.B. DeSanctis (Milan: Mursia, 1968) 192.

letter he says, "Voi comparite sì bene i basci, il toccar de le mani, i risi e le dormiture, che non si ode mai querelare né bestemiare né lagnar niuno."[18] In either case, judging from the letter to Angela and those addressed to Lorenzo, all dated 1537 and thereafter, it would seem that the whole situation had been forgotten, and that *La Zaffetta* had not harmed the real Zaffetta's reputation or client-base.

Lorenzo was not the only Veniero to attack specific courtesans in literary form. His son, Maffio, wrote several poems in Venetian dialect maligning Veronica Franco. He also had written derogatory verses about several other courtesans,[19] but his verses about Veronica Franco are more numerous and well-known, although their fame may be due in part to Veronica's eloquent self-defense. It is unclear what, if any, relationship existed between Maffio and Veronica. They probably did know each other, since Veronica was involved with Maffio's cousin Marco. The poem "Franca, credéme, che, per san Maffio," [Franca, believe me, that, by Saint Matthew] claims that Maffio is attracted to Veronica: he states that he would like to be her lover, but would never pay for love. Margaret Rosenthal explains Maffio's declaration as a parody of the *incerto autore*'s worship of Veronica. This *incerto autore*, an anonymous admirer who appears in Veronica's *Terze rime*, published in 1575, is believed to have been Marco Veniero, and Maffio's poetry to Veronica satirizes the adulatory Petrarchan verses of his cousin.[20]

> L'è quatro mesi che fazzo custion
> Se me diébbo infrisar o star indrio:
> Da una banda me piase, me sa bon

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[18]Pietro Aretino, *Lettere*, ed. Francesco Flora (Verona: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1960) 367.

[19] Nicola Ruggieri, *Maffio Venier (Arcivescovo e letterato veneziano del Cinquecento)* (Udine: Rossetti, 1909) 80.

[20]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 186.

El véderve, el sentirve a rasonar,
Dall'altra sé un carigólo boccon.
.....
Quando ve vardo, si che me infrisé;
Ma quando penso ai scudi, cazzo Amor
.....
No perchè vu no sié bella e pulia,
Cara, dolce, gentil e costumà,
.....
Me tagiaràve el cazzo, e, desperà,
De sti coglioni faria una fortàgia,
Co' pagasse una volta, co' ho chiavà.[21]

[It's been four months that I've been asking myself whether I should fall in love or stay away: on the one hand, I like you, I enjoy looking at you, and listening to you debate, but on the other hand you're an expensive morsel....When I look at you, therefore, I fall in love; but when I think of the money, damned Love....Not because you're not beautiful and clean, dear, sweet, kind, and courteous...I would sooner cut off my cock, and, hopeless, make an omelette of my balls, than pay even once for a fuck.]

The language becomes stronger as the poem progresses. He tells her how ardently he desires her, but then harshly rebukes her for the venal aspect of her love:

I sguardi, i passi xé la mia patente
Che ve certa, e franca, se ve adoro
E se spasimo de dormirve arente.
.....
Deh, Veronica cara, caro cuor,
Caro contento, cara anema mia,
Fé conto de soccorrer un che muor.
.....
No se trovarà mai testo nè glosa
Che vògia che l'amante diebba dar
Altro ch'el proprio cuor alla morosa.
Chi trové l'invention del bombadar,
Chi tradì Christo, xé dove è colù

[21]Manlio Dazzi, *Il Libro Chiuso di Maffio Venier* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1956) 23-24.

Che con i soldi scomenzé a chiavar.[22]

[The glances and the footsteps are the papers which guarantee that I adore you and yearn to sleep next to you....Oh, dear Veronica, dear heart, dear happiness, dear soul of mine, imagine that helping one who's dying....
*No text or gloss will ever state that a lover must give his woman anything besides his heart. Whoever invented gunpowder, whoever betrayed Christ, keeps company with the one who first screwed for money.][23]

The amorous tone of these verses explains why Veronica initially attributed them to Marco, instead of to Maffio, and why she was shocked and offended by the unusual juxtaposition of Petrarchan love hyperbole and the crude terminology used to chide her for the nature of her profession. Maffio's reference to Judas recalls his father's indignation: both saw something perfidious in the exchange of love for money, and both felt that courtesans did not keep their rightful place. He certainly felt threatened by and resentful of the fact that, without having been born into the high aristocracy to which Maffio belonged, Veronica moved in these same circles and was at least as well-respected, intellectually and socially.[24] In fact, it is likely that Veronica was even more highly esteemed than Maffio, her prestige peaking in 1574 when Henry III of France visited her during his stay in Venice.[25]

In the next poem, "An fia, comuodo? A che muodo zioghémo?"[Hey, girl, what's this? How shall we play this game?] Maffio moves from the denigration of Veronica's profession, to a complete assault on every aspect of her person and reputation. In the first stanza he explains the

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[22]Dazzi, 25-26.

[23]From * onwards, trans. in Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 54.

[24]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 50.

[25]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 102.

reason for his anger: she has insulted him by refusing to greet him on the street. He then criticizes her arrogance:

> Me respondé con una certa ciéra,
> Vu spendé tanta reputatïon
> Che incago alla Rezina d'Inghilterra.[26]
>
> [You answer me with such a face, you squander so much
> reputation that the Queen of England is nothing in comparison.]

The next few stanzas establish how plebian and worthless she is. In spite of her haughty manner, she is beneath even the lowly tripe-maker's assistant.

> ...[S]fondraìzza signoria;
> E s'ti va per un bezzo de soffritto,
> El garzon del tripèr te cazza via.[27]
>
> [...You fallen woman; if you go for a penny's worth of onions and
> butter, the tripe-maker's assistant kicks you out.]

This association of the courtesan with the tripe-maker's assistant, while she believes herself to be on a par with the aristocracy, is similar to Lorenzo's association of Angela, through the *trent'uno*, with the lowest class of men.

In contrast to "Franca, credéme," "An, fia, comuodo?" describes at length Veronica's ugliness. The language of the first poem is not nearly as exaggerated as that of this poem: at times the comparisons in the second poem seem ridiculous, especially in light of the fact that earlier he had lauded her for her beauty. Maffio claims that Veronica is so ugly that, if an infant is brought before her, he will be so terrified at her appearance he will act as though he had

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[26]Dazzi, 28.

[27]Dazzi, 28.

worms.[28] Three pages describe minutely every part of her body, from the blisters and boils on her face,[29] to the hair, scabs, and open wounds[30] on her skeletal deathlike torso and limbs, back to the four hairs covering her head.[31] Whereas before he had depicted her as a beautiful woman acting immorally, here her repulsive body becomes a concrete manifestation of her immorality. In the sixteenth century, the exchange of love for money was perceived as an act that could mean the death of one's soul.[32] Here the death of Veronica's soul has manifested itself outwardly: she has become the image of death itself.

> Ma mi me penso che la morte trema,
> Ché la die' creder de vederse in specchio,
> De no s'aver da dar essa medêma.[33]
>
> [But I think that death trembles before you, as she thinks she is looking at herself in the mirror, not realizing that you are something other than her reflection.]

Maffio's insistence on boils and scabs are references to syphilis. As she embodies death, she also embodies the disease most frequently associated with prostitution.

Perhaps Maffio was trying to make a point about courtesans in general by criticizing Veronica, and it is possible that he was interested in Veronica and felt rejected by her. Another plausible explanation for his violent verbal attacks is suggested by Margaret Rosenthal. She

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[28]Dazzi, 30.

[29]Dazzi, 30.

[30]Dazzi, 31-32.

[31]Dazzi, 32.

[32]Sperone Speroni, "Orazione contra le Cortigiane," *Opere*, tome III (Rome: Vecchiarelli, 1989) 237.

[33]Dazzi, 32.

points out that Marco had a very successful career in politics, and obtained much power with apparent ease,[34] while Maffio struggled, moving from court to court, eventually obtaining only what for him was an undesirable position as the archbishop of Corfu.[35] In 1574-1575, when these defamatory verses were written, Maffio was still wandering in search of a religious or political appointment while Marco and Veronica were quickly rising in Venetian society. Maffio found work briefly in 1574 as a poet and an informer at the Tuscan court (which does not seem to have been a very honorable position for a patriotic Venetian), but by 1575 he was in Rome, writing poetry and entertaining himself, without the security of a formal appointment.[36] Therefore an attack on Veronica Franco was indirectly an attack on the much-envied Marco.[37]

The fact that Maffio was politically unsuccessful for so many years may also have led him to vent his anger on this successful courtesan. In "Franca, credéme," he makes this statement about the life of a courtesan:

> Val certo ste virtù, val la beltà,
> Ma l'è più cara assai, più preciosa
> De bellezza e virtù la libertà.[38]
>
> [No doubt such talents are worth a lot and so is beauty. But more

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[34]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 51.

[35]That Maffio found the archbishopric less than desirable is confirmed by the fact that he tried to obtain other bishoprics from 1583, the year of his appointment, to 1586, when he died, ironically, of syphilis. Also, this position only worsened his economic situation. Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 49-50. See also Ruggieri, 27, 33-38.

[36]Ruggieri, 12-14.

[37]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 51.

[38]Dazzi, 26.

dear and more precious by far than beauty and talent is freedom.][39]

Given that courtesans tried to be the mirror images of courtiers,[40] it is possible that Maffio was voicing his disgust at his own servile position and lack of freedom by disparaging that of the courtesan.

The third poem in the series, "Veronica, ver unica puttana," [Veronica, truly unique whore] continues to insult Veronica Franco. Here, in addition to being the incarnation of death and disease, she becomes an actual monster:

> Donna reduta mostro in carne umana,
> Stucco, zesso, carton, curàme e tòla,
> Fantasma lodesana, orca varuola,
> Cocodrilo, ipogrifo, struzzo, alfana.
> Ghe vorrìa centenara de concetti,
> E mïara de penne e caramàli,
> E un numero infinito de Poeti,
> Chi volesse cantar tutti i to mali,
> Tutte le to caìe, tutti i difetti,[41]
>
> [A woman reduced to a monster made of human flesh: plaster, chalk, cardboard, leather, and wooden board, a grisly spook, a scabby ogre, a crocodile, a hippogriff, an ostrich, a knock-kneed mare. To sing of all that is wrong with you, your flaws, your faults, would take a hundred concepts, thousands of pens and inkwells, and countless poets,][42]

There has been a progression in the poems, from the first one in which Veronica was a beautiful but sinful woman, to Veronica in the second poem, depicted as decrepit, ugly, and barely human, to Veronica as an inhuman and grotesque Harpy in the third poem. Many of the insults in this

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[39]Trans. in Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 55.

