

communities, tap into the knowledge residing in oral networks, and wield the power of shared, social speech to their social and political advantage. In these ways, gossip was an unofficial yet implicit practice in the workings of the Venetian state and political life. We shall see in conclusion how the speech of courtesans similarly served the state in unexpected ways, because courtesans' talk, like gossip, was a subtle but consistent component of Venetian political culture. Like gossip, courtesans' speech at times proved disruptive, but in other instances, also surprisingly contributed to the workings of Venetian statecraft.

The Language of Courtesans

In a letter published in 1580, the prolific Venetian poet and playwright Andrea Calmo described the way he had been bewitched by a courtesan named Basilisca. "If you could only feel the infernal fire that burns constantly in my heart," he said, "the melancholy . . . the buckets of tears that flow from my eyes. . . . I can barely eat or sleep, and I cannot remember what I'm saying when I talk. I put my socks on inside out, my jacket on backwards, and I put on two different shoes. . . . You are a bear, a tiger, a serpent, Medea, Circe, [and] Falerina."¹ Calmo's description of lovesickness is nothing unusual. In fact, he wrote similar descriptions to 49 other courtesans in the fourth book of his letters. His plea, however, presents a curious insight into women's language when he compares Basilisca to some of the greatest sorceresses of history: Medea, who used her magic to help Jason obtain the Golden Fleece and then to kill his bride with a poisoned robe; Circe, whose magical powers and poisonous herbs turned Odysseus' men into pigs; and Falerina, the enchantress who entrapped many valiant knights in the legends of Charlemagne. Calmo's comparison alludes not only to the delights of love but also to its potentially sinister side effects, or the way that love imprisons and disempowers its object through spells, incantations, and the magical language spoken by women. Enormous gaps existed between the prescriptions of Renaissance writers about how men and women should talk and the ways in which verbal exchanges actually occurred in the early modern world, and Calmo's letter is no exception. In discussions about gossip, male writers tried to construct categories for gendered speech – masculine

¹ Calmo, *Le lettere*, 266–68.

rhetoric and feminine gossip – that did not really exist. They suggested that silence was a woman's greatest virtue: advice that, as we have seen, appears to have been entirely ignored by urban women. Against this backdrop, Calmo's letter alludes to how a particular category of women was even more pronounced in skirting traditional prescriptions for women's speech and silence – the courtesan.²

One might well wonder, what place does courtesans' talk have in a study of language and the state? Political speech as it is traditionally cast occurred in the halls of government and the courts, far removed from courtesans' salons. Why not consider the speech of lawyers, advocates, or political men who based their livelihoods in large part on their verbal dexterity? Though courtesans' speech may at first appear unrelated to the study of speech and statecraft, when examined closely, we can see how courtesans' language played a subtle but intriguing role in Venetian society. A consideration of courtesans' speech as a facet of Venetian political culture is fitting for several reasons. Firstly, with remarkable unanimity, all scholars who have studied the lives of Renaissance courtesans agree emphatically on one point: courtesans distinguished themselves primarily through their speech and language. They asserted their power and negotiated their status through the mastery of the spoken word: an assertion that, for all its frequency, has received surprisingly little exploration or scrutiny. Secondly, and even more significantly, Italian Renaissance writers paid a truly inordinate amount of attention to the speech of courtesans. They dedicated more discursive energy to courtesans' talk than to the spoken words of any other sub-group or profession as a whole: a fact that demands examination. Because Venice was famed for

² The literature on courtesans and prostitutes in the Renaissance is vast. For Renaissance Italy and Venice in particular, the most important studies and collections of documents include: Fiora A. Bassanese, "Private Lives and Public Lies: Texts by Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30 (1988): 295–319; Antonio Barzaghi, *Donne o cortigiane? La prostituzione a Venezia. Documenti di costumi dal XVI al XVIII secolo* (Verona: Bertani, 1980); Rita Casagrande di Villaviera, *Le cortigiane veneziane del Cinquecento* (Milan: Longanesi, 1968); Paul Larivaille, *La vie quotidienne des courtesans en Italie au temps de la renaissance* (Paris: Hachette, 1975); *Leggi e memorie venete sulla prostituzione*, ed. Giovanni Battista de Lorenzi (Venice, 1870–72); *Il gioco dell'amore. Le cortigiane di Venezia dal Trecento al Settecento*, ed. Doretta Davanzo Poli and Irene Ariano (Milan: Barenice, 1990); Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Ruggiero, *Binding Passions* and *The Boundaries of Eros*.

its courtesan culture, much of this discussion about courtesans' speech focused in and around the lagoon city: all reasons to look more closely at courtesans' talk.

It is important to emphasize up front that we have very few examples of courtesans' actual spoken words. Indeed, this consideration of courtesans' language rests on a slender archival and documentary base. Most historical sources that document the lives of courtesans are either legislative or literary and do not record courtesans' own voices. Historical speech, as always, proves difficult to capture. We have no records that offer us extensive transcripts of courtesans speaking, beyond what Guido Ruggiero has already explored from the records of the *Sant'Uffizio*. However, as we have seen with blasphemy, this is not necessarily a block to gaining insight into courtesans' language, because much can be learned from looking closely at peripheral evidence. In this case, we know an extraordinary amount of information about what people *said* about their speech. Such reflective or secondary evidence tells us little about courtesans' agency, but it has a lot to say about their perceived roles in Venetian society as well as the complex connections and interactions that existed between speech, gender, sexuality, and the state.

Both Guido Ruggiero and Margaret Rosenthal have examined the dual, paradoxical nature of the perceptions of courtesans as both dangerous threats to civic stability and honored arbiters of social status. Courtesans ingeniously appropriated the symbolism of both Venus and the Virgin from Venetian iconography in their self-fashioning. Ruggiero has demonstrated how prostitution was "potentially subversive . . . in a society that saw itself based upon marriage and the family," and yet courtesans flourished in sixteenth-century Italian cities because they "satisfied new social imperatives."³ In her magisterial study of Veronica Franco, Rosenthal has similarly noted how courtesans "embodied a city immersed in luxury, spectacle, disguise, commercialization, voluptuousness, and sensuality" while at the same time offering proof of the republic's progressive social policies and tolerance.⁴ These scholars have explored a great

³ Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*, 26, 38. See also Guido Ruggiero, "Who's Afraid of Giuliana Napolitana? Pleasure, Fear, and Imagining the Arts of the Renaissance Courtesan," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 280–92, esp. 281–82.

⁴ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 3.

variety of topics associated with courtesans and their lives, including how courtesans were made, how prostitution was disciplined, and how these women served as both symbols and anti-symbols of the Venetian republic. In doing so, neither has by any means ignored the importance of spoken language and conversation; both point to eloquence as one of the skills courtesans employed to survive and advance in society. As Ruggiero puts it, "power over words implied in many ways power in the world and over men."⁵ However, both Ruggiero and Rosenthal use the term "words" broadly to mean written language, including poems and letters, as much as speech. I would like here to add a new dimension to their work by paying specific attention to courtesans' talk, or at least as much of it as we can glean from extant records. Doing so deepens our understanding of courtesans' lives and position in society. Namely, when examined through the lens of their linguistic practices and their talk, we can see how courtesans occupied a small but consistent place in Venetian political culture.

Many have noted the ways in which courtesans served as commercial assets to the Venetian state.⁶ Here, I would like to emphasize the degree to which, as Ruggiero has put it, courtesans were selling more than just their bodies. Throwing this point into even higher relief allows us to assert that courtesantry was a Venetian industry driven by the profits of not just sex, but of conversation and verbal exchange, or the language that courtesans sold as entrepreneurs or gave as gifts, sometimes to the benefit of the state. Courtesans were subtly yet powerfully connected to Venetian civic identity and the Venetian economy itself through their mastery and sale of *language* in particular. If Venice had become noted throughout the sixteenth-century world for its illustrious courtesans and courtesans were famed for their eloquence, this in turn suggests that Venice's public image and economic strength were derived in part from the witty speech of this select group of women.

⁵ Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*, 45.

⁶ Ann Rosalind Jones, "City Women and Their Audiences: Louise Labé and Veronica Franco," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 303; Ruggiero, "Who's Afraid of Giuliana Napolitana?" 282; Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 22.

And yet, as with gossip, there existed conflicting and often contradictory connections between courtesans' language and Venetian political culture. Like the Jews, courtesans embodied both the evils and dynamism of a mercantile society concerned with turning a profit. They traded both sex and words for financial gain, and in doing so fit into the classic conflation of the lure of the marketplace, sexual seduction, and moral outrage.⁷ Read together, literature, legislation, and trial testimony highlight the unstable nature of courtesans' talk. Their words were beautiful, but dangerous. Courtesans' speech commanded fascination and admiration, but sometimes condemned them to persecution and marginalization. It was precisely this varied and fluctuating nature of their speech that allowed courtesans to play a peculiar role in Venetian political culture. The nature of power and agency has long been understood as shifting and unpredictable, as varied and often surprising, and the Venetian promotion of courtesans' language to the wider world illustrates this phenomenon. Although their speech frequently condemned them within the city – Venetian magistracies at times focused their disciplinary powers on courtesans' language to promote civic stability – an admiration for their eloquence simultaneously promoted them when projected to the wider world. That is to say, it was this perception of their language as mutable and unstable, as eloquent but also offensive and sinful, that allowed them to function simultaneously as victims and agents. Courtesans were both sexualized demons and eloquent humanists, sinful deviants and savvy economic agents, who both suffered and profited from the use of their eloquence and witty speech. Most significantly, the inherent tension around courtesans' language made it possible for them to assume an emblematic, diplomatic importance in the city's promotion of itself that other Venetian women could not assume.

Many sixteenth-century writers considered courtesans' speech dangerous because of its sexual nature: a concept that was rooted to some degree in the idea that speech itself was sexual. Anatomists and medical men, for instance, depicted the mouth as a sexual orifice and the tongue as a phallus. The renowned sixteenth-century anatomist Berengario

⁷ See Evelyn Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1400–1600* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 32.

da Carpi concluded in his 1522 *Isagogae* that the tongue, "like the penis . . . has more and larger pulsating and quiet veins than any other member equal to it in size."⁸ In his 1535 treatise *Anatomica methodus*, Andrés de Laguna provocatively asserted that

the tongue, like some stern doorkeeper . . . is quite spongy so that it draws and attracts to itself whatever moisture there may be, like some old drunken woman. . . . [I]t often happens that the tongue admits some harmful medicines. . . . Thus it happens that the tongue is very frequently deceived. . . . Under the tongue there is something called a frenulum (little checkrein); if by chance this becomes more loose than is convenient or reasonable in any person, as may be seen in women who are more talkative than any turtle-dove, you should not expect silence. . . . One must, however, note carefully that nature has attached such a checkrein only to the tongue and to the private parts, for in these organs especially she has desired that men should be modest.⁹

Two sixteenth-century Venetian proverbs highlight this association: "The mouth and the asshole are brothers" (*La bocca e'l cul son fradei*), and "All mouths are sisters, but those of the asshole and the cunt are the closest" (*Tutte le bocche son sorelle, ma quella del cul e della pota son più felle*).¹⁰ Lastly, while we have seen that rhetoric, in theory, was often described as masculine speech that was off limits to women, Renaissance writers also at times described rhetoric and oratory as sexualizing or feminizing practices. Cicero and Quintilian were decidedly nervous about the potentially feminizing aspects of rhetoric because they believed Roman men ought to define themselves through action rather than talk. Copying a passage from the third book of Cicero's *De oratore*, Pico della Mirandola condemned the rhetor as a sodomite, and a man who behaved like a woman.

Who would not approve the soft step, the clever hands, the playful eyes in an actor and a dancer, but in a citizen or a philosopher, who would not disapprove, censure, and abominate them? If we see a girl graceful

⁸ Berengario da Carpi, *Isagogae breves*, in Lind, *Studies in Pre-Vesalian Anatomy*, 122.

⁹ Andrés de Laguna, *Anatomica methodus*, in Lind, *Studies in Pre-Vesalian Anatomy*, 266–67. Francesco Sansovino also argued that male and female tongues were anatomically different. See Sansovino, *L'edificio del corpo humano*, 15v–16r. I am grateful to Cindy Klestinec for this citation.

¹⁰ Cortelazzo, *Le dieci tavole*, 91, 129.

in her manners and talkative, we will praise her, will kiss her. These things we would condemn and prosecute in a matron. Therefore, it is not we, but they [the rhetoricians], who perform Bacchanalias at the feet of a Vestal, who dishonor the gravity and chastity of philosophical matters as if with games and curling irons.¹¹

Similarly equating rhetoric or public speech with sexuality, Pietro Aretino claimed in his satires that procuresses and pimps quoted Petrarch with ease.¹² This feminization of rhetoric is an especially intriguing concept for Venice, where more so than in many other cities, rhetoric remained a real skill that was actively used in day-to-day political negotiation in the halls of government.¹³

According to Pico and Aretino, rhetoric and public speech were associated with enticement and magical allure, which are figured as feminine and thus implicitly threaten any male-dominated society. Ioan Couliano has noted the close connection "between the five senses, the production of the voice, and the secretion of sperm. The last two are closely allied in Renaissance medicine, because they represent the only two modalities through which the spirit leaves the body in an observable way."¹⁴ If we take these ideas a step further, cutting out the tongue would represent a type of castration. Similarly, laws against insults and blasphemy would have undertones aimed at creating civic sexual respectability. As we have

¹¹ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Epistola Hermolao Barbaro*, in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Gian Francesco Pico, *Opera omnia* (Basel, 1557), in Wayne A. Rebhorn, *The Emperor of Men's Minds: Literature and the Renaissance Discourse of Rhetoric* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 135.

¹² Arturo Graf, "Una cortigiana fra mille," in *Attraverso il Cinquecento* (Turin: Ermanno Loescher, 1888), 231, n. 1. Similarly, Aretino's Nanna equates sex and conversation when she states that "if I were a man, I would like to bed down with a woman who has a honied instead of a learned tongue; and I would be happier to hold in my arms an experienced slut than Messer Dante himself." See Pietro Aretino, *Aretino's Dialogues*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 200.

¹³ See Virginia Cox, "Rhetoric and Humanism in Quattrocento Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 56 (2003): 652-94.

¹⁴ Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 101-2. On the connection between sexual ejaculation and speech in Renaissance medical theory, see also Allison Coudert, "Some Theories of a Natural Language from the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century," in *Magia Naturalis und Die Entstehung der Modernen Naturwissenschaften: Studia Leibnitiana* 7 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1978), 63-64. Couliano's statement is not entirely correct, because early modern medicine held that the spirit could also leave the body through bloodletting and female sperm in menstruation; nevertheless, the connection between the voice and sexuality remains strong.

seen with sexual insults, the eradication of such speech had a particular resonance in republican societies. Republics, unlike courts, did not tolerate illegitimate birth.¹⁵ Unruly sexuality undermined the institutions of marriage and the family, while a disciplined sexuality preserved family, community, and republican order. The desire to control the social body legitimated controlling the actions of the physical body, and patrolling speech as a facet of sexuality would work to shore up such connections.

Most importantly, however, as the physician de Laguna indicates, the tongue was feminine in nature and represented a type of female penis. Female silence was equivalent to chastity and a loose tongue to sexual licentiousness. In an often-cited chapter on "Speech and Silence," Francesco Barbaro made the connection between sexuality and speech especially clear. "It is proper," he wrote, "that not only the arms but indeed also the speech of women never be made public; for the speech of a noble woman can be no less dangerous than the nakedness of her limbs."¹⁶ Stefano Guazzo similarly employed the word *conversazione* to equate chat and women's sexuality, observing that "la conversazione delle donne" meant both men's sexual relationships with women and masculine discussion with women.¹⁷ In another passage well-known among feminist historians, the humanist educator Guarino claimed in 1438 that Isotta Nogarola's sexual deviancy matched her public speech, as "the woman of fluent speech is never chaste."¹⁸ Feminine speech clearly proved problematic in the early modern world. Normally, women "belonged" to men – to their fathers or husbands – who controlled their sexuality. A woman who "spoke" therefore took possession of her own body and sexuality – a dangerous notion in a society based on chastity and patriarchal control. Women's public language symbolically equaled prostitution. Female

¹⁵ Jacob Burckhardt claimed that in the dynasties of the Renaissance, there was a "public indifference to legitimate birth." For instance, "when Pius II was on his way to the Congress of Mantua (1459) eight bastards of the house of Este rode to meet him at Ferrara, among them the reigning Duke Borso himself and two illegitimate sons of his illegitimate brother and predecessor Leonello." Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, vol. 1, 38. On sexuality and republicanism, see Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, 9.

¹⁶ Francesco Barbaro, *On Wifely Duties*, trans. Benjamin G. Kohl, in *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, ed. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt with Elizabeth Welles (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 205.

¹⁷ See Jones, "Surprising Fame," 77–78.

¹⁸ Cited in Lisa Jardine, "Women Humanists: Education for What?" in Hutson, *Feminism and Renaissance Studies*, 56.

speech, on the one hand, represented one axis of a wider, more sweeping critique of women's nature in general. On the other hand, early modern individuals suggested that loose tongues metaphorically led to the next step of prostitution. Such perceived connections between speech and sexual promiscuity therefore left women faced with a series of paradoxes. If women were not respected or respectable, they could not be heard; if they spoke, they were by definition unrespectable and opened the door to a barrage of criticism of and attacks on their virtue.

Similarly, injunctions against women's speech placed them in a political bind. According to male writers dating from the ancient world through the Renaissance, including Giovanni Della Casa, women by nature were not capable of speaking "well," "respectably," or "safely," so they were not considered political actors; yet because they were not recognized as political actors, they were effectively denied a voice. Humanists like Juan Luis Vives and Leonardo Bruni excluded rhetoric from women's education because it belonged to the public realm or the spheres of law, politics, business, and diplomacy, which were strictly off limits to women. Renaissance pronouncements on women's speech obsessively dictated that speech and chastity were mutually exclusive: an opposition that remains fascinating in that it was by no means self-evident. As Ann Rosalind Jones has suggested, "the link between loose language and loose living arises from a basic association of women's bodies with their speech: a woman's accessibility to the social world beyond the household through speech was seen as intimately connected to the scandalous openness of her body."¹⁹ Many literary scholars have noted the ways in which discussions of sexuality in the Renaissance were infused with ideas about language; many Renaissance writers linked language and desire.²⁰ Courtesans' public speech was clearly constructed as dangerous because

¹⁹ Jones, "Surprising Fame," 76.

²⁰ Much has been written, especially by literary scholars, on the relationship between speech and sexuality. See Margaret W. Ferguson, "A Room Not Their Own: Renaissance Women as Readers and Writers," in *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 93-116; Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Madhavi Menon, *Wanton Words: Rhetoric and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2004), 4-34; Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 8-35; Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in Ferguson et al., *Rewriting the Renaissance*, 123-42.

of the ways in which it laid bare the sexual nature of their bodies and their trade.