[40]Lawner, 74.

[41]Dazzi, 37.

[42]Trans. in Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 189.

poem are similar to but more intense than those in "An, fia, comuodo?". While in the second poem Veronica was just the mirror image of death, here she actually is death, specifically death by syphilis:

> No estu del gran mal
> Francese la diletta fia adottiva,
> relita della *q.[uondam]* Pellativa?
> Causa che tanti scriva?
> Erede universal del Lazzaretto?
> Quella vacca che sàtia tutto Ghetto?
> Quel stupendo soggetto
> Che ti nassevi al tempo del Petrarca?
> .....
> Quella che mantien guerra
> Contro la sanità. Mare del morbo.
> Quella che venne al mondo con el corbo.
> Quella che rende orbo
> Sto seculo presente, e che l'infetta.
> Quella contra de chi no val recetta
> Né medesina eletta.[43]
>
> [Are you not the adopted daughter of syphilis, orphan of the *quondam Pellativa*? The reason why so many write? Universal heiress of the Lazzaretto? That cow that satisfies the entire ghetto? That stupendous subject that was born in the time of Petrarch?.... She who wages war against health. The mother of disease. She who comes into the world with a crow. She who blinds the present century, and who contaminates it. That for which there is no cure nor medicine.]

Maffio Veniero's poetic attacks on Veronica Franco first appeared in 1575,[44] the same year that a two-year plague struck Venice and the Veneto. "Veronica, ver unica puttana," in equating Veronica with disease, offers an explanation for this terrible outbreak: Veronica's individual corruption has corrupted and infected Venice. As Margaret Rosenthal has pointed out,

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[43]Dazzi, 38-39.

[44]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 48.

it was a common belief that moral decadence, epitomized for Maffio and many others by the prostitute and courtesan, had led to Venice's ruin.[45] As Aretino mentions in his *Ragionamenti*,[46] prostitutes were also blamed for the spread of syphilis. But rather than simply functioning as a carrier of the sickness poisoning Venice, Veronica has become the disease itself.

Maffio wrote several verses about the effects of the plague on Venice, in which he grieves for this once-beautiful, virgin city, now a decrepit, diseased monster:

> Quant'a ragion mi doglio
> di scoprir ne l'amato almo tuo seno
> piaghe aperte e voraci,
> e in te stessa nutrir foco e veleno!
> Come ti cangi e sfaci!
> Or le tue belle membra, e 'l crine adorno
> d'oro, di perle e d'ostro
> forman di vaga ninfa orrido mostro,
> mostro che geme e piange empio destino
> con mille insidie de la morte intorno,[47]

This description of Venice bears some resemblance to the poems about Veronica, in its references to open wounds, death, and the charming beauty who becomes a monster. In her own poetry, which was published around the same time as the poetry of Maffio, Veronica Franco had identified strongly with the feminine icon of Venice.[48]

The first part of Veronica's *Terze rime* is a discourse between Veronica and the *incerto autore*, probably Marco Veniero. One of the poems of the *Terze rime* is a response to the *incerto*

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[45]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 45.

[46]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 174.

[47]Cited in Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 46.

[48]Margaret Rosenthal, "Veronica Franco's *Terze rime*: the Venetian Courtesan's Defense," *Renaissance Quarterly* 42 no. 2 (1989): 235.

*autore* who, believing Veronica to be residing in Verona, speaks of the city as beautiful because graced with her presence:

> Invero una tu sei, Verona bella,
> poi che la mia Veronica gentile
> con l'unica bellezza sua t'abbella. [XI, 1-3][49]

Veronica responds by exhorting her admirer to adore and praise Venice rather than Verona, as although Verona is beautiful for its own qualities and not because of her, Venice is a goddess among cities, and so much more worthy of praise:

> Una invero è, qual dite voi, Verona,
> per le qualità proprie di se stessa,
> e non per quel che da voi si ragiona;
> ma tanto piú Vinegia è bella d'essa,
> quanto è piú bel del mondo il paradiso,
> la cui beltà fu a Vinegia concessa.
> .....
> Questa, se in piacer v'era dilettarmi,
> dovevate lodar, e con tal modo
> al mio usato soggiorno richiamarmi. [XII, 31-36, 76-78][50]

As Maffio Veniero knew the preceding poems of the *incerto autore* well enough to satirize them, he was probably familiar with this one as well. "Veronica, ver unica puttana," is a play on the *incerto autore*'s "vera, unica al mondo eccelsa dea," [VII, 173][51] and may also be a parody of the aforementioned poem that speaks of Verona. Besides satirizing the *petrarchismo* of these poems, Maffio was trying to undermine Veronica's self-identification with Venice.[52] The progression of the Veronica figure in Maffio's poetry, from the beautiful woman of

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[49]Veronica Franco, *Rime*, ed. Stefano Bianchi (Milan: Mursia, 1995) 85.

[50]Franco, *Rime*, 89-91.

[51]Franco, *Rime* 74. See also Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 187.

[52]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 188.

"Franca, credème" to the hideous personification of disease and ruin, is in many ways analogous to the destruction evoked in his poem about a Venice ravaged by the plague. Both are seen, on some level, as "fallen" women; the most readily-apparent difference is that while Veronica is forever ruined, Venice is a "nova fenice," and in the near future will emerge as "questa Dea rinnovar vita felice."[53]

Unlike Angela Zaffetta, who was either unable or unwilling to defend herself on a literary level, Veronica Franco rose to the challenge of taking on the malevolent Maffio. Veronica presents herself as fighting a duel, which indicates that she saw herself as his equal, rather than his inferior.[54] The sixteenth poem of the *Terze rime* is Veronica's counter-attack, one in which she proves herself a more skillful and courteous literary warrior than her opponent. The poem begins with the image of a knight who stabs an unarmed, unawares woman, thus gravely wounding her. [XVI, 1-28][55] This analogy suggests that Maffio, by defaming Veronica anonymously rather than facing her in literary battle, is a coward who has violated the most basic rules of courtesy.[56] Veronica challenges him to a real battle, and establishes herself as the defender of all women against this coarse, silly coward. [XVI, 67-81][57] Fluent in both Venetian

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[53]Quoted in Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 48.

[54]Peter Burke, "Insult and Blasphemy in Early Modern Italy," *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 107.

[55]Franco, *Rime* 106.

[56]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 191.

[57]Franco, *Rime* 108.

and Tuscan, and capable of using any poetic register, [XVI, 112-117][58] she allows him to choose the "weapons," or language, for the fight, thus demonstrating her courtesy and indicating her mastery of all types of Italian poetic language. Then, she attacks the poem "Veronica, ver unica puttana." Rather than trade insults with him, she explains how his use of language is incorrect.

> ma, al mio dizzïonario, io non so come
> "unica" alcuna cosa, propriamente,
> in mala parte ed in biasmar si nome.
> Forse che si direbbe impropriamente,
> .....
> L' "unico" in lode e in pregio vien esposto
> da chi s'intende; e chi parla altrimenti,
> dal senso del parlar sen' va discosto.
> Questo non è, signor, fallo d'accenti,
> quello in che s'inveisce, nominare,
> col titol de le cose piú eccellenti.
> O voi non mi voleste biasimare,
> o in questo dir menzogna non sapeste.[XVI, 142-145, 154-161][59]

She continues remarking that to insult someone without cause is a sign of bad manners and is not permitted in "buona civiltà."[XVI, 171][60] In this way she establishes herself as superior to him in courage, courtesy, and literary skill. The last part of the poem is dedicated to a vindication of prostitutes. Here, using logic, she turns around what Maffio has written, explaining that if a woman as gracious as herself is a common whore, then common whores must possess a great many good and noble traits:

> E se ben "meretrice" mi chiamate,
> o volete inferir ch'io non vi sono,
> o che ve n'èn tra tali di lodate.
> Quanto le meretrici hanno di buono,

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[58]Franco, *Rime* 109.

[59]Franco, *Rime* 109-110.

[60]Franco, *Rime* 110.

quanto di grazïoso e di gentile,
esprime in me del parlar vostro il suono. [XVI, 178-183][61]

Veronica Franco thoroughly trounces Maffio Veniero by adhering to social and poetic norms and demonstrating how her opponent, through his crude verses, has acted outside the conventions of civil society.[62] This point, as well as her criticism of his grammar is reiterated in a letter, presumably addressed to Marco, in which she apologizes for ever having thought him the author of those verses, claiming she knew all along that they could not have been his, so badly were they written:

> ...non ho voluto compiutamente credere che quella fosse sua fattura, avendo risguardato all'imperfezzione dell'opera, piena d'errori e per altra causa non degno parto del nobile intelletto suo.[63]

The works of Lorenzo and Maffio Veniero were meant to publicly discredit Angela Zaffetta and Veronica Franco, to demote them from the elevated and inappropriate status of cultured, aristocratic courtesans, and return them to their proper roles as common prostitutes. Both attempts failed, as neither Angela nor Veronica lost their reputations or their clientele. The accusations made were eventually repudiated, especially those having to do with syphilis, in Angela's case by Aretino, and in Veronica's case by her own pen. Ironically, it was Maffio who, eleven years after he accused Veronica of contaminating the world, died of syphilis.[64] Although

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[61]Franco, *Rime* 110-111.

[62]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 56.

[63]Franco, *Lettere* 65.

[64]Maffio Venier officially died of a fever on 10 November, 1586, but considering that this fever had lasted from August to November, and that he had first become violently ill with syphilis in May of 1581, it seems probable that the fever that killed him was a complication of syphilis. Ruggieri, 22-23, 38-39. It is uncertain whether he was aware he had contracted syphilis

they failed in their efforts to undermine these upwardly-mobile, educated women who refused to fit into the few female roles offered by their society (i.e. those of chaste, dependent wives or impoverished common prostitutes), the discomfort and resentment Lorenzo and Maffio felt towards women who dared transgress their boundaries would be reiterated in the works of many writers who came after them.

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before 1581; if there were evidence indicating he was infected six years earlier, and aware of it, this could explain his anger towards courtesans.