Against this general cultural background, courtesans came to embody literally this link between speech and sexuality in the early modern period. The term "honest courtesan" first appeared in the second half of the fifteenth century. Whereas prostitutes in the late Middle Ages were referred to more generally as *peccatrici* or *meretrici*, the emergence of this new term, *cortigiana onesta*, indicated a change in cultural perceptions away from the universal, moralistic condemnation of all prostitutes to the praise and even glorification of a select group of them.²¹ The term *courtesan*, derived from the term *cortigiano*, denoted a mannered and educated group of women – elevated above the ordinary working prostitute – who circulated among the ranks of humanists, artists, and the papal court. The courtesan's lifestyle typically involved luxurious physical surroundings, an intellectual life, music, and knowledge of the literature of ancient Greece and Rome.²² She distinguished herself from the common prostitute, in part, through spectacular appearances at banquets, high fees, musical abilities, dress, and an elite clientele. For example, when the Venetian courtesan Andriana Savorgnan was 22 and at the height of her career, her lovers included the *crème* of the Venetian aristocracy, including Nicoletto Corner dalla Ca'Granda, Filippo da Canal, Lorenzo Celsi, Santo Contarini, Alessandro Contarini, and Scipione Avogadro.²³

Venice and Rome represented the two Italian cities particularly noted for the sale of sex in early modern Italy, and many writers and chroniclers noted the large numbers of prostitutes in Venice. Although such figures are regularly cited in almost all existing studies on courtesantry, a review of these numbers will help emphasize the connections between gender, speech, and the state. Marin Sanudo meticulously noted in his

²¹ See Graf, "Una Cortigiana fra mille," 224, 227. See also Barzaghi, *Donne o cortigiane*, 41, and Villaviera, *Le cortigiane veneziane*, 25. Not everyone acknowledged such a great distinction between prostitutes and courtesans; see Alessandro Citolini, *La tipocosmia* (Venice, 1561), 443.

²² In one of his novelle, Matteo Bandello describes the room of the Roman courtesan Imperia as being so beautiful that rather than spit on the floor and soil the luxurious surroundings, the Spanish ambassador instead spit in the face of a servant. See Matteo Bandello, *La terza parte de le novelle*, ed. Delmo Maestri (Alessandria: Edizione dell'Orso, 1993), 193–94.

²³ See Marisa Milani, "Cortigiane e inquisizione a Venezia nel secondo '500," in *Stregoneria e streghe nell'Europa moderna*, ed. Giovanna Bosco and Patrizia Castelli (Pisa: Ministero per i Beni Culturali, 1996), 311, and Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*, 32–33.

chronicle that among Venice's 300,000 inhabitants in 1509, of 48,346 women and children, there existed 11,654 *femene da partito* (women who were shared/*partirsi* among many, or prostitutes). Excluding children, noblewomen, and citizens, this figure suggests that the number of prostitutes could have been as high as one-third of the female population.²⁴ In fact, these figures were exaggerated, for Venice had only 115,000 people in 1509 and reached its highest population in 1563 with 168,000 inhabitants. Nonetheless, it is still probable that a large number of women were prostitutes.²⁵ As many as one in every 10 inhabitants (or one in every five women) in sixteenth-century Venice might have made their living from prostitution, and even a figure of half these numbers would be remarkable.²⁶ Legislation from the *Provveditori alla Sanità* described the "infinite number of the many infamous *meretrice* that exist and are growing by the day in this city," and many literary descriptions confirmed this depiction of the city.²⁷ Of perhaps thousands of prostitutes, there were many fewer women who could be considered courtesans; nevertheless, courtesans were also particularly numerous in Venice. The English traveler Thomas Coryat put their number at 20,000 (showing how exaggerating numbers is a topos of male rhetoric). The *Catalogo di tutte le principale et più honorate cortigiane di Venezia* (1565) listed 210 names, and Michel de Montaigne suggested a figure of around 150 such women in his travel journals.²⁸ Even later in the middle of the eighteenth

²⁴ Sanudo, *I diarii*, vol. 8, 414; Marisa Milani, "Cortigiane e inquisizione," 307.

²⁵ See Daniele Beltrami, *Storia della popolazione di Venezia dalla fine del secolo XVI alla caduta della repubblica* (Padua: CEDAM, 1954), 59.

²⁶ See Paula Findlen, "Humanism, Politics, and Pornography in Renaissance Italy," in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 357, n.120. It is important to note that Findlen's figures, also, are questionable, because no statistics record whether women earned a living from prostitution; they only record whether a woman had sexual relations outside of marriage. Many of the women referred to as *meretrice* earned their living by working as laundresses, spinners, or domestic servants.

²⁷ *Leggi e memorie veneti*, 105. Niccolò Franco said that prostitutes in sixteenth-century Venice numbered in the thousands, Matteo Bandello described Venice as having "an infinite number of whores," and Ortensio Lando agreed that to try to count them "would be like trying to count the stars in the sky." See Niccolò Franco, *Le pistole vulgari* (Venice, 1542 edn.), 187v-188r; Bandello, *La terza parte delle novelle*, 31; Ortensio Lando, *Sette libri de cataloghi* (Venice, 1552), 23.

²⁸ Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities*, vol. 1, 402; Michel de Montaigne, *Journal de voyage en Italie*, ed. Maurice Rat (Paris: Editions Garnier, 1955), 73. See also Giovambattista Giraldo Cinthio, *Hecatommithi, ovvero cento novelle* (Venice, 1593), vol. 2, 91v.

century, Carlo de Brosses still found there were twice as many courtesans in Venice as in Paris, and expressly noted that Venetian courtesans were "well employed."²⁹ Venice was clearly renowned as a lascivious and alluring city that offered the sale of sex in abundance.

Scholars have long studied courtesans' lives, and yet any attempt to study courtesans as a group distinct from prostitutes as a whole poses several obstacles. There were numerous synonyms for prostitutes in the sixteenth century, and the prostitute and the courtesan were both commonly referred to as a *meretrice*, *bagascia/baldracca*, *bardassa*, *sgualdrina*, *mondana*, *donnaccia*, *a donna di malavita*, or sometimes even so simply as a *signora*. In many cases, it was a fine line that separated them, as the vocabulary that defined them and its connotations blurred. Sixteenth-century Venetians themselves often referred to them as distinct groups, but also sometimes grouped them together or continued to refer to prostitutes and courtesans as a whole as *meretrice*, or women who simply had sexual relations outside of marriage.³⁰ Distinguishing courtesans as a group is also challenging because Venetian legislation did not always do so. The language of the *Provveditori alla Sanità* and the *Esecutori Contro la Bestemmia* – the two magistracies assigned to oversee various aspects of prostitution in the city – frequently combined and conflated these terms, as did Venetian men and women themselves.³¹

Scholars tend to agree, however, that courtesans distinguished themselves in large part through their great skills in the art of conversation. As insulting drawings and gestures have shown us, communication involves action as much as language, and courtesans were no exception to this idea; their dress and lifestyles were also important to their success. Their spoken language, however, appeared to play a special role in their careers. Courtesans were Renaissance versions of the classical *hetairie*,

²⁹ Graf, "Una cortigiana fra mille," 288.

³⁰ "Quelle veramente si intendino meretrice quale non essendo maritate haverano comercio et pratica con uno over più homeni . . . quelle che havendo marito non habitano con sui mariti, ma stanno separate et habino comercio con uno over più homeni," ASV, *Senato Terra*, 12 February 1543, cited in *Leggi e memorie*, 109.

³¹ On similar questions of naming and vocabulary and the various levels of prostitution that existed across the social spectrum, see Elizabeth Cohen, "Courtesans' and 'Whores': Words and Behavior in Roman Streets," *Women's Studies* 19 (1991): 201–8; Jones and Rosenthal, "Introduction: The Honored Courtesan" in Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 2–3; Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*, 35–36.

or "women friends" called on for spiritual and aesthetic enjoyment in *symposia* or intellectual conversations in the Hellenist circles of Greek antiquity.³² Courtesans sold their sexual services, but what differentiated them from the common prostitutes, besides their glamour, grace, and beauty, was their eloquence. A man in search of sex alone sought out a prostitute, but paid more for the refined experience that included a stimulating (or erotic) conversation. Many contemporary descriptions of courtesans emphasize their mastery of the spoken word, their linguistic skill, and their conversational bravura. For instance, when instructing her daughter in the arts of courtesantry, Pietro Aretino's Nanna tells Pippa that "noblemen are accustomed to great ladies and derive more pleasure from gossiping and chitchat than from other things. So you must know how to talk." If not with gossip, the courtesan had to be prepared to "put on a show of reading *Furioso*, Petrarch and Boccaccio's *Hundred Tales*, which you should always keep in full view on your table."³³ The courtesan Giulia da Brolo was famous for reciting comedies, and Lucrezia Squarcia for walking around, Petrarch in hand, reading poetry and debating Homer, Virgil, music, and the *questione della lingua* at social gatherings.³⁴ The character Ludovico commented on the courtesan Matrema-non-vole in the satirical prose dialogue the *Ragionamento del Zoppino* (1539) for appearing to be a "new Cicero" and for memorizing all of Petrarch, Boccaccio, and numerous Latin verses. "I know 25 gentlemen," he claimed, "who are professional orators who know less about talking than she does."³⁵ Although we can never know the exact words of conversations that took place in the private boudoirs of Venetian courtesans, many men described the scintillating conversation that occurred there. Eloquence functioned as courtesans' cultural passkey,

³² See Pio Pecchiai, *Imperia* (Padua: CEDAM, 1958), 6.

³³ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 181, 233.

³⁴ Maffio Venier, "Daspuò che son entrà in pensier sì vario," in Milani, *Contro le puttane*, 66; "Lucrezia Squarcia, che di poesie/Finge apprezzar e seguir gli studi/... Recando spesso il Petarchetto in mano/Di Virgilio le charte et hor di Homero/Spesso disputa del parlar Thoscano," *La tariffa delle puttane di Venegia*, reprinted in Barzaghi, *Donne o cortigiane*, 173.

³⁵ *Ragionamento del Zoppino*, ed. Mario Cicognani (Milan: Longanesi, 1969), 42. Ercole Bentivoglio sent a courtesan named Angela (perhaps Angela Zaffetta) a chapter of his concerning the *questione della lingua* entitled *Della lingua tosca* and expressed his own desire to learn the Venetian dialect from her. See Graf, "Una cortigiana fra mille," 230. For similar descriptions of courtesans' eloquence, see Aretino, *Letters*, 249, Calmo, *Le lettere*, 278-80; 290, 297, 309, 334.

and it was through the manipulation of language that courtesans gained entrance to the elite world and made their living.