## Chapter two
## From Moralism to Misogyny: General Works Maligning Courtesans

Defamatory writings about courtesans were not limited to the pointed, personal invectives of Lorenzo and Maffio Veniero. Often their detractors took a broader approach, either mildly castigating them in general, as in Sperone Speroni's *Orazione contra le cortigiane* (1575), or anonymously maligning some of the most successful courtesans, as in the *Tariffa delle puttane di Vinegia* (1535), and the *Ragionamento dello Zoppino* (1534).[1] As with the works discussed in the previous section, the intensity of the attack is determined by the writer's feelings towards courtesans, and by whether or not he perceived her as a threat to himself or to the social order. A comparison of Speroni's *Orazione* to the anonymous *Tariffa* and *Ragionamento* will clarify and support this hypothesis: as we shall see, Speroni held courtesans in high regard and considered them fellow intellectuals, and consequently, his criticism of courtesans is relatively kind and respectful, emphasizing the potential good of the women who felt compelled to sell their bodies. The dispute over the authorship of the *Tariffa* and the *Ragionamento* makes the analysis of these works according to this criterion more problematic, it being impossible to surmise anything about the experiences of an anonymous author vis-a-vis courtesans. However,

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[1]The two latter works have been attributed to Lorenzo Veniero and/or Pietro Aretino, yet there remains uncertainty surrounding the authorship of these works. The *Tariffa delle puttane di Vinegia* (1535) has been attributed by some to Lorenzo Veniero and by others to Antonio Cavallino, a Paduan student. See Lorenzoni, 63. The *Ragionamento dello Zoppino*, included in some editions of Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, such as the Sampietro edition used here, was probably not written by Aretino, and its author remains unknown. See "Opere di Pietro Aretino e di Anton Francesco Doni," 16. Given the similarities between the *Tariffa*, the *Ragionamento*, and other writings by Veniero and Aretino, it is possible either that they wrote these works, or that the ideas contained within, as well as the writing style, were common among their contemporaries, rather than the trademark of Aretino or Veniero.

the vulgar content and coarse language of these two works indicate that their authors were deeply offended by the courtesan's transgression of traditional gender and class boundaries. Their anger is underscored by comparison with the tasteful content and the courteous language of Speroni's *Orazione*.

Sperone Speroni (1500-1588) was a Paduan intellectual, well-respected in Venetian literary circles.[2] One of his most famous works, the *Dialogo d'amore* (1542), features the courtesan Tullia d'Aragona as one of the main interlocutors.[3] Unlike the female interlocutors in Castiglione's *Cortigiano* (1527), Tullia speaks frequently and eloquently.[4] Speroni's portrayal of the courtesan as an equal of learned men indicates that he had a great deal of respect for these upwardly mobile and unchaste female intellectuals, which perhaps contributed to his later problems (1574) with the Inquisition. In fact, in 1575, he corrected his *Dialogo d'amore*, and wrote the *Orazione contra le cortigiane*.[5] It is entirely possible that the *Orazione* was written not as a castigation of courtesans, but simply to convince the Church that he disapproved of the "sinful" courtesan.

The premise of the *Orazione*, that of the need to steer these misguided souls back onto

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[2]For a biography of Speroni, see the introduction in "Sperone Speroni," *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*, vol. 25, tome I, ed. Mario Pozzi (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1976) 471-850. (The introduction comprises pages 471-509.)

[3]In the *Dialogo d'amore* Tullia is the lover of another interlocutor, Bernardo Tasso, who in fact was involved with Tullia during her brief stay in Venice in 1534. "Sperone Speroni" 511n.

[4]In the *Dialogo d'amore*, Tullia argues that love is an irrational, jealous passion, rather than a tranquil happiness governed by reason. For the complete *Dialogo d'amore*, see "Sperone Speroni" 511-563.

[5]Introduction, "Sperone Speroni" 484-485.

the path of righteousness, supports the theory that it was written to assure the Church of his devotion. The *Orazione* begins:

> I dì passati sendomi imposto cortesemente da alcun signore amorevole, che io biasimassi le cortigiane, con speranza, come io avviso, che vergognando le miserelle, che la lor vita vituperosa fusse ritratta nelle mie carte, cangiasser modi e costumi; io in quel punto nulla altra cosa considerando, se non che come elle son pronte a far male, così ancora io e più facilmente potessi dirlo a mio senno, disideroso dello ubbidire promisi fare il comandamento.[6]

From this first sentence it is apparent that the work has a different purpose than other critiques of courtesans, and the difference is reflected in its courteous language. Speroni refers to them as *cortigiane*, a neutral term which carries no hostility, and *miserelle*, implying pity. Neither of these characterizations have the derisive implications of the obscene epithet *puttana* favored by most of the courtesans' detractors. Although he describes their profession as *vituperosa*, he voices the hope that, feeling ashamed, they will become "respectable" women. In claiming that they are capable of shame, he implies that they are not naturally dissolute; rather, they have strayed from the path of chastity and "goodness" and, being intelligent and virtuous of nature, will turn to a more exemplary lifestyle, once they have recognized the error of their ways. Other detractors of courtesans deny the possibility of courtesans' remorse, portraying them as evil, bestial creatures, unable to feel, or even comprehend anything beyond greed and lust.

The *Orazione* is divided into two parts: the first recalls virtuous women of the past, and the second chastizes courtesans, exhorting them to renounce their wicked ways and lead a more

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[6]Sperone Speroni, *Orazione contra le cortigiane*, *Opere*, tome III (Rome: Vecchiarelli, 1989) 191.

respectable life. Speroni explains how the courtesan, the prisoner of others' whims and desires,[7] can both free herself and find salvation by turning to God; among other examples, Mary Magdalen and Mary of Egypt are cited as former prostitutes who were canonized after becoming God's devout servants:

> Fra mille esempli che io ho già letti e veduti, e vedo ancor tuttavia, che saria lungo a contarli, d'alcuni eletti farò parola; cominciando da Maddalena, della quale sette dimoni cacciò il signor Gesù Cristo, cioè peccati infiniti: che'l sette è posto per le migliaia ora ella è santa delle più alte di paradiso....Maria Egizia....avveduta di sua viltà scelerata, vergognandosi di se stessa, e d'esser mostra per meretrice; fuggendo il mondo e il dimonio, corse al diserto d'oltre il Giordano, e vivessi anni quaranta sette d'erbe e radici senza altro cibo, piena di vera contrizione nel qual tempo imitando la leggierezza del corpo suo, quella dell'anima disgrevata de' suoi peccati, come se gli angeli la portassero....E tanto basti alli esempli: onde la misera cortigiana di miglior vita disiderosa, prende speranza, che Dio adempia compiutamente il suo e il mio disiderio.[8]

This passage expands upon the opening premise by offering evidence that a change in lifestyle is possible. Through the example of a common prostitute who rose to the top of the celestial hierarchy, Speroni conveys a more open-minded attitude towards prostitutes than other detractors. Traditionally, writings about women divide them into good, angelic, asexual beings and bad, demonic, lusty seductresses. Although Speroni's desire to turn the bad woman into a good woman indicates that his work is still influenced by this dichotomy, underneath lies a belief in the latent goodness within every bad woman. This is a radical departure from the positions of most other writers, who refuse to see anything remotely good, or even human, within the

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[7]Speroni, *Orazione* 236.

[8]Speroni, *Orazione* 228-229.

corrupted body of the prostitute.

While Speroni still resorts to many negative stereotypes, he does not degrade the courtesan by referring to her almost exclusively as a *potta* or *culo*, devoid of either intelligence or character, or an inhuman monster, as many of her censors did. He blurs the distinction between courtesans and prostitutes by using the terms *cortigiane* and *meretrici* interchangeably but avoids calling them *puttane*. Although Speroni accuses them of spreading syphilis, and demonstrates a certain amount of contempt, his language does not create as repugnant an image as that found in other works:

> Già fa ognuno per udir dire, e molti il fanno alle spese loro, che, ancor non sono cento anni andati, dal mondo novo all'antico venne una specie d'infermità, la qual comunque sia nominata (perchè del nome tra Spagna e Francia è contesa) pare esser pena da Dio mandata specialmente a' fornicatori....Dunque in sua vita la meretrice sempre è punita delle sue colpe....E di ciò fanno un gran bene che tale essendo la meretrice non per destino o per violenzia, ma si per libera elezione; l'averle alcuna compassione, contraponendosi in certo modo alla sentenzia del signor Dio, farebbe specie di scelerata presonzione certo ad una anima, che sia colma di tutti i vizii, quale ha la misera cortigiana, nullo altro corpo risponderebbe, salvo lo infetto di una pestifera infermità, che non spegnesse la vita, ma lentamente la distrugge. [9]

The absence of a detailed description of the scabs and sores which accompany the disease is striking, as these descriptions had become literary commonplaces in derogatory writings about courtesans and/or prostitutes. Here syphilis is used less to incite disgust in potential clients of the courtesan, than to convince courtesans of the enormous risks of their profession, and thus to steer them towards a more honorable lifestyle.

In another passage, Speroni accuses courtesans of having recourse to abortion, but then

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[9]Speroni, *Orazione* 221.

remarks that this is not necessarily a bad thing, because even the courtesans themselves would not know who the fathers of their children were:

> Pecca molto questa perversa contra Dio e la natura; che essendo femmina di ciascuno, non vuol di alcuno esser madre: anzi accorgendosi d'esser gravida, usa ogni arte a gran rischio, per isconsciarsi e disgravidare; sappiendo ella che 'l partorire, portare in collo i figlioli, e poichè in corpo per molti mesi gli avrà portati, lattarli appresso per altri molti, vegghiar per essi la notte, e compatire alle lor bisogne, sono sì fatte operazioni, che sminuiscono la bellezza, e maggior fanno parer la etade; di che peggio non può avvenire alla cortigiana. Ma in tal peccato tanto ha di bene, che essendo sterile questa rea, non sa cosa che l'assimiglie, e non raddoppia la sua tristizia ben schiva un scandalo molto orribile, che produrrebbe il suo parto perciocchè partorendo la cortigiana, potrebbe esser che non sapesse elle stessa, chi fusse padre di suo figliolo.[10]

Again, the passage is moralizing rather than degrading. The accusation is harsh and possibly unfair, but the courtesan is still painted as an immoral, vain, superficial woman who must learn the error of her ways, rather than as a mindless receptacle or a grotesque monster.

The courtesan is also portrayed as a perfidious Eve leading thousands of Adams into sin:

> Fu bene un tempo, che tu eri Eva nel tuo peccato, mentre era specie d'incontinenza: ma or che sei cortigiana, tu sei serpente in due modi; l'un che perseveri nel peccato, l'altro, che essendo tu peccatrice, tiri anche teco a peccare non più un solo, ma mille Adami ingannati.[11]

Eve was the traditional prototype for the disobedient temptress, indeed a kind of proof that women were generally untrustworthy, sinful, and dangerous.[12] Here the courtesan is not only the

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[10]Speroni, *Orazione* 222.