Although Renaissance culture dedicated much discursive energy to controlling and minimizing women's speech in general, a truly surprising amount of legal and literary attention was paid to controlling the language of courtesans as a specific group. Courtesans' speech was often singled out as particularly unruly. A law passed in 1571 by the *Provveditori alla Sanità* prohibited courtesans from attending church on major holidays under a fine of 200 *lire di piccoli*, so that among their many disruptive forms of behavior, their "many lascivious words do not provide a negative example to others who attend church."³⁶ A second law from 1578 remarked on the verbal commotion caused by prostitutes and courtesans who attended city churches dressed as married women or widows, and a third law from 1582 reiterated concerns about the uproar caused by the scandalous language of courtesans and prostitutes that resulted in "*mormoratione universale*."³⁷ Calmo described the courtesan Meneghina Cinqueta as "an evil tongue . . . full of slander and wanton words . . . always assassinating and destroying the honor of others." Tomaso Garzoni noted how prostitutes and courtesans regularly duped unwitting young men with their seductive words, and many other writers reiterated similar ideas about courtesans' unruly tongues.³⁸ As a living example of the verbal deception of courtesans, many sixteenth-century Venetians surely either recalled or knew of the spectacular case of Antonio di Landi,

³⁶ "Che alcuna meretrice over cortesana sia di che conditione esser si voglia, non possano ne debbano de cetero andar in chiesa alcuna il zorno della festa et solenità principal di quella, acciò non siano causa di mali esempj con molti et parole lascive a quelli over quelle che vanno a buon fine in ditte giesie con vergogna di questa città," ASV, *Provveditori alla Sanità*, Capitolare 1, 1485-1574, carta 157, 10 March 1571.

³⁷ "Nelle chiese di questa città a tempo che si celebrano li santi officij vano diverse meretrice e cortesane in esse chiese vestite da maridate e da vedove facendo atti disonesti con mal esempio e mormoratione," Ibid., Capitolare 2, 1574-1689, carta 37, 20 December 1578; "Cosi molti chiassi et usando termini inhonesti con mormoratione universale et contaminatione delle persone da bene che vanno a dette chiese et luochi per devotione," Ibid., Notatorio 11, carta 112, 2 December 1582.

³⁸ Andrea Calmo, *Le bizzarre, faconde, et ingeniose rime pescatorie* (Venice, 1553), 44; Garzoni, *La piazza universale*, vol. 2, 951-65. See also Aretino, *Letters*, 122; Mattio Pagan, *Pronostico alla villota sopra le puttane* (Venice, 1558); Passi, *I donneschi difetti*, 158-77; *Ragionamento del Zoppino*, 37; Francesco Sansovino, *Ragionamento, nel quale brevemente s'insegna a giovani huomini la bella arte d'amore* (Venice, 1545), 19v; Venier, *Il libro chiuso* in Milani, *Contro le puttane*, 68-69.

a state secretary who was betrayed by a courtesan in matters of state in 1498.³⁹ It is interesting to note that, for all this concern, the records of the *Sanità* indicate that one prostitute, Catharina Zotta, was punished for foul language in the sixteenth century, and the *Esecutori Contro la Bestemmia* banned one prostitute for blasphemy in 1551.⁴⁰ Despite the fact that both legal and literary discourse aggressively argued that courtesans and prostitutes were particularly obscene talkers, the low number of them prosecuted for verbal crimes in the sixteenth century – two – once again suggests a disconnect or slippage between the way that male authorities described female speech and the way courtesans actually spoke, at least in the public realm.

If there was any one label consistently applied to courtesans that captured their role as temptresses and their alluring, wicked voices, it was their frequent description as Sirens. Although we have already seen this term used by both Castiglione and Guazzo to describe outspoken women in general who threatened the natural order with their loquacity, Niccolò Franco, Girolamo Parabosco, Perissone Cambio, Francesco Pona, Tomaso Garzoni, and others all applied this term to courtesans.⁴¹

³⁹ The courtesan Laura Troylo had the suspicion that Antonio Landi had been revealing state secrets to a Trevisan named Giovanni Battista. Troylo invited a friend named Gieronimo Amai to hide behind the bed during one of these secret exchanges, and then Troylo and Amai denounced Landi for his crime, who was then executed and hung from gallows between the columns of San Marco. While this case could appear the results of the honorable, patriotic efforts on the part of Troylo to preserve state secrets, the rhetorical tone of its interpreter Sanudo, as well as the nineteenth-century historian Giuseppe Tassini, suggests that it was yet another example of a deceptive, chattering courtesan who could not keep quiet. "Ed ditta Laura non li bastò l'animo andarli ad accusar; ma mandò questo Hironimo," Sanudo, *I diarii*, vol. 1, 917–18. "La donna, incapace di tacere, comunicò il fatto ad un altro suo amico, per nome Girolamo Amai," Giuseppe Tassini, *Alcune delle più clamorose condanne capitali eseguite in Venezia* (Venice: Tipografia di G. Cecchini, 1866), 115–16. The poligrafo Niccolò Franco similarly argued that prostitutes used their beauty to overhear secrets and strategically employed such knowledge to gain profit and reputation. See Franco, *Pistole vulgari* (Venice, 1539 edn.), xxiv–xxv.

⁴⁰ ASV, *Provveditori alla Sanità*, Notatorio 6, carta 231v, 20 August 1552; *Esecutori Contro la Bestemmia*, Libro 1, Raspe, 1548–70, carta 30, 7 April 1551. While he does not mention any specific name or magistracy, Pietro Bembo found the case of a prostitute who blasphemed in 1512 significant enough to mention in his *Della historia vinitiana*: "In Vinegia I Signor Dieci bandirono una meretrice, che Dio et Santi sozzamente bestemmiato havea, e s'era fuggita, postale questa conditione, che se ella in luogo alcuno della Republica presa fosse, la testa le fosse tagliata e ella abbrusciata," Pietro Bembo, *Della historia vinitiana* (Venice, 1552), 176–77.

⁴¹ Franco, *Le pistole vulgari* (Venice, 1542 edn.), 220v; Girolamo Parabosco, *Quattro libri delle lettere amoroze* (Venice, 1611), 38; Perissone Cambio, *Primo libro dei madrigale* (Venice, 1547),

Recounting his travels to Venice at the end of the sixteenth century, Thomas Coryat emphasized the dangerously seductive tongues of Venetian courtesans.

Moreover shee will endeavour to enchaunt thee partly with her melodious notes that she warbles out upon her lute, which shee fingers with as laudable a stroake as many men that are excellent professors in the noble science of musicke; and partly with that heart-tempting harmony of her voice. Also thou wilt finde the Venetian cortezan (if she be a selected woman indeede) a good rhetorician, and a most elegant discourser, so that if she cannot move thee with all these foresaid delights, shee will assay they constancy with her rhetoricall tongue. And to the end shee may minister unto thee the stronger temptations to come to her lure.

For these reasons, Coryat goes on to warn the traveler not to enter into conversation with the Venetian courtesan and to “furnish they self with a double armour, the one for thine eyes, the other for thine eares . . . against the attractive inchauntments of their plausible speeches.”⁴² It is interesting to note in passing the Siren that graces the frontispiece of Aretino’s *Stanze di M. Pietro Aretino* (1537) (Figure 7). Often attributed to Titian, this image depicts Aretino as a rustic shepherd singing to his love Angela Sirena, who emerges from the clouds as a winged Siren in the heavens. Angela Sirena was not (that we know of) a courtesan, but was the wife of Gian Antonio Sirena. Nevertheless, Aretino like other writers of his generation sometimes referred to courtesans as Sirens and Titian’s image works to visualize the ideas of this group of writers.

Literary references to the Sirens – to the enchantresses whose songs threatened to shipwreck Odysseus and his crew off the coast of Italy – imply various layers of meaning. Courtesans were indeed sexualized women, but descriptions of them as Sirens suggest that narrative or

dedication (no pagination); Francesco Pona, *La lucerna*, ed. Giorgio Fulco (Rome: Salerno, 1973), 108; Garzoni, *La piazza universale*, vol. 2, 965. Though not connected to courtesans per se, on a related note, the late sixteenth-century Paduan professor of rhetoric Antonio Riccobono claimed that the enemies of rhetoric denounced rhetoricians for clinging “to the allurements of words as to the rocks of the Sirens.” Antonio Riccobono, *Oratio pro studis humanitatis*, in Giancarlo Mazzacurati, *La crisi della retorica umanistica nel Cinquecento* (Antonio Riccobono) (Naples: Libreria Scientifica Editrice, 1961), 171.

⁴² Coryat, *Coryat’s Crudities*, vol. 1, 406.

STANZE DI M. PIETRO ARETINO.



Figure 7. Frontispiece of Pietro Aretino, *Stanze di M. Pietro Aretino* (Venice, 1537). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1937 (37.37.2). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

poetry and song – not sex – was true source of their power.⁴³ Courtesans embodied the idea that narrative and language itself could be seductive

⁴³ On the courtesan's voice in Renaissance music, see the articles by Feldman, De Rycke, Flosi and Davies in *The Courtesan's Arts*, 105–60.

and harmful, in the same way that the Sirens tempted Odysseus with a complete knowledge of all events, especially those at Troy, but only at the price of his life. If courtesans were indeed Sirens, this meant that their powers of speech were linked to that of the Homeric Muses themselves. That is to say, courtesans were not simply "monstrous" females; they possessed the divine powers of speech, song, and epic poetry: the language of culture par excellence. At the same time, while the Muses commanded the language of poetry from Zeus for the posterity of the Western world, Sirens and courtesans commanded it for their own inscrutable purposes. In this way, courtesans were anti-Muses; they threatened to destroy, instead of preserve, one's honor and identity.⁴⁴ In the Venetian context, courtesans, like Sirens, offered knowledge – a knowledge specifically of sexuality – and many patrician youths visited them to gain access to this world. However, their speech also threatened the loss of men's constructions of themselves as husbands, fathers, undertakers of lucrative professions, and civic politicians: in effect, the loss of male identity if men became obsessed or subsumed by their relationships with courtesans.

While some portrayed courtesans as Sirens, many went a step further and labeled them as witches. The 1531 poem *La puttana errante* – an epic Rabelaisian fable inspired by Aretino's pornographic writing, or perhaps assembled by Pietro Aretino and Lorenzo Venier together to mock the courtesan Elena Ballerini – offers a vivid portrayal of the courtesan as a witch. It describes a parade of courtesans as a crowd "of witches, enchantresses and Erinys (*megere*), with each harpy holding that which she needs for charms and curses," such as fingernails, hair, the skin of an unborn fetus, or the bones of the dead.⁴⁵ In describing courtesans as *megere*, a term that means both one of the three furies and a prostitute, the poem plays up the connection between prostitution and the enchanting speech of witchcraft. The *Ragionamento del Zoppino* similarly recounts

⁴⁴ See Lillian Eileen Doherty, "Sirens, Muses and Female Narrators in the *Odyssey*," in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 81–92.

⁴⁵ "Di streghe incantatrici e di *megere*/Et ha ciascuna in man di queste arpie/Cio che bisogna a incanti et a malie/Unghe, capegli e funi d'impiccati/E di non nato fanciullino pelle/Ossa di morti dal vivo cavati/Grassa di donne giovenette e belle/Vasi pieni di lagrime e stillati/D'herbe colte a splendor di certe stelle/Che disperdan I parti et il cervello/Tolgan spesso a quest'amante e a quello," *La puttana errante*, reprinted in Alessandro Luzio, *Pietro Aretino nei primi suoi anni a Venezia* (Turin: Ermanno Loescher, 1888), 118.

the various acts of sorcery that courtesans undertook to cause someone to fall in love with them, and the character Zoppino claims that their magical words and incantations are so frequent and lengthy that it would take a month to recount them.⁴⁶

While the terms siren and witch functioned as metaphoric descriptions, witchcraft was a real legal and spiritual problem in early modern Venice and the Holy Office sometimes tried courtesans and prostitutes for witchcraft.⁴⁷ Many historians – Ruth Martin and Guido Ruggiero in the case of Venice, Robin Briggs in France and Lorraine, and Lyndal Roper in Germany – have long studied the gendering of witchcraft, emphasizing that most accused witches were women, and many at least in Northern Europe were midwives and healers.⁴⁸ The accused in approximately 18 inquisition trials for witchcraft in sixteenth-century Venice were labeled *cortigiane* or *meretrice*, and trial content reveals additional courtesans who practiced *stregoneria*.⁴⁹ Although this remains a small

⁴⁶ *Ragionamento del Zoppino*, 20–22. Pippa similarly asks Nanna if she should learn to use spells, sorceries, and witchcraft as part of her trade as a courtesan. See Aretino, *Dialogues*, 226. Maffio Venier also referred to Veronica Franco as “Quella solene strega, quella erbera,”

Maffio Venier *Il libro chiuso*, in Milani, *Contro le puttane*, 71.

⁴⁷ It is difficult to know exactly how many trials of courtesan-witches the Venetian Inquisition initiated because many trial records are incomplete and have been lost, dispersed, or ruined. However, in the second half of the sixteenth century, approximately 1500 trials took place, and of these, about 150 were for witchcraft, magic, and divination – 98 percent of these witchcraft trials were of women, tried primarily in the 1580s. These trials began with the first trial for witchcraft in 1552 against Lucrezia (bu. 10) and ended with the trial of Angela Manza in 1592 (bu. 69). See Marisa Milani, *Piccole storie di stregoneria nella Venezia del '500* (Verona: Essedue Edizioni, 1989), 16, and Marisa Milani, “L’incanto di Veronica Franco,”

Giornale storico della letteratura italiana 162 (1985): 251, n. 5.

⁴⁸ Ruth Martin, *Witchcraft and the Inquisition in Venice, 1550–1650* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*; Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Penguin, 1996); Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. 199–225.

⁴⁹ A precise count remains elusive. On the one hand, many *meretrice* were surely accused of sorcery as a rote accusation, suggesting that such numbers may be inflated. See Martin, *Witchcraft and the Inquisition*, 234–38. These numbers may be an underestimate, on the other hand. Lucia Furlana (bu. 49) for instance, tried for witchcraft, is referred to as a “dona di pessima et cativa vita,” which is often used synonymously to mean a *meretrice*. Also, several trials reveal several courtesans or *meretrice* who are not being tried themselves. For instance, the trial of Girolamo Zago (bu. 49) discusses four *meretrice* who participated in witchcraft; the trials of Faustina (bu. 57) and Elisabetta Greca (bu. 66) reveal several courtesan witches working together, though only one is principally accused. A complete reading of all the sixteenth-century trials of the Holy Office would most likely reveal additional courtesan witches.

number, the content of these trials often reveals a perceived cultural connection between courtesans and witchcraft. Some of these trials, such as that of Emilia Catena (1586) and Isabella Bellocchio (1589) resulted in whipping and various forms of public humiliation that would have made a strong impression linking courtesans and witchcraft in the minds of contemporary Venetians.

This linkage is significant because witchcraft was fundamentally a spoken, verbal practice and a crime of language.⁵⁰ In early modern Europe and Venice in particular, the practice of witchcraft involved a variety of arts ranging from bean-throwing (*butta fave*), conjuring the devil with tarot cards (*il tarocco*), boiling bones or making a type of witches' stew (*la pignatta*), or seeing the future or past in a jar of holy water (*l'inghistara*). Though diverse in practice and often focused on the immediacy of material objects, almost all these acts of witchcraft necessarily employed incantations in order to make the magic work. Many rituals involved complex mixtures of words and actions: an object, movement, or gesture whose magical powers were brought to life by an oration. Without these spoken words used to activate the magic, the action or object alone had no effect.⁵¹ For instance, someone hoping to make a fickle lover return might turn to a witch for the *tarocco*. This required directing prayers and reciting formulas to the tarot card of the devil with a candle lit in front of it, usually at dawn or sunset, so that the devil would enter the heart of an unfaithful lover and convince him to return to his partner. Or, someone like the famed courtesan Veronica Franco, trying to locate a lost or stolen item, might ask for an *inghistara*. Here,

⁵⁰ Because the boundaries between saints and heretics or witches were often quite blurry in the early modern world, it is interesting to note the degree to which those supposedly possessed by the devil emphasized orality and spoken language in their revelations. Armando Maggi describes some visionaries and demonically possessed as "obsessed with orality." See Armando Maggi, *Satan's Rhetoric: A Study of Renaissance Demonology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 144.

⁵¹ See Ruggiero, *Binding Passions*, 92, 99–109. In his encyclopedic *La tipocosmia*, a text purporting to describe all the actions existing in the world, Alessandro Citolini, a Venetian resident and writer interested in language, considered necromancy and witchcraft actions undertaken above all by the mouth. See Citolini, *La tipocosmia*, 539. On spells and witchcraft as a crime of speech, see also Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 282–84; Marisa Milani, "Cortigiane e inquisizione," 313; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 183, 502–12.

the witch would recite a series of *pater nostri*, *ave marie*, or incantations to a jar of holy water to locate the missing goods.⁵²

Inquisition records are often frustratingly thin on the actual spells and incantations pronounced by these women, and testimony only reveals a fleeting glance at such language. However, the vast majority of witchcraft trials indicate the regular use of magical words even when they were not directly transcribed. Witnesses called to testify often commented on the "diabolical words" they heard the witch pronounce, or claimed that the witch spoke something softly as she enacted her magic.⁵³ These trials often point to the close association of courtesans and magical language, demonstrating how people believed that courtesans wielded a particular power over spoken words. During the trial of a certain Bianca Lando, for instance, Bianca's servant Ancilla unwittingly revealed the common cultural connection made between courtesans, orations, and magic. "My mistress pronounces orations using the fabric from church altars," Ancilla remarked, "and this is how she practices witchcraft. But even though she does these little things as all women do, she is a saintly, Catholic woman and she is not a courtesan."⁵⁴

As Keith Thomas has argued, in an age when doctors were unable to treat most illnesses, when poverty, sickness, fire, famine, and sudden disaster or death were common experiences, people often turned

⁵² For instance, Veronica Franco recited the words "Anzolo santo, anzolo bianco, per la tua santità et per la mia verzinà mostrame il vero et la verità chi ha tolto la tal cosa cioè le forfette et l'officio," ASV, *Sant'Uffizio*, bu. 46 "Veronica Franco" 8 October 1580. The trial of Gabriele da Venezia (bu. 65) illustrates the practice of the *tarocco*, and the trial of Camilla Milanese (bu. 65) also illustrates the practice of the *inghistara*. The wetnurse and midwife in Pietro Aretino's *Dialogues* describe the orations associated with throwing beans; see Aretino's *Dialogues*, 379–80. For the various techniques and practices of witchcraft, see Marisa Milani, "L'incanto di Veronica Franco," 250–63.

⁵³ "Et non sentiva ciò che dicessero quelle done che le buttava, perché parlavano pian pian et non volevano che si sentisse la lor virtù," *Ibid.*, bu. 53, "Magdalenam Bradamonte," 21 June 1584, 25v. See also the trials of Catterina Furlana, *Ibid.*, bu. 55, testimony of Marina, 16 February 1585, 5r. The trials of Latisana and Benedetta Maranese (bu. 68), while not of courtesans per se, offer good examples of witches' orations.