[11]Speroni, *Orazione* 239.

[12]Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Brink of All We Hate: English Satires on Women, 1660-1750* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1984) 135.

descendent of Eve, but also of the serpent, the demonic agent that leads both women and men into sin. The topos of Eve, while commonly found in writings about women, is not normally alluded to in writings aimed specifically at courtesans. Perhaps this reflects the religious tone of the work, which in turn could be explained by Speroni's desire to please the Church.

Notwithstanding its unflattering stereotypes, the *Orazione* assumes a certain amount of inherent goodness and intelligence on the part of courtesans, without which the oration would fail in its proposed intent. While most of the courtesans' critics refer incessantly to her genitalia and to the sexual act, the *Orazione* carefully avoids any such explicitness for two reasons. Firstly, if Speroni's main incentive in writing this work was to appease the Church, any vulgarity would have simply implicated him further. Secondly, if, as evidenced by his earlier works, he held the courtesan in high regard, and did not see her as a threat, he would feel no need to defame, insult, and thus disempower her by overemphasizing her sexuality and disparaging her intellectual gifts. The *Orazione* also avoids naming courtesans. Much of the courtesan's reputation was established within a literary forum, as attested to by the fact that many of the most successful courtesans published works which linked them to successful and well-respected men. While works degrading courtesans in general probably offended them to some extent, they could extricate themselves from possible embarassment by presenting themselves as exceptions to the stereotype. Thus, in order to truly shame them, their detractors had to refer to them by name.

An example of a work that names the illustrious courtesans of Venice is the *Tariffa delle puttane di Venegia*, which also reduces them to a series of rented body parts. The framework for this attack is that of a dialogue between a foreigner, who wishes to pay a visit to any one of the

famous Venetian courtesans, and a gentleman, who attempts to demystify them. The poem was an attempt to diminish their high status, as the author quite clearly felt that these courtesans did not deserve their wealth and prestige, and ridiculed them, often crudely, for their pretensions of erudition and noble birth:

> Quinta si por la dea de gli atti crudi,
> Lucrecia Squarcia, che di poesie
> Finge apprezzar e seguitar gli studi,
> Et *ab antiqua* e gran genealogia
> Fa il suo natal, si come d'un barbiero
> Che si mori in Spedal, figlia non sia.
> Poi fa con gentil'huomini l'altero,
> Recando spesso il Petrarchetto in mano,
> Di Virgilio le charte et hor di Homero.
> Spesso disputa del parlar Thoscano,
> Di musica, e 'l cervel cosi le gira,
> Che pensa haverne il grido di lontano:
> Et a queste virtù cotanto aspira,
> Quanto al vero un heretico, e le intende
> Come l'asino fa il suon de la lira.
> *Quant'ella ha in mundo, il che a pensar m'offende...*
> Et è ben goffo e d'intelletto privo
> Chi la cerca chiavar, che, com'intendo
> Entra in un mar che n'ha fondo o rivo.[13] [emphasis mine]

The author is clearly jealous of and threatened by Lucrecia Squarcia's success, and wishes to convince the reader that she is not of noble birth, is stupid and ignorant in spite of her reputed erudition, and is little more than an animal to be used for sexual release. While Speroni concentrated on the wicked acts of intelligent, potentially virtuous women, the author of the *Tariffa* humiliates specific women, portraying them as feigning intelligence, and by extension, their humanity. Ironically, the very description meant to dishonor Lucrecia Squarcia attests to

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[13]*La tariffa delle puttane di Venegia*, in Antonio Barzaghi, *Donne o cortigiane? La prostituzione a Venezia: Documenti di costume dal XVI al XVIII secolo* (Verona: Bertani, 1980) 173.

her intellectual gifts, even centuries later.

Tullia d'Aragona, the eloquent and well-respected "academician's courtesan,"[14] who was one of the main interlocutors in Speroni's *Dialogo d'amore*, is also depicted in a less than flattering light:

> Hor de' casi di Tullia d'Aragona
> A la qual mezzo palmo di budello
> Lava pisciando il Fonte d'Helicona,
> Vol diece scudi a torlo ne l'anello
> E cinque in potta, e questa lasciarete
> Per la maggior puttana di bordello.[15]

Again, the courtesan's reputation for intellectual prowess is undermined with a crude exaggeration of the meretricious nature of her existence. Tripe seems to have been a symbol of low status: it was used by Maffio Veniero to place Veronica Franco in a lower social caste, and it is used again here to decrease Tullia d'Aragona's standing.

The poem gradually becomes cruder and more insulting as the author lists the various courtesans, their prices, and the more repugnant aspects of their persons:

> Laura, che arroge il titol di Petrarca,
> Volto ha di cazzo, e piscia spesso in letto:
> Per mezzo scudo il suo giardin si varca.
> Felicità dal Squero ha un ladro aspetto;
> Ma l'asselle le puteno si forte,
> Ch'occide l'huom, quando l'abbraccia stretto.
> Angela, sua sorella, par la Morte,
> Quando leva di letto la mattina:
> Ad ambe mezzo scudo apre le porte.[16]

Although some reference is still made to their pretensions of erudition, the emphasis here falls on

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[14]Fiora Bassanese, "Private Lives" 299.

[15]*Tariffa* 176.

[16]*Tariffa* 181.

their stench, their bodily fluids, and their ugly faces. The poem, which began by discrediting the courtesan's knowledge, now removes all refinement from her person, rendering her even more vile than the most humble prostitute.

The *Tariffa*, like virtually all other works maligning courtesans, mentions the common stereotype of the courtesan as carrier of syphilis. Here, the disease acts as revenge for all the tricks courtesans play on their clients:

> Per tutto il mondo le trovano eguali,
> Per tutto noi la fregan, ma nel fine
> Fanno nostra vendetta gli Hospedali.[17]

Syphilis does not figure as prominently in the *Tariffa* as it does in other works denouncing courtesans, perhaps because the representation of the courtesan up to this point is sufficient to discourage the stranger from frequenting them. The fact that the courtesan, if infected, could transmit the disease to her clients is glossed over, as if all courtesans died of the disease while their patrician clients remained immune to it.

The *Tariffa* is meant to have a comic effect, and although the joke is misogynist and slanderous, it is not nearly as insulting as the *Ragionamento dello Zoppino* (of uncertain attribution), which also sought to inveigh against courtesans and ridicule their pretensions of refinement and erudition, but in a more serious vein. The *Ragionamento* is a dialogue between Zoppino, a monk, and Ludovico, a pimp [puttaniere?], on the lives and origins of Roman courtesans. The myths surrounding courtesans, evoked by Ludovico, are debunked by Zoppino, who verbally reduces them to diseased, rapacious prostitutes. Many of the most famous courtesans, such as Matrema-non-vole, Tullia d'Aragona, and Angela Greca are mentioned in

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[17] *Tariffa* 189.

this work.[18] Like the *Tariffa*, the *Ragionamento* refers incessantly to the courtesan's genitalia, as in this passage, where Zoppino explains the etymology of the words *puttana* and *cortigiana*:

> Puttana è un nome composto di vulgare e di latino. Perchè ano in latino si dice quel che in nostra lingua si chiama culo, dove che si compon di potta e ano: e in vulgare nostro puttana vuol dire che li pute la tana; e cortigiana, cortese dell'ano.[19]

Cruder than Speroni's comparatively elegant diatribe, but similar in tone to the *Tariffa*, this passage establishes the courtesan, by "definition," as a body part used for sexual release. It creates a (false) linguistic link between courtesanry and prostitution, and so detaches the word *cortigiana* from *cortigiano*, the actual word from which it was derived.

Virtually all of the negative stereotypes surrounding courtesans are brought forward in this dialogue, but even more striking than the accusations made is the harsh language used. While in the *Tariffa* the courtesan's body functioned as a receptacle for male aggression, both sexual and verbal, in the *Ragionamento* this same body is presented as a rotting piece of flesh. The constant use of words that allude to death and decay suggest that, for the author, the courtesan is a memento mori and a symbol of all that is evil in the world. Throughout the dialogue, Zoppino repeats this theme within various contexts, beginning with the use of demonic magic:

> E se con un'altra ti fermi o parli, le ti voglion far gli incanti, e vanno presto a cimiteri e a le sepolture; quivi trovano le forze, e quivi l'esche con che ti legano e ti lusingano, nascono. Quante per i sentieri ne ho vedute cariche d'ossa, di teste e di veste di morti? quante con tenagliuzze, forbicine o mollette, empir le tasche de

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[18]For their preferences in men, see pp.251-252 and for their less than noble genealogies, see pp. 258-261 of the *Ragionamento*.

[19]*Ragionamento* 254.

> denti cavati da le putrefatte mascelle d'impiccati, a quali spesso ancora, o il capestro tolgono o le scarpe: e ho visto riportar li pezzi integri de la putrida carne, la quale con parole che elle a loro modo dicono, ti danno a mangiare.[20]

Although a condemnation of magic is implicit in this passage, the emphasis falls on the decaying corpses used by the courtesan to achieve her ends, rather than on the fact that she uses magic. The author's aim is not so much to criticize magic, but to foster disgust towards the courtesan, and to highlight the association between courtesans, evil, and death.

This theme recurs in a discussion of the courtesan's beauty, or lack thereof. Zoppino refutes Ludovico's statement that many courtesans are beautiful by claiming that they mask their scabby, decrepit bodies and horrible stench with waxes and oils:

> Hanno il corpo per il soverchio maneggiare rugoso e crespo; le loro zinne fiappe, che paiono vessiche sgonfie, che gli cascano; e sono queste quelle che tu stimi siano le più belle, e poi tutto 'l dì perdon tempo dietro ad acconciarsele con acque di pino, e la notte quando dormano sole, se le fasciano per tenerle in soppresso; e più, per guarir de le mani dormono co guanti, perchè le rognacce e croste che vi hanno suso se ne vadino via, e per aver le mani morbide....E or con galle retirando la guinza pelle, che li pende di continuo, e poi con pelatoi e bagni, i quali scorticatoi gli chiamano, imbruniscono le pelose membra, di che il puzzo ammorba. E gli putrefatti lisci, che sui labbri si pongono, puzzano egli? quel liquor che di continuo de le facende gli esce, di che sa? non sa già di buono questo. E il più de le volte bisogna che portino dentro struffioni, spazzatoi di forni o stracci, perchè non gli coli più per le lorde coscie la compitura corotta....E quelle poltronerie sulimati e tossichi che tengono in sul volto, sui labbri e sui denti, che qualche volta saria meglio basciar un cesso che i lor volti.[21]

The courtesan resembles the putrefied corpses she exhumes for her magic spells. While the

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[20]*Ragionamento* 249.