⁵⁴ "Mia madonna attende a far delle orationi, delli panni de altari per le chiese, e queste sono le sue strigarie. È una donna santa, una donna catholica, save che tutte le donne fa qualche coseta, ma la non e cortegiana," ASV, *Sant'Uffizio*, bu. 65, "Bianca Lando" 16 November 1589. The speakers in Moderata Fonte's dialogue *The Worth of Women* similarly indicate a commonly perceived connection between courtesans, spells, and magic when one woman describes how a prostitute cast a spell on her husband. See Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, 69–70.

to either religion, magic, or both, for help, healing, or hope. That is to say, they invoked the magical words of the mass and the prayer, or the spell and the incantation, to assist them in times of need. According to Thomas, churchmen and magicians possessed similar and parallel powers.⁵⁵ Prayers and spells were two sides of the same coin: magical words pronounced either to supplicate or control. They were types of speech that were not incompatible, even in the years after the Reformation, as there were magical elements that survived in religion (prayers and masses continued to have an incantory character) and religious tendencies that survived in the practice of magical speech (*pater nostri* and *ave marie* were regularly used in the orations of Venetian courtesans). If blasphemy, rhetoric, and the magical words of the mass tended to be represented as masculine forms of speech, this suggests that the spells and incantations of witches and courtesans were their feminine counterpart, and male religious authorities aimed to silence such challenges to their voice in the age of the Counter-Reformation. The patriarchal powers of this repressive culture aimed at clarifying the difference between the masculine prayer and the feminine spell. Not all witches were courtesans, but many courtesans practiced witchcraft and believed in the magical power of their spoken words. The prosecutions of courtesan-witches, albeit relatively small in number, therefore revealed a competition between men and women over the control of magical speech. This gendered contest over language was certainly not the most central one in Tridentine culture in which male authorities were concerned about the regulation of many kinds of irregular speech and action, including that of men. Yet the prosecution of the courtesan-sorceresses demonstrated how the Inquisition in Venice functioned as an arm of the state attempting to silence the unruly language of these women.

As an interesting, but related aside: archival documents from a variety of magistracies also suggest that the Venetian state linked courtesans, foul language, and immigration together as a nexus of immorality and vice that needed patrolling, not unlike connections state magistracies perceived between blasphemy and immigration. The *Esecutori Contro la Bestemmia* was originally given jurisdiction over the crime of blasphemy in 1537. It was given additional jurisdiction to serve as the appellate court

⁵⁵ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 41.

for the *Provveditori alla Sanità* in cases involving prostitution in 1553, and these powers were confirmed and amplified in 1578, followed by jurisdiction over the registration of foreigners in 1583. That is, to repeat: the state placed jurisdiction over blasphemy, foreigners, and prostitution under one magistracy designed to oversee civic morality. On 16 September 1539, the *Provveditori alla Sanità* passed a law stating that "all foreign prostitutes who have lived in Venice for under two years . . . must leave the city within fifteen days." Those who did not were punished with whipping from San Marco to the Rialto, six months in prison, the fine of 100 *lire di piccoli*, and banishment. The Council of Ten repeated a similar law in 1572, suggesting that during the sixteenth century, many courtesans and prostitutes were foreigners.⁵⁶ If courtesans were known for their lascivious tongues, enough to prompt the passing of laws that specifically took note of their language, and if many courtesans came from outside the city, this suggests that when it remarked on courtesans' language, civic legislation once again had the collateral effect or intention of disciplining the tongues of immigrants to conform to civic standards of respectability.

Courtesans certainly had vehement and often violent detractors. Aggressive diatribes against their entire existence – let alone their speech and language – abound. In his famous attack on Veronica Franco, Maffio Venier stated that it would take thousands of pens and an infinite number of poets to be able to sing all her vices and defects.⁵⁷ While courtesans

⁵⁶ "Che tutte le meretrice forestiere che da anni doi in qua sono venute ad habitare in questa Città (sic), etiam che fussero de terre et lochi subditi a questo illustrissimo Dominio, debbono in termine de giorni XV proximi partirse immediate da questa città sotto pena de esser frustade da S. Marco a Rialto, stare mesi sei in preson serrate et pagare lire cento de pizoli," ASV, *Provveditori alla Sanità* capitolare 1, carta 45, 16 September 1539. See also *Consiglio dei Dieci, Misti*, libro 13, 12 September 1539; *Consiglio dei Dieci, Comuni*, registro 30, 1571–72, carta 101v, 28 March 1572. Michelle Laughran has argued that "immigration generated not just the demand for prostitution but the prostitutes themselves," and many prostitutes in both Venice and Europe at large came from outside their resident cities. See Laughran, "The Body, Public Health and Social Control," 62–64. The trial of Sofia Solarin before the Holy Office similarly suggests the large number of foreign prostitutes present in the city. One witness described her as a "ruffiana che alloggia tutte le meretrici thodesche che vengono qua a venetia e sempre ne ha tre o quattro," ASV, *Sant'Uffizio*, bu. 65, fasc. Sofia Solarin, 10 December 1589.

⁵⁷ Maffio Venier, *Il libro chiuso*, in Milani, *Contro le puttane*, 68. No one was more explicit about the perilous aspects of courtesans' existence than Veronica Franco herself, who described the life of a courtesan as one that "always turns out to be a misery. It's a most wretched thing, contrary to human reason, to subject one's body and labor to a slavery terrifying even to think of," Veronica Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 39 (Letter 22).

may have possessed a mastery of language, their livelihoods necessarily entailed the stigmatized commerce of the body and sex, and it is important not to overstate their agency. Courtesans' lives were difficult, and as Rosenthal has demonstrated, they were often victims of the attacks of envious men who vied with them for patronage. Rosenthal, however, tends to depict male writers as discussing the courtesan with an almost exclusively negative tone. According to Rosenthal, writers described courtesans as objects of "abject servility" who were "seldom championed by their fellow citizens" and "frequently were the victims of envious men who competed with them for public attention." She claims that "rather than being championed by many male contemporaries, the courtesan was used . . . as a satirical outlet" and that male authors demonstrated "a growing mistrust and hatred of the courtesan."⁵⁸ This description of courtesans as universally disparaged, however, only begins to scratch the surface, and examining a variety of depictions of courtesans' speech reveals a more complex picture of their position in society. Courtesans occupied a more complicated position in the minds of Venetian writers. Although writers like Andrea Calmo, Sperone Speroni, or Pietro Aretino expressed criticism of courtesans in shocking and often vulgar language, it does not necessarily follow that such writers were consistently courtesans' antagonists. In fact, a select group of Venetian writers – the poligrafi – at times appeared closer to courtesans as a group than to any other subset of Renaissance culture.

The poligrafi were group of literary odd-job men who rejected conventional careers as servants of the courts to work in the relative intellectual freedom of Venice. In the 1530s and 1540s, vernacular literature was becoming increasingly popular. As a result, Venetian printers who published vernacular works like Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari and Francesco Marcolini profited from this trend and the tremendous expansion of printing in Venice in general. Such printing houses encouraged the production of non-scholarly texts for more popular consumption and employed the poligrafi as editors, translators, and writers during this period of growth. The poligrafi authored a wide variety of texts, including poetry, plays, fables, travel literature, satires, letters, and burlesques.

⁵⁸ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, ch. 1, "Satirizing the Courtesan: Franco's Enemies," 11–57, esp. 33, 15, 17, 19.

Many of these texts were incredibly popular and went into multiple editions; some were reprinted every three or four years for half a century. The poligrafi were a diverse group in terms of their social class and literary output. Ludovico Dolce, Lodovico Domenichi, Giuseppe Betussi, and Pietro Aretino especially came from moneyed backgrounds, whereas Niccolò Franco and Anton Francesco Doni did not.⁵⁹ The fantastical works of Franco and Doni contrast sharply with the more sober writing of Dolce and Domenichi.

Their diversity aside, the poligrafi also had much in common. They were famous for their critical approach to much of Italian society, including ancient and modern learning, the vast majority of Italian professions, and Italian social organization. They were especially disparaging of humanists, Petrarchists, and Renaissance grammarians. Many of them ridiculed those who worried about accents, vocabulary, sentence structure, and parts of speech in an effort to revive classical eloquence instead of simply expressing themselves clearly. They thought writers should be more concerned about other more pressing issues such as political power and morality.⁶⁰ The poligrafi also had much in common with courtesans. If courtesans sold conversation, the poligrafi were the corresponding vendors of the printed word. Like courtesans, the poligrafi were immigrants (Dolce was the only native Venetian among the group) who made their living in a foreign city through trade in language. Most importantly, as merchants of words, the poligrafi appeared to appreciate courtesans deeply, and often included courtesans' writings in their collections. Their relationship suggests a nexus of conversation and print that publicized courtesan's voices to the wider world.⁶¹

Niccolò Franco, for instance, credited courtesans with having re-introduced otherwise lost cultural delights back into Italian society — including, we can imagine, conversation. Courtesans evoked a golden

⁵⁹ While Aretino was not a poligrafo per se, he may, for convenience, be grouped with these writers because of his close association with this group and the way he helped establish many of them as writers.

⁶⁰ Grendler, *Critics of the Italian World*, 154.

⁶¹ On the poligrafi, see Claudia di Filippo Bareggi, *Il mestiere di scrivere: Lavoro intellettuale e mercato librario a Venezia nel Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1988); Giovanni Aquilecchia, "Pietro Aretino e altri poligrafi a Venezia," in *Storia della cultura veneta*, vol. 3:2, ed. Arnaldi and Stocchi, 61–98; Paul Grendler, *Critics of the Italian World, 1530–1560: Anton Francesco Doni, Niccolò Franco, and Ortensio Lando* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

age, he claimed, by using their social graces to bring the glories of the ancient world into the modern one.⁶² Anton Francesco Doni celebrated the courtesan Francesca Baffo in his *Pistolotti amorosi* and included a copy of a letter to her in his *Tre libri di lettere*: a collection of letters addressed to the likes of Michelangelo, Tintoretto, Sansovino, and Aretino, and very few other women besides Baffo. Lodovico Domenichi and Giuseppe Betussi also included Baffo's poems in their printed collections, and both Domenichi and Girolamo Parabosco also dedicated sonnets and letters to her.⁶³ While Sperone Speroni brutally denounced an imaginary courtesan in his *Orazione contro le cortegiane* (1575), he too had once written in praise of courtesans. This later diatribe reflected a reaction to the repressive, moralistic climate of the Counter-Reformation. Scholars often consider Speroni to be among the harshest of courtesans' attackers, yet Speroni was an arch-sophist practicing his argumentative style and cannot necessarily be taken at face value: an important point to keep in mind for discussions about courtesans in general.⁶⁴

Of all those who commented on the lives of courtesans, it was Pietro Aretino and his ribald tales, recounted in a brothel among prostitutes, that perhaps best exemplified the relationship between courtesans and the poligrafi.⁶⁵ Like other Venetian writers, Aretino was highly critical

⁶² Franco, *Le pistole vulgari* (1542 edn.), 223v–224r.

⁶³ Anton Francesco Doni, *Pistolotti amorosi* (Venice, 1552), 12v–14r; *Tre libri di lettere* (Venice, 1552), 73r–v. While the *Pistolotti* is a satirical take on Petrarchism and sixteenth-century love treatises, it nevertheless represents the respect Doni held for Baffo. Though biographical information about Baffo is scarce, many assume that she was a courtesan. See C. Mutini, "Franceschina Baffo," in *Dizionario biografico italiano*, vol. 5 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1963), 163. For a lengthy list and discussion of all the poems and sonnets written both by, for, and in praise of courtesans, by various members of Venetian literary circles, see Bareggi, *Il mestiere di scrivere*, 17–29, 104, n. 20, and Villaviera, *Le cortigiane veneziane*, 143–91.

⁶⁴ See Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 25. Virginia Cox emphasizes the fact that while some dialogues, such as Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua*, are indisputably monological and advance a single point of view, others are much more ambiguous and create "almost endless possibilities for creative manipulation of the relations between reader and text." Speroni's dialogues, she argues, belonged to the second category; they do not attempt to promote any one single opinion. See Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue*, 5, 64–65, 84.

⁶⁵ On Pietro Aretino and his commentary on courtesans, see Christopher Cairns, *Pietro Aretino and the Republic of Venice: Researches on Aretino and His Circle in Venice, 1527–1556* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1985); Giulio Ferroni, "Il teatro della Nanna," in *Le voci dell'istrione: Pietro Aretino e la dissoluzione del teatro*, ed. Giulio Ferroni (Naples: Liguori, 1977), 136–202; Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino: Fra Rinascimento e manierismo*, trans. Mariella Di Maio and Maria Luisa Rispoli (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980); Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 11–57.

of the courtesan, who he believed represented the moral, economic, and social decay of sixteenth-century Italy. He depicted courtesans and prostitutes as among the most foul-mouthed of women, and Nanna, Antonia, and Pippa, the courtesans whose dialogue forms Aretino's *Ragionamenti* and *Sei giornate*, appear no more than calculating swindlers who excel in the arts of deceit, flattery, and lying. However, Aretino's words, like those of Speroni and other Venetian poligrafi, maintain an underlying complexity. Although Aretino's dialogues took place in Rome, because he was active as a writer in Venice, his dialogues also reflect ideas that he likely thought applied in Venice as well. A close look at his portrayal of courtesans' language reveals a nuanced understanding and often profound admiration of their speech.

Like the poligrafi that he supported, Aretino ridiculed the literary norms of the day such as the reverence of the Platonic dialogue, the prevalence of books on manners, and the Renaissance culture of politeness. Rebelling against the standards of Renaissance humanism and respectability, Aretino dedicated his *Dialogues* to a monkey rather than a prince, and employed courtesans' voices in these dialogues rather than those of courtiers and ladies as a means of ridiculing these figures. Sarcas- tically mimicking advice from comportment literature, Aretino has the courtesan Nanna – rather than a respectable lady – advise her daughter on the importance of manners and conversation. She tells Pippa to use a “gentle voice” and “make an effort to say something that doesn't stink of the brothel” and remember that “good manners are the best go-betweens to help you rise in the world.”⁶⁶ However, this is advice given from one prostitute to another, not with the aim of social or cultural edification but with the goal of how to best cheat clients out of as much of their fortune as possible. In this way, Aretino ridiculed both courtesans and their more respectable, upright counterparts: he criticizes social climbers who hope to improve their status through manners as being no better than the prostitutes, or the dregs of society.

However, Aretino also argued that compared to nuns and wives, courtesans were the only truly honest women whose actions, for once, matched their words (158). In addition, his letters betrayed a profound admiration for the courtesans Zufolina and Angela Zaffetta. He praised

⁶⁶ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 169–70, 220.

their speech, and in one letter invited Angela to dine with himself, Titian, and Sansovino: a sure sign that she was a delightful conversationalist.⁶⁷ He typically depicts Nanna – the main protagonist in his dialogues – as a dynamic and engaging speaker, and the responses of the other interlocutors in his dialogues consistently underscore – albeit obscenely – just how compelling her words are. For instance, Antonia responds to Nanna's speeches by saying "I'm waiting for you to get to the heart of your story, and I feel just like a baby waiting for his wet nurse to shove her tit in his mouth."⁶⁸ Antonia believes that Nanna's words "should be inscribed in letters of gold" (62). Nanna's speech is so vivid and persuasive that it produces immediate physical and erotic results.

Pippa: Oh, you are a wonderful painter with words; and as I listened to you, I got all excited. I had the feeling that the hand you described touched my nipples and was just about to feel... I won't say what.
Nanna: I saw the passion on your face, which changed completely, then blushed red while I was showing you what one does not see. (200–1)

Antonia similarly comments that when she listens to Nanna, what happens to her is "what happens to someone who smells a purge and, without even taking it, goes twice or three times to move her bowels" (52–53). Pippa and Antonia's responses to Nanna's speech illuminate Aretino's thoughts on courtesans' language. He may or may not have respected courtesans in terms of their morality, piety, or social respectability, but they were clearly fascinating to listen to. Their speech commanded attention so well that he used them as his mouthpiece for pornographic expression. Though Aretino never states this outright, it is implicit that erotic language such as Nanna's served not only to seduce but also to assert female agency and social mobility, as courtesans used their alluring talk to attract their noble clientele and make a living.

More importantly, Aretino also chose a courtesan to express his views on contemporary debates about language itself, as Nanna repeatedly ridicules the ways in which Renaissance men spoke. She tells her daughter not to imitate the affected language of princes and courtiers. "I beg you" she says "my dear daughter, do not forsake the speech which your

⁶⁷ Aretino, *Letters*, 120–22, 272.

⁶⁸ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 26.

dear little mother taught you; leave all 'in such a manner's' and 'directly's' to affected courtiers." Instead, Nanna says that she remains herself when she speaks. "I say the words as they trip to my tongue; I don't lift them out of my mouth with a fork, because they are words and not confectories; when I speak, I resemble a woman, not a magpie" (182-83). Nanna emphasizes that when she talks, she is spontaneous and avoids the affectation commonly described by humanist literature.

I make it all up as I go, I improvise and don't drag things out by the hair, I say them right off in a single breath and not in a hundred years, as do certain worn-out style-doctors who teach us how to write books, taking a lifetime on their "so-to-speaks," "as-it-weres," and "as-to-shits," composing comedies out of speeches more constipated than constipation; and that's why everyone rushes to look at my gossip, printing it right away as if it were the *Verbum Caro*. (213-14)

Nanna's chatter is by no means a simple feminine annoyance; rather, it is a theatrical spectacle that forces her audience to listen. Publishers rushed to capture and print her words, she claimed, in the same way that Aretino's texts flew off the presses. In this way, through Nanna – the voice of a courtesan – Aretino scathingly criticized the social and cultural practices of Renaissance literary speech and flaunted literary convention by ridiculing Bembo's contemporary advice to follow archaic linguistic models. Like other poligrafi, Aretino did not describe courtesans simply as "corrupt," but also as remarkable for their verbal prowess.⁶⁹

Despite their criticism of humanists as ridiculous and useless pedants, it remains important to note that the poligrafi could not resist the debates surrounding the *questione della lingua*; many of them composed texts on language and grammar.⁷⁰ Although such interests by no means indicate concrete links between the poligrafi and the speech of courtesans, they demonstrate how this group of male writers who were either intrigued by or critical of contemporary debates about language appeared to value the verbal arts of courtesans as a group. The poligrafi admired courtesans as examples of both frankness and eloquence. As we have seen,

⁶⁹ See Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 34, 42.

⁷⁰ The third book of the 1552 edition of Anton Francesco Doni's *Tre libri di lettere* is a book of grammar. See also Ludovico Dolce, *Delle osservazioni* (Venice, 1556); Sansovino, *L'arte oratoria* and *Le osservazioni della lingua volgare* (Venice, 1562).

courtesans' language was noted for both its beauty and its obscenity, and insult, slander, and obscenity were also common in writings of poligrafi, as Aretino especially made clear. Poligrafi at once expressed an interest in linguistic debates while simultaneously flouting the conventions of grammar, language, and the courtly, Ciceronian dialogue that such debates established.⁷¹ Such contradictory interests in language may explain why courtesans' speech appealed so much to the poligrafi, as courtesans were both positively and negatively renowned for their tongues. The poligrafi represented a distinct, popular, and highly published arm of Venetian literary culture that appreciated courtesans' language and turned up the volume of their words. Aretino was especially fundamental in generating a new, international marketplace for the obscene. The written or printed versions of courtesans' voices from his and other poligrafi's sixteenth-century texts spawned additional waves of interest in such language – particularly obscenity and pornography – and set the stage for its more widespread diffusion, especially in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France.⁷²

In many ways, courtesans disrupted the categories of masculine and feminine and sometimes even represented a third sex, both in terms of their behavior and depictions of it. As Nanna succinctly put it, "Whores are not women: They are whores."⁷³ They were women who borrowed the idioms of traditional Petrarchism developed by male writers and composed themselves as the erotic projections of male fantasies. Writers often described them scandalously adorning themselves with male attire, and Venetian legislation and literature illustrated this practice as well.⁷⁴ Most importantly, they were women who needed masculine virtues to survive, especially verbal expertise. Unlike other women whose honor was more regularly defined by silence and chastity, courtesans, like men, needed eloquence for their livelihood and survival and used their mastery

⁷¹ See Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue*, 18, and Grendler, *Critics of the Italian World*, 7.