[21]*Ragionamento* 252-253.

*Orazione* presented her as the epitome of moral corruption, here her deterioration is physical: she is literally the embodiment of death and decay. This physical description contains similarities to that of Veronica Franco in Maffio Veniero's *Libro chiuso*, which indicates either that Maffio was influenced by this work, and/or that these descriptions reflected widely held views of courtesans and prostitutes.

The common accusation of spreading syphilis resurfaces, but becomes just another revolting and inevitable trait of the courtesan:

> E ti lasciano le devise lor nel letto, o imbrattate le lenzuola di marchese, o qualche crosta di mal francese, o rogna, o qualche caruolo, acciochè ti ricordi di loro.[22]

Unlike the *Orazione* and the *Tariffa*, the *Ragionamento* places its emphasis on the courtesan as a repulsive, bestial mess of scabs, rather than on the disease itself as a manifestation of God's or man's vendetta.

The language of the *Ragionamento* reflects its purpose, to deconstruct the carefully constructed personae of courtesans, to reveal the illustrious as vile and corrupt. Nearly every sentence is specifically created to incite disgust in the reader, with its repetition of words alluding to death and decay, like "putrefatto," "corotta," "putrida," and "puzzo." There is no semblance of courtesy as there was in the *Orazione*, and the denunciation is far stronger than that of the *Tariffa*, as the courtesan is not merely a dehumanized object, but a representation, even a harbinger of death.[23]

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[22]*Ragionamento* 254.

[23]Felicity A. Nussbaum comments on the association between women and death in English satires, "Though woman's exterior beguiles man, within that appearance she threatens physical and spiritual death. Beneath a woman's seeming beauty lies the ugliness that can destroy

Although more general in scope, the *Tariffa* and the *Ragionamento* are quite similar to the works of the Venieros. Whereas Maffio Veniero was almost certainly influenced by these works, his father, Lorenzo Veniero, may have actually written the *Tariffa.* The *Ragionamento* has been attributed by some to Pietro Aretino, yet this seems unlikely, as it is such a radical departure from his dialogues on courtesanry,[24] with which it is published. While the works of the Venieros and the aforementioned anonymous writings mirror what were probably fairly common stereotypes about courtesans, Aretino's *Ragionamenti,* in which the main interlocutors are two courtesans, not two men, as in the *Tariffa* and the *Ragionamento*, refute these stereotypes.

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men." Nussbaum, 108.

[24]These dialogues, or *Ragionamenti*, will be discussed in the next section.

## Chapter three
## "I vizî de le puttane sono virtù": Ambiguity and Social Commentary in Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti*

Pietro Aretino, "the Scourge of Princes," was a freelance writer in Rome and Venice in the first half of the sixteenth century who earned his nickname the same way he earned his fortune: by blackmailing and slandering the most powerful men of his time. Born in Arezzo the son of a cobbler, he used his wits and his literary talents to rise to the top of society. He moved to Rome in 1516 or 1517 where he entertained the papal court of Leo X,[1] and by the early 1520s he had established himself as the main writer of the *pasquinate*, scathing satirical verses attached to a statue called *Pasquino*.[2] Although seen as the voice of the people, he often used these verses to further his own interests.[3]

During the 1520s Aretino was forced to leave Rome more than once because of scandals and assassination attempts. He wandered from court to court, and became the "tagliaborse dei principi,"[4] threatening to write *pasquinate* slandering those princes who did not show him generosity,[5] and continuing to write pamphlets condemning Adrian VI and then Clement VII.[6]

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[1]Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980) 35, 37.

[2]Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* 45-53.

[3]Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* 49-50.

[4]Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* 56.

[5]Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* 56-57.

[6]Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* 57-58.

Finally, in 1527, he settled in Venice, a well-known refuge for censured writers.[7] Aretino wrote many works during his lifetime, but he is best known for his satirical comedies, erotic verses and letters. The *Ragionamenti*, written in 1536, are a series of dialogues between two courtesans and a madam, which satirize sixteenth-century morals (or the lack thereof) regarding the relations between men and women.

The *Ragionamenti* can be interpreted either as a defense or as a condemnation of courtesans. The first part of the *Ragionamenti* examines the three roles open to sixteenth-century Italian women. The first two, nun and wife, are dismissed as totally hypocritical and dishonest. The third possibility, prostitute, although it involves dishonesty and fraud, is not hypocritical, because the prostitute acts according to popular expectations. Despite the numerous stereotypes propagated in the *Ragionamenti*, Aretino's denunciation of courtesans must be analyzed in light of the fact that he condemns virtually everyone in his society.

Aretino's ambiguity vis-a-vis the courtesan may well reflect his own ambiguous status in sixteenth-century Italy. Like most male writers of his time, he condemns the courtesan as greedy, licentious and perfidious. However, perhaps he cannot help but identify with the courtesan,[8] who uses her wits to rise above her social class and to obfuscate the nature of her profession. Aretino needed to sell his works to survive in the same way that the courtesan needed to sell her body to survive, yet the financial and social success of Aretino and of courtesans depended on their ability to downplay the mercenary and the subaltern aspects of their work and to earn respect

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[7]"Chronology," *Dialogues*, by Pietro Aretino, translated and prefaced by Raymond Rosenthal, with an epilogue by Margaret Rosenthal (New York: Marsilio, 1971) 416.

[8]Lynne Lawner affirms that "Aretino considers himself a kind of *puttana di lusso* (an upper-class prostitute) who uses a phallic pen." 67.

instead for their intellectual gifts.

The *Ragionamenti* is an erotic, titillating view of the situation of sixteenth-century women. It is quite improbable that most women had the highly active sex lives that Aretino depicts, and therefore it is safe to assume that Aretino is using sex to sell this particular work. He satirizes the courtesan's lack of independence, her need to outsmart and deceive her social superiors, and her use of sex to achieve material and social success, yet is conscious of the fact that in some ways, his lifestyle is analogous to hers. These similarities lead him to understand, sympathize with, and even admire the courtesan, as she shares his ambiguous and precarious status.

Both Aretino and the courtesan had a kind of "outsider within" status in upper-class society, that is, they lived among members of the patriciate, yet did not belong fully because of their humble social origins. Rather than being born into this privileged world, they entered it by selling a commodity desired by the upper classes. The courtesans sold an ideal of wealth and refinement that matched the desired self-image of the upper class. Aretino sold a similar product, yet threatened to hold up a negative mirror revealing the warts of superficiality, vanity and greed that the upper class did not want to see. Although Aretino employs the standard stereotypes about courtesans, i.e., that they were cunning, ruthless, manipulative and greedy, the work overall is more a scathing commentary on the society in which they moved, than an indictment of courtesans in particular.

Perhaps, in examining the stereotype of the courtesan, Aretino recognizes the same adjectives used by others to describe him. He was thought of by many as a ruthless, greedy

upstart who blackmailed and slandered others in order to achieve his material goals.[9] His methods, in a way, were the reverse of the courtesan's. While the courtesan became successful by enhancing the cultured, refined image of the aristocracy, Aretino achieved his success by destroying, or threatening to destroy the reputations of various powerful men.[10] This may explain why his depiction of the courtesan, unlike those of so many of his contemporaries, was ultimately sympathetic to her difficult situation, presenting her as less evil than the allegedly "good" people in society:

> I vizî de le puttane sono virtù....importa il cavarsi ogni vogliuzza, potendo favorire ciascuno, perchè Roma sempre fu e sempre sarà, non vo' dir de le puttane, per non me ne avere a confessare.[11]

Although Aretino's representation of the courtesan is not wholly positive, his most bitter criticism is reserved for those social groups that he felt were completely hypocritical, the clergy and the nobility. In the preface to the *Ragionamenti*, which is dedicated to a monkey, Aretino compares the vices of the animal with those of the nobility, and concludes that monkeys and great nobles have many traits in common:

> Tu con la tua ingordigia ogni cosa trangugi, ed essi con la loro divorano sì, che la gola non si trova più tra i sette peccati mortali. Tu fino a uno ago rubi, ed essi fino al sangue furano, riguardando il luogo dove fanno i furti, come lo riguardi tu; essi sono liberali ne la maniera che diranno i servidori e i sudditi loro a chi gliene dimanda, e tu sei cortese, come possono giurare quegli che si arrischiano a toglierti qualunque cosa che tu ti tenga fra l'unghie; tu sei sì lussurioso, che ti corrumpi fin con te stesso, ed essi usano senza punto di vergogna con le medesime carni; la tua presunzione

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[9]Raymond Rosenthal, preface, *Dialogues* 6. See also James Cleugh, *The Divine Aretino* (Great Britain: Anthony Blond, 1965).

[10]Cleugh, 16-17.

[11]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 105.

> avanza quella de gli sfacciati, e la loro quella de gli affamati; tu sei sempre pieno di lordezzo, ed essi sempre carchi di unguenti; il tuo volubile aggirare non trova mai luogo, ed il loro cervello è stabile come un torno; i tuoi scherzi sono il giuoco del popolo, e le lor materie il riso del mondo; tu sei fastidioso, ed essi importuni; tu temi ognuno, e fai temer ciascuno, ed essi a tutti fanno paura, e di tutti hanno paura; i tuoi vizii sono incomperabili, e i loro inestimabili; tu fai strano viso a ciascuno che non ti porta il cibo, ed essi non mirano con diritto occhio, se non gli apportatori de loro piaceri, essi non danno cura a vituperio, che si gli dica, nè tu a villania che ti si faccia.[12]

The first part of the dedication is obviously a condemnation of the nobility, rather than an analysis of monkeys' behavior. In the second part, he castigates nuns for their promiscuity, explaining how many of them are worse than prostitutes and that even Hell is revolted by their behavior.[13] The two parts of the dedication combined suggest that Aretino may be drawing a parallel between the prostitute and the monkey: the prostitute has many vices, but like the monkey does not deny them, while great lords and nuns mistakenly think themselves to be better than others. In fact, this is one of the recurring themes in the dialogues: the rampant hypocrisy of a moralizing society that is itself immoral.

The *Ragionamenti* consist of six days of conversations between Nanna, a woman who has lived the three basic female conditions, and a few other women, including her daughter and a procuress. In the first three days, Nanna and Antonia, a prostitute stricken with syphilis, discuss the three options open to Pippa, Nanna's daughter. Nanna candidly describes her experiences as a nun, a wife, and a courtesan, and her metamorphosis from a naive, innocent, virgin, into a conniving prostitute. Although the women in Aretino's dialogues are portrayed as dishonest and

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[12]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 18.

[13]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 19.

manipulative, unlike the standard misogynist diatribes, they do not claim women are evil by nature, but rather suggest that they are taught to act in evil ways. It is clear that Nanna is not an evil person: she has learned to exploit others because it is necessary for her survival.

The first day of the *Ragionamenti* explores the world of the convent, where Nanna expects to find austerity and piety, but instead encounters sumptuous feasts and wild orgies. Although the description is fictional and was written to provide erotic entertainment, the monastic life depicted in this episode was probably inspired by actual events. Many Venetian convents of the Renaissance were prosecuted repeatedly for sex crimes, and at least one fifteenth-century convent, Sant'Angelo di Contorta, which was eventually closed by the pope for its embarassingly large number of prosecutions for sex crimes, seems to have borne quite a resemblance to the convent described by Nanna.[14]

After receiving a severe whipping from one of her lovers, Nanna leaves the convent and marries a rich, older man. In this second day of the *Ragionamenti* Aretino presents the duplicity of the institution of marriage, just as in the preceding day he revealed the prevarication of the convent. Neither the wives nor the husbands described in Nanna's tales can remain faithful, and the day is filled with stories of lies and trickery, culminating in Nanna's murder of her husband, whom she literally stabs in the heart.

In light of Aretino's presentation of the nun and the wife, one can interpret the deceitful whore presented in the third day as the most honest figure in the *Ragionamenti*. The courtesan is devious and fraudulent not only because she has to be this way in order to survive, but also because that is one of the services she provides:

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[14]Ruggiero, *Boundaries* 76-86.

> Ma sopra tutte le cose, studia le finzioni e le adulazioni, che io ti ho detto, perchè sono i ricami del sapersi mantenere. Gli uomini vogliono essere ingannati, e ancora che si avveghino che se gli dia la baia, e che partita da loro, gli dileggi, vantandotene fin con le fanti, hanno più caro le carezze finte, che le vere senza ciancie....[15]

The trickery and cruelty of men are emphasized in the *Ragionamenti*, and next to many of the men described by Nanna and the other characters, this dishonest courtesan sounds almost virtuous. On the fourth day of the dialogues, Nanna classifies men, by place of origin, profession, and personality, and explains how to treat the members of each category. It becomes clear that in order to protect oneself from these ruthless characters, one must become just as cunning and merciless as they are. The subject of the fifth day, the acts of cruelty men have committed against women, further contributes to the negative image of men.

In emphasizing men's cruelty and women's lack of choices, is Aretino defending the courtesan? Certainly many of the assertions made by the interlocutors would indicate that he was. For example, the prostitute does not do sinful things because she is evil: she acts immorally because society needs and pays her to do so.

> Il mio parere è che tu faccia la tua Pippa puttana, perchè la monaca tradisce il suo consagramento, e la maritata assassina il santo matrimonio; ma la puttana non l'attacca, nè al monastero, nè al marito; anzi fa come un soldato, che è pagato per far male, e facendolo, non si tiene che lo faccia, perchè la sua bottega vende quello che ella ha a vendere...[16]

In fact, the prostitute, by responding to the demands of even the most respectable men, reveals the hypocrisy of a society that condemns her for doing that which it expects of her. Throughout

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[15]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 124.

[16]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 105.

most of the *Ragionamenti* Aretino appears to be defending the courtesan. Although he describes at length the betrayals and cruel tricks that courtesans wreak upon their clients, the perfidy of courtesans is mild in comparison to that of their clients:

> Io non so dove ci venga questo mal nome, che noi abbiamo da fare, e dire a gli uomini; e rinasco a non sentire chi conti i portamenti loro inverso de le puttane, che tutte son puttane le donne che si intabbaccano seco; ma pongansi da un canto tutti gli uomini rovinati da le puttane, e da l'altro tutte le puttane sfracassate da gli uomini, e vedrassi chi ha più colpa, o noi, o loro....[17]

Aretino seems to have a more sophisticated understanding of the courtesan's difficulties and her methods than did his contemporaries. For example, he mocks the common belief that the courtesan's power over the clients infatuated with her was the result of witchcraft; his meretricious characters explain that its source is not magical but sexual.

> NANNA: Per non parere ipocrita ti dico, che ponno più due meluzze, che quanti filosofi, strologi, alchimisti, e nigromanti fur mai, ed io ho provato quante erbe hanno due prati, e quante parole hanno dieci mercati, e non potei mai movere un dito di cuore ad uno, che non ti si può dire, e con un girar di chiappettine lo feci immattire così bestialmente di me, che se ne stupiva ogni bordello, che sendo avezzi a veder tutto il dì cose nuove, non si sogliono maravigliar di nulla.
> ANTONIA: Guarda, guarda dove stanno i segreti de lo incantare.
> NANNA: Egli stanno nel fesso....[18]

Aretino sees the courtesan's power as the natural result of men's sexual desires rather than the supernatural effect of unchristian spells. This implies that he was more comfortable with the courtesan's elevated status than were many of his contemporaries. Generally, a nobleman's love

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[17]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 173. See also 155-197.

[18]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 89.

for a courtesan, or for any woman of questionable social status, was seen as subversive, and thus, in legal procedures deemed "supernatural," and it was this that led to accusations of witchcraft.[19] Aretino, who had little interest in maintaining, or even respecting the status quo, does not attribute this kind of love to supernatural causes; instead he declares that it is as acceptable as any other innate desire, such as the desire for food and drink. Aretino, much like the courtesan herself, had risen above his class to become a sort of honorary member of the Venetian patriciate. To him, the courtesan's entrance into the upper classes would not seem at all strange or magical, as it might to those born within this normally closed caste. For Aretino, courtesans, and women in general, are not the mysterious, unholy creatures they were often thought to be in this period. They are, like men, slaves to their appetites for sex, wealth, and power.

This having been said, there are nonetheless some misogynist elements in the *Ragionamenti*. Aretino's treatment of rape, especially gang rape, is disturbing because women are seen as willing participants. When Nanna explains to Pippa how refusing sex can fuel a man's desire, Pippa asks what to do if he forces her to have sex, and Nanna replies, "Non si sforza niun, matta."[20] In another anecdote related by Nanna, a noblewoman switches places with a peasant woman in order to experience for herself the famous *trentuno*, which she thoroughly enjoys. The comment of Nanna, who has endured a *trentuno*, is that, "Ti confesso bene, che se durasseno la metà, sarebbeno una cosa sfoggiata, e farebbero un buon pro."[21]

Aretino portrays women as so lascivious that nothing short of locking them away will

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[19]Ruggiero, *Boundaries* 33-35. Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 24-45.

[20]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 116.

[21]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 64.

keep them chaste:

> La castità donnesca è simile a una guastada di cristallo, che usata quanta diligenza tu si, al fine ti cade di mano, che non te ne avedi, e tutta si rompe, ed è impossibile a mantenerla intera, se non la tenessi sempre chiavata in un forziere; e quella che ci si mantiene, si può mettere fra i miracoli che fa un bicchiere di vetro, che cadendo non si spezza.[22]

As Aretino legitimizes rape, he rationalizes the practice of keeping married noblewomen sequestered in their homes, common in Venice at that time.[23] This perception of women as wanton temptresses leading men into sin is typical of misogynist writings. However, in Aretino's view, men are responsible for their own behavior and the fact that they tend to blame women for negative consequences of their actions is simply evidence of their hypocrisy.

> La colpa che ci si dà quando si ferisce, o ammazza insieme qualch'uno che ci vien dietro. Che diavolo potiam far noi de le lor gelosie, e de le lor bestialità?...io ho speranza, poi che s'è trovato chi nacque prima la gallina o l'uovo, che si troverà anco se le puttane hanno attaccato il mal francioso a gli uomini o gli uomini a le puttane; ed è forza che ne domandiamo un dì messer san Giobbe, altrimenti ne uscirà questione, perchè l'uomo fu il primo a stuzzicar la puttana, la quale si stava chiotta, e non la puttana a stuzzicar l'uomo; e questo si vede tutto dì per i messi, per le lettere, e per le imbasciate, che mandano; e i pontesisti si vergognano a correr drieto a le persone, e s'eglino sono i primi a richiederci, furono anco i primi a attaccarcelo.[24]

The women of the *Ragionamenti* are clever, ambitious, and keenly aware of the hypocritical double standard imposed upon them. Their salaciousness and greed, rather than distancing them from men, literally bring them closer to men, both physically, as a way of

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[22]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 73.

[23]Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan* 22.

[24]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 173-4.

satisfying their appetites for sex and money, and psychologically, as these lusts are what men and women have in common. Although women in the *Ragionamenti* are portrayed as conniving and deceitful, the men are depicted as, at best foolish, and at worst, cruel. In Aretino's literary world, flattery and lies do not hinder communication, but rather are the sole means of relating in a society built on hypocrisy.

Aretino, like many of his contemporaries, had an extremely negative opinion of human nature. The sixteenth century was a time of immense political and religious upheaval. In Aretino's lifetime, the Italian peninsula went from being the religious and economic center of Western Europe to being the battleground upon which the power struggle between France and the Hapsburg Empire was played out. Italian despots, including the pope, chose and switched sides frequently, and rather than banding together to rid themselves of foreign invaders, preferred to ally themselves with them to gain advantages over hostile neighboring cities. During the later years of these wars the Reformation began to rear its head. After the sack of Rome, and by the time Aretino moved to Venice in 1527, the pope, once the most powerful religious leader in Western Europe and a fairly powerful political player as well, was reduced to a mere puppet of the Hapsburg Emperor, Charles V.

This rapid decline in Italy's fortunes brought on a climate of decadence, and a crisis of identity. Italy was no longer a wealthy and vibrant peninsula, but a collection of cities and territories ravaged by war and, with the exception of Venice, under foreign domination. To many writers of the early sixteenth century, it seemed that the world had gone mad, and the immense religious and political chaos of the time was reflected in their writings. For example Erasmus

wrote his *Praise of Folly* in 1509, after visiting Italy[25] and witnessing, among other things, the absurdity of Pope Julius II leading his troops into battle for temporal rather than spiritual benefits.[26] In Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532), there is an episode in which one of the characters, Astolfo, goes to the moon, where all things missing on Earth are found, to retrieve Orlando's sanity. He finds, instead, that the one thing missing on the moon is insanity, as all insanity is found on Earth.

> Lungo sarà, se tutte in verso ordisco
> le cose che gli fur quivi dimostre;
> che dopo mille e mille io non finisco,
> e vi son tutte l'occurrenzie nostre:
> sol la pazzia non v'è poca né assai;
> che sta qua giù, né se ne parte mai.[27]

Ernesto Grassi and Maristella Lorch have argued convincingly that the main plot of the *Orlando Furioso*, of the successful and powerful warrior who has lost his sanity, and consequently, his identity, reflects Ariosto's despair at the events of his time. Orlando's loss of sanity is a metaphor for the decline of Renaissance values and of the independence of the Italian city-states; the disturbing change in Orlando's world echoes the appalling transformation of Ariosto's world.[28]

While Ariosto's pessimism about the state of the world was expressed in the image of a world gone mad, other writers, such as Machiavelli and Aretino, communicated their negative view of the world through a depiction of man as an essentially bestial and cruel being. The

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[25]Ernesto Grassi and Maristella Lorch, *Folly and Insanity in Renaissance Literature* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1986) 41.

[26]Martines, 281-282.

[27]Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, ed. Cesare Segre, vol. II (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1976) 903.

[28]Grassi and Lorch, 102-106.

ruthless political atmosphere of the early sixteenth century may have contributed to the cynicism rampant in many works of this period. In *Il Principe* (1513), Machiavelli proposes several techniques for gaining and maintaining power. Central to his thought in *Il Principe* is the idea that man is irredeemably selfish and untrustworthy and that, in order to survive in such a brutal world, one must be prepared to do evil when necessary.

> Uno uomo, che voglia fare in tutte le parte professione di buono, conviene rovini infra tanti che non sono buoni. Onde è necessario a uno principe, volendosi mantenere, imparare a potere essere non buono, et usarlo e non usare secondo la necessità....Perché delli uomini si può dire questo generalmente: che sieno ingrati, volubili, simulatori, fuggitori de' pericoli, cupidi di guadagno; e mentre fai loro bene, sono tutti tua, òfferonti el sangue, la roba, la vita, e' figliuoli, come di sopra dissi, quando el bisogno è discosto; ma, quando ti si appressa, e' si rivoltano.[29]

In the fifteenth century, political treatises were based on ideals rather than reality. A brief look at the works of the Florentine humanists reveals their optimism and their unflinching belief in man's innate goodness, as well as in his enormous potential, all of which translated into a very different type of political theory than that of Machiavelli. The difference between the writings of Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) and Machiavelli indicate the drastic change in Italy's fortunes, and reflect the more negative perspective of sixteenth-century writers, who had witnessed Italy's political decline.

By the sixteenth century, Italian humanism was evolving into mannerism, as style and artificiality became more desireable than naturalism in art and literature.[30] The aristocracy, increasingly insecure, sought refuge in the elegant, idealized portraits of itself in literature and

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[29]Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe* (Milan: Signorelli, 1973) 88, 94.

[30]Shearman, 18-19.

works of art. Appearances superseded reality, and style became more important than substance.[31] The idea of *virtù*, so important in fifteenth-century Italian thought, gave way to an inordinate concern with the appearance of *virtù*. Idealized depictions of society, such as in Castiglione's *Cortigiano*, placed enormous value on image, specifically that of *sprezzatura*, which was partly nonchalance and partly the ability to make difficult feats seem effortless. Much of the literature of the early sixteenth century reflects a more sophisticated and complex social world and the desire of the aristocracy to seem refined.

Mannerism was one reaction to the disturbing events of the time, satire another.[32] Paul Larivaille has argued that Aretino's writings are mannerist, as they exaggerate rather than portray reality. Larivaille also claims that Aretino's refusal to conform was a tendency displayed in mannerist works.[33] However, Larivaille's conclusion disregards the fact that Aretino is rebelling against mannerist works like the *Cortigiano*, and that he exaggerates, not for the aesthetic value of exaggeration, but to satirize his world and the idealized image of it portrayed in many mannerist works. Mannerism was about escaping from the brutality of the time by presenting a refined, elegant world that had little connection to reality: Aretino's works demystified that world, revealing it as artificial.

Aretino's *Ragionamenti* were also a reflection of this period, and contain themes recurrent in early sixteenth-century Italian thought. As in Machiavelli and Castiglione,

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[31]Shearman, 41.

[32]Martines, 300.

[33]Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino* 411, 421-422.

appearances are important, but in Aretino appearances completely obscure reality.[34] Here the social mask covers everything, that underneath is actually the opposite of what it appears. Supposedly chaste nuns spend all their time in wild orgies, "virtuous" wives betray and then murder their husbands, deflowered maidens learn all the tricks for simulating virginity several times over, and whores appear faithful and nonmaterialistic, especially when they are swindling those whose money they claim not to want. In revealing the hypocrisy of the social mask, perhaps Aretino was suggesting that the preoccupation with appearances should be done away with, and that a more natural, liberal code of ethics would cancel the need to hide behind a false veneer of respectability.

The *Ragionamenti* was to relations between men and women what Machiavelli's *Principe* was to politics; a careful study of what one must do to survive and obtain power in an immoral and corrupt society. While previous writings on love and on the interaction of men and women posited an ideal relationship based on honesty and good manners, Aretino inverts this paradigm, and postulates a relationship based on cunning and deceit. Like Machiavelli, Aretino discards the ideal as irrelevant and bases his discussion on a more realistic, if more sordid and exaggerated view of human nature.

Not only has Aretino inverted the love paradigm, but he suggests a female prototype that subverts the traditional ideals of chastity, obedience, loyalty, and selflessness. The ideal woman

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[34]It is possible that Aretino's constant use of euphemisms to describe sexual acts is a satire of false appearances on a linguistic level. In other works, such as the *Sonetti lussuriosi* (c. 1527) and *La puttana errante* (published posthumously in 1660) Aretino writes in extremely crude terms. However, this hypothesis is weakened by two facts: one, that the *Ragionamenti* contains some vulgar language as well, and two, that it is uncertain whether Aretino actually wrote *La puttana errante*. For some of the debate concerning the authorship of *La puttana errante*, see Lorenzoni, 41.

was asexual yet maternal and, most importantly, she was silent. The ultimate female ideal in Western society was a virgin mother.[35] Others, like Beatrice or Laura, merely served as conduits for male voices. Boccaccio's *Decameron*, though it depicts many strong female characters, ends with the story of Griselda, who is completely submissive. Ariosto's Angelica disappears from the *Orlando Furioso* as soon as she makes the transition from desired object to desiring subject. The women of Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, by being the opposite of what was seen as ideal, reveal just how unnatural these ideals were. One of the most striking aspects of the *Ragionamenti* is the fact that female characters tell the story. In much of the canon of Italian literature, women remain silent, even when it is they who are the object of discourse. A prime example of this is to be found in Castiglione's *Cortigiano*, in which the male interlocutors debate whether women are equal to men while the women listen silently. Castiglione's idealized portrait of women mirrors his idealized view of men. Both in Aretino and in Castiglione women are said to be the equals of men, in Castiglione for their bravery, chastity, and selflessness, and in Aretino for their ruthlessness and their uncontrollable lusts. Aretino's *Ragionamenti* satirize the ideals of the *Cortigiano*; while in Castiglione's work courteous men discuss ideals for both men and women, in Aretino's work corrupt women reveal the depravity of both men and women. As Castiglione's women are ideals without a voice, Aretino's men are debauched boors unable to offer anything other than money and momentary satisfaction. Castiglione describes what women and men should aspire to be; Aretino echoes these ideals, but reveals them to be mere images:

> Alla donna sta ben aver una tenerezza molle e delicata, con maniera in ogni suo movimento di dolcezza femminile....molte

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[35]Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. I (New York: Harper, 1988) 216-217.

> virtù dell'animo estimo io che siano alla donna necessarie così come all'omo; medesimamente la nobiltà, il fuggire l'affettazione, l'essere aggraziata da natura in tutte l'operazion sue, l'esser di boni costumi, ingeniosa, prudente, non superba, non invidiosa, non maledica, non vana, non contenziosa, non inetta.[36]
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> Tu in cervello, e tacendo, e parlando, fa sì che il favellare, e lo star queta paia bello ne la tua bocca, ed accadendoti di rivolgerti ora a questo, ed ora a quell'altro, miragli senza lascivia...una che sta sempre in nozze, debbe vestirsi più di piacevolezza che di velluto, mostrando del signorile in ogni atto; e ne lo essere chiamata a cena, se bene sarai sempre la prima a lavarti le mani ed andare a tavola, fattelo dire più di una volta, perchè si ringrandisce ne lo umiliarsi...Fa che tu dica voi ad ogni uomo, e giovane, e vecchio, e grande, e picciolo, perchè quel tu ha del secco, e non garba troppo a le persone; e non ci è dubbio che i costumi sono buoni mezzani a farsi in suso, e perciò non esser mai prosuntuosa ne tuoi andari, e attienti al proverbio, il quale dice: non motteggiar del vero, e non ischerzar che dolga. Quando sei, e con gli amici e co compagni di chi ti ama, non ti lasciare scappar cose di bocca che pungano...Or questo è il punto; non ti dilettare di scompigliare le amicizie col rapportare di ciò che tu odi; fuggi gli scandali, e dove tu puoi metter pace, fallo.[37]

The courtesan aspired to be a reflection of the ideal courtier; this distinguished her from the common prostitute. The courtesan sold more than sexual favors; she sold the image of culture and refinement described in Castiglione's work. The greatest courtesans were actually arbiters of status among the men who, by associating with them, elevated their standing in society.[38] These courtesans' creation of a sanitized image of themselves and of their work, was similar to Castiglione's portrayal of the aristocrats as genteel, sincere, gallant friends enjoying a delightful discussion, rather than as the calculating, suspicious rivals many seem to have been, judging

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[36]Castiglione, 262-3.

[37]Aretino, *Ragionamenti* 115, 145-6.

[38]Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* 38-41.

from the events of the period. Aretino's *Ragionamenti* satirize the *Cortigiano;* they tell how one should act in order to be a successful prostitute, just as Castiglione's work outlines the attributes of the ideal courtier. Aretino's prostitutes discuss in detail the importance of appearances, but in doing so reveal the falsity of these appearances. Aretino's goal is to expose the distortion of reality inherent in the *Cortigiano* and other treatises on good conduct,[39] which he achieves by making his dialogues on courtesanry mirror the dialogues on courtliness; each is distorted, but in opposite ways. The *Ragionamenti* is also an exaggeration, but in the opposite direction, meant to emphasize the falsity not only of the treatises on ideal behavior, but also of the professions of courtesans and courtiers themselves. One of Aretino's points in doing so is to demonstrate that fundamentally the goals of courtiers and courtesans are the same; to create an idealized mirror of culture and refinement into which the prince and the aristocracy, respectively, could gaze.[40]

Aretino exposes a brutal, repulsive world of deceit and cruelty in the *Ragionamenti*, and his depiction of courtesans was, in many ways, unkind. Margaret Rosenthal in her epilogue to the *Ragionamenti*, accuses Aretino of the "hostile, unpaid use of the prostitute's body,"[41] yet his portrayal of prostitutes, and even of women, is not nearly as one-dimensional as Rosenthal's comment would suggest. If he is "using" the prostitute, he is using her to vocalize his disgust with society as a whole. While choosing a courtesan to be the protagonist was unusual, this is more flattering than derogatory, given that the character is presented as possessing extraordinary

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[39]Nuccio Ordine, "Le *Sei Giornate*: Struttura del Dialogo e Parodia della Trattistica sul Comportamento," *Pietro Aretino e La Cultura del Rinascimento*, tome II (Rome: Salerno, 1995) 715.

[40]Ordine, 715.

[41]Margaret Rosenthal, epilogue, *Dialogues* 398.

intelligence and the author's own biting wit. In stating that Aretino's presentation of the courtesan is "hostile," Rosenthal does not keep the portrayal of the courtesan within its context, that of a society so morally bankrupt that its most virtuous member is the greedy, untrustworthy prostitute. Aretino's code of morals is more natural and hedonistic than the moral code publicly espoused but privately ignored in his time. The prostitute provides pleasure, and is honest about who she is, two qualities which, according to Aretino, make her morally superior to the hypocrites who publicly condemn her as "sinful" while secretly making use of her services.

Through his characters, Aretino paints a very different picture of courtesanry than that which courtesans themselves tried to create. His vision of the courtesan bears some similarity to his peers' writings about courtesans, in that they are portrayed as avaricious, deceitful prostitutes. However, the women in his dialogue possess attributes that cannot be found in contemporary writings on courtesans, or even on women in general, namely, intelligence, wit, compassion (for other women), and cynicism. Nanna is the voice of Aretino; through her he expresses his contempt for a society in which one has to deceive and exploit others in order to survive. Aretino, like Nanna, exploits others to improve his station, so to a certain extent, he identifies with her, and seems to have sympathy for the difficult and unfair situation of all women. The *Ragionamenti* is a scathing satire, not only of current treatises on proper conduct, but of the superficial, affected ways of early sixteenth-century Italy. Aretino despises society as a whole, but is not misanthropic; this is made clear by the fact that his characters, although far from virtuous, are likeable and even realistic. Aretino indicates what may lie beneath the decorous exterior in all professions, at all levels of society, and implies that a code of morals which fails to consider human nature, thus creating the need to conceal one's natural instincts, is no code of

morals at all.

## Conclusion

The sixteenth-century Italian courtesan constructed a persona that combined culture, erudition, and refinement with erotic allure. This combination proved extremely successful because the aristocratic men she catered to sought a more refined, socially acceptable means of sexual fulfillment than could be obtained through frequenting prostitutes. Through her person and her writings, the courtesan ingratiated herself by presenting an idealized reflection of aristocrats and their courtly values, at a time when these men were desperately searching for praiseworthy images of themselves. Perhaps more importantly, she may have enabled many of these men to experience a type of love that they were either unable or unwilling to find within their marriages. Works praising courtesans recall neo-Platonic thought and Petrarchan verse, both of which heavily influenced contemporary views on love. Virtually all respected courtesans carried around a *petrarchetto*, a little book of Petrarch's poetry, not only because Petrarch was so fashionable at the time, but perhaps also to remind their clients what they represented and provided. Also, it seems that an extremely successful courtesan could become an arbiter of status within groups of men, which meant that she determined how these men perceived each other. This may help explain why many of these men reacted so violently when courtesans potentially embarassed them by cuckolding their lovers or behaving in another way that was considered inappropriate.

The courtesan's spectacular rise to the top of the socio-economic hierarchy was not without its difficulties. Although revered by many, she was not a true member of the aristocracy, and technically was still a type of prostitute, two facts mentioned in all works maligning her. The

courtesan's liminal position not only made her more vulnerable to these literary attacks, but also may have unwittingly provoked them as her violation of traditional norms for women and for the lower classes became a symbol of the chaos of the time. This association manifested itself noticeably in works like Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, and more subtly in works like *La Zaffetta*, in which the courtesan must be disciplined for disobeying sixteenth-century rules of sexual power, and the *Tariffa*, which belittles the intellectual accomplishments of these women by focusing almost exclusively on their sexuality. For many, the courtesan was the sign of a general moral decline, as seen in the *Ragionamenti*, Speroni's *Orazione contra le cortigiane*, and Maffio Veniero's *Libro chiuso*. In many misogynist works, women, particularly seductive, unchaste women, represent death; this symbolism is displayed most prominently in the *Ragionamento dello Zoppino* and the *Libro chiuso*, where courtesans literally become the mirror image of death.

Works degrading courtesans generally reveal more about the dynamics of power in sixteenth-century gender and class relations than about the courtesans themselves. Those who felt threatened by these well-educated, socially mobile, and unchaste women degraded her person and her intelligence and/or saw in her the image of death. Serious attempts to discredit courtesans were accompanied by the names of the most prominent courtesans. The language used in these works reflects the intent of the author: mild criticism was accompanied by courteous language, while vicious assaults on the courtesan's character were expressed in a vulgar, often obscene slang. In all of these works, the courtesan was not so much an individual person, as a canvas upon which the writer could project and/or vent his own insecurity, frustration, and anger.

In spite of their impressive accomplishments, courtesans were trapped within a culture

that determined a woman's virtue on the basis of her chastity. At the same time, the aristocracy's need for chastity in their wives and daughters greatly facilitated the courtesan's rise to wealth and (limited) power. Paradoxically, while clearly the product of a patriarchal society, the courtesan remained outside of it, threatening it even more with her intelligence than with her sexuality. Because of this, she was one of the many scapegoats upon which men displaced their anxieties about morality, power, and existence itself.

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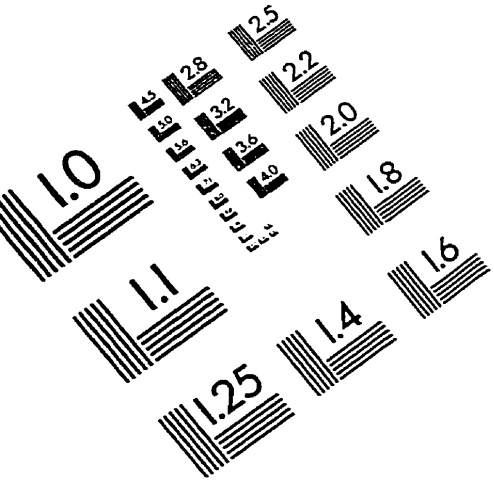


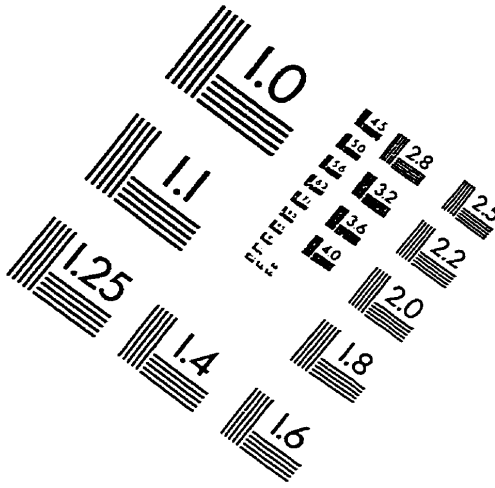


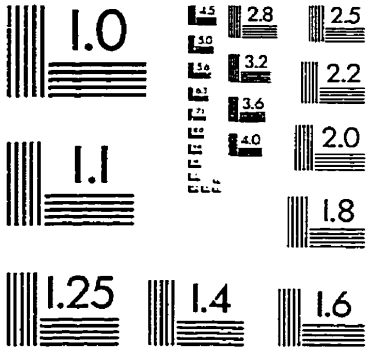


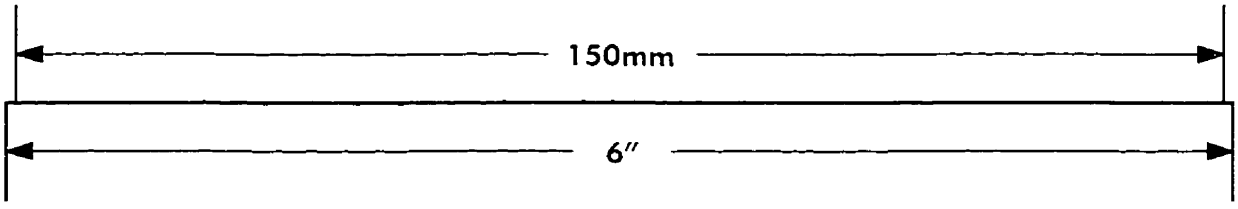


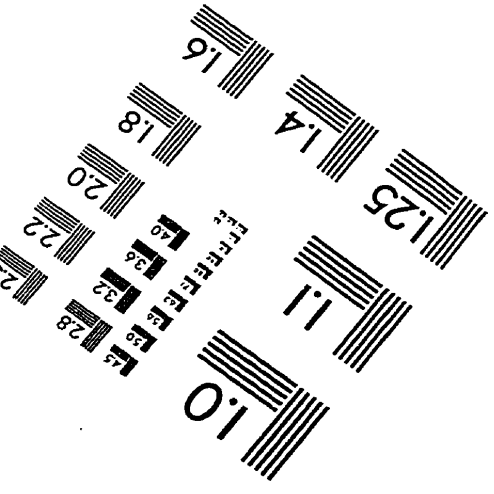


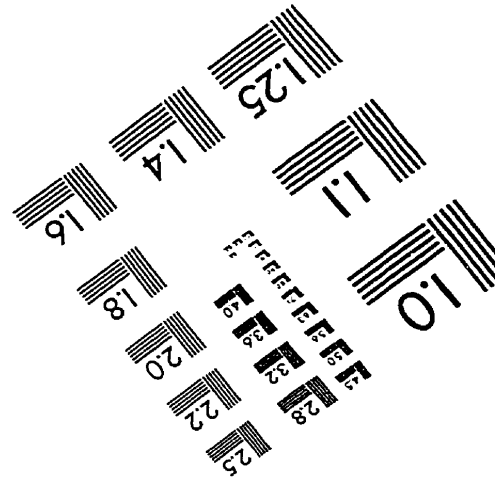


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