⁷² Aretino's *Ragionamenti* became the prototype for seventeenth-century pornographic writing, both in Italy and France. See Paula Findlen, "Humanism, Politics, and Pornography."

⁷³ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 135.

⁷⁴ "Hanno trovato questo novo et non più usato di vestirsi con habiti de homo . . . sia proibito alle meretrici et cortigiane sopradette l'andar per la città vagando in barca vestite da homo," ASV, *Consiglio di Dieci*, Comuni, Registro 33, 1577–78, fo. 167v, 14 July 1578. See also Aretino, *Letters*, 249; Alessandro Fabri, *Diversarum nationum ornatus* (Padua, 1593), 7–9; Cesare Vecellio, *Habiti antichi e moderni* (Venice, 1598), 114.

of words to create their public personas. The figure of the courtesan especially disrupts the categories of masculine and feminine speech in the writings of Aretino. Aretino places vulgar, aggressive language into the mouths of courtesans: a deeply unfeminine and transgressive subversion of typical structures of gender and speech as defined by the likes of prescriptive moralists. As Bette Talvacchia has pointed out, especially in his *Sonetti lussuriosi*, he allows women "to indulge in vulgar speech, to state their sexual desires, and to command their partners in sexual performance, all of which is transgressive for a female voice."⁷⁵ Aretino blurs the boundaries of masculine and feminine by narrating an erotic story through women's voices, by empowering a female voice and then endowing it with a content that conveys masculine desire. All this is to say that representations of the unstable nature of courtesans' speech and their sexually ambiguous nature granted them a particular voice in Venetian culture and Venetian political culture more specifically. Courtesans could speak more, and more frankly, than other Venetian women: a skill that, as we shall see, worked to enable and empower their roles as entrepreneurs and diplomats in Venetian political culture.⁷⁶

In addition to the poligrafi, travelers regularly expressed their fascination with courtesans and publicized them so that Venetian courtesans enjoyed wide fame in other Italian cities and abroad. Thomas Coryat remarked that "the name of a cortezan of Venice is famous over all Christendome." One of the most discussed and debated documents regarding courtesans in sixteenth-century Venice, *La tariffa delle puttane di Venegia* (1535), is a dialogue attributed to both Aretino and Lorenzo Venier in which a Venetian gentleman describes the city's women to a foreigner who comes specifically to visit its courtesans. The visitor boasts, "For Venice, I left my patria, and I do not regret it, because [now] I never have a famine for fornication." In one of his *novelle*, the Milanese writer Matteo Bandello similarly recounts the way that courtesans lured foreigners to Venice, and according to a letter

⁷⁵ Bette Talvacchia, *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 96–99.

⁷⁶ "Their membership in the so-called third sex gave them a privileged view of the practices of others and, thus, empowered them to speak, quite literally to 'authorize' a portrait of society," Findlen, "Humanism, Politics and Pornography," 107.

reprinted in Sanudo's chronicle, the French ambassador announced to other travelers at the dinner table in 1531 that in Venice, one can find "perfect merchandise," naming Cornelia Griffo, Julia Lombardo, Biancha Saraton, Elena Ballerina, and other Venetian courtesans.⁷⁷

The fact that so many foreigners came to Venice to find courtesans is not surprising; much scholarship, including that of Margaret Rosenthal, has noted this to be the case. What is more remarkable, however, is the degree to which various writers, travelers, and observers of Venice claimed to want to come to Venice for the *specific experience* of courtesans' conversation. For instance, in one of his *novelle*, Celio Malespini described two gentlemen who went to Venice expressly "to enjoy some of the beautiful and pleasing conversation of the graceful young girls that exist in such large numbers."⁷⁸ Montaigne intriguingly remarked that rather than be shocked by their wanton nature, he was more taken aback by the efficient organization of courtesans who charged a standard sum for the "whole deal" or a different fee for conversation alone, suggesting that this explicit service was so regularly sought out that courtesans distinguished its charges in their accounting practices.⁷⁹ In fact, one of the most consistent tropes in sixteenth-century literature about courtesans is the idea that courtesans talked people, including their numerous foreign clients, out of their money. The *Tariffa delle puttane* and the *Ragionamento del Zoppino* both claim that courtesans emptied the purses of their clients with their verbal dexterity and seductive speech. Maffio Venier described Franco as sweetly talking the money out of the bag of Henry III.⁸⁰ Although courtesans' income was not taxed monthly

⁷⁷ Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities*, vol. 1, 401; "Per Venegia io lasciai la patria mia. E no men pento, purché qualche volta non havessi di foter carestia," *La tariffa delle puttane di Venegia*, reprinted in Barzaghi, *Donne o cortegiane*, 169; Bandello, *La terza parte de le novelle*, 152; Sanudo, *I diarii*, vol. 54, 421, 6 March 1531, letter of Francesco Mazzardo.

⁷⁸ "Per godere della bella e soave conversazione delle leggiadre giovanette che vi sono in copia grandissima," Celio Malespini, *Ducento novelle* (Venice, 1609), vol. 1:4, 19r. The poligrafo Ortensio Lando, when thinking about leaving Venice in the imaginary voyage recounted in his *Commentario*, lamented the idea of missing "the sweet conversation of the virtuous Giulia Ferreta and Francesca Ruvisa," Ortensio Lando, *Commentario delle piu notabili, et e prenesi istremo piacere* (Venice, 1550), 38v.

⁷⁹ Montaigne, *Journal de voyage en Italie*, 72.

⁸⁰ *La tariffa*, reprinted in Barzaghi, *Donne o cortigiane*, 184-85; *Ragionamento del Zoppino*, 18-19; Maffio Venier, "Daspuò che son entrà in pensier sì vario," in Milani, *Contro le puttane*, 65.

as it was in Florence, the Venetian republic did impose a tax on courtesans in 1514 that benefited the *Arsenale* and its harbor, from which it received "a great quantity of money."⁸¹ Courtesans were generally prosecuted less often in Venice than in Rome and Florence, and Thomas Coryat remarked that one of the reasons that the Venetian state tolerated the presence of so many courtesans was "the revenues which they pay unto the Senate for their tolleration, doe maintaine a dozen of their galleys, (as many reported unto me in Venice) and so save them a great charge."⁸² An elite caste of both Venetian men and foreigners involved in politics, trade, or industry such as the printing industry had the financial capabilities to maintain courtesans and in doing so, "fill[ed] the coffers of the Republic."⁸³

Courtesans clearly commercialized language: a business that was both culturally associated with the city and contributed significantly to its economy. This is especially evident in the way that writers exploited courtesans and their eloquence as a tourist attraction, and more indirectly, in the textual sales of the poligrafi, who successfully sold works often based on or related to the language of courtesans. In short, like shipbuilding or glass-blowing, the sale of sex and more importantly, conversation, came to be closely associated with the lagoon city and defined it in the minds of both locals and foreigners as a mark of Venetian culture. Courtesans provided Venice with several cultural services; for instance, it was normal that patrician men around the ages of 14–15 would begin to visit courtesans for early sexual experiences, and courtesans served

⁸¹ See L. Menetto and G. Zennaro, *Storia del malcostume nei secoli XVI e XVII* (Abano Terme: Piovan Editore, 1987), 17.

⁸² Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities*, vol. 1, 403. See also Jones, "City Women and Their Audiences," 303. In 1514, Marin Sanudo also recorded the taxes collected from Venetian prostitutes and courtesans in his diaries, stating that they helped pay for the construction of the Arsenal. See Graf, "Una cortigiana fra mille," 288–89. Graf cites no page or column number in Sanudo, and I have been unable to find this reference. Unfortunately, because of the stigma attached to the sale of sex and a lack of data demonstrating how much courtesans earned and how much they may have contributed to the fiscal economy, we can speculate only on the symbolic significance of such taxation.

⁸³ Lynn Lawner, "Gaspara Stampa and the Rhetoric of Submission," in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Craig Hugh Smyth*, ed. Andrew Morrogh, Fiorella Superbi Gioffredi, Piero Morselli and Eve Borsook, vol. 1 (Florence: Giunti Barbèra, 1985), 347. See also Georgina Masson, *Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), 10–11, and note 6 in this chapter, on the courtesan as a commercial asset.

to drive men away from the vices of sodomy and homosexuality.⁸⁴ In addition – recalling the fact that Giovanni Della Casa described conversation as fundamentally resembling a commercial transaction – courtesans provided a great commercial asset based in part on the marketing of their conversation and language. This was especially the case because ordinary, “respectable” Venetian women could not have undertaken the commercialization of language. In an age that represented the expansion of markets and early capitalism in both Europe and the world at large – an age that promoted the development of individualism through taste and purchasing power as many historians have argued – Venice was among the premier cities whose economy was driven by consumption.⁸⁵ As Evelyn Welch has stated, it “was exceptional in its commercial sophistication and specialisation,” and despite potential moral injunctions against courtesans, Venice as a capitalist city made a place for courtesans as entrepreneurs – a place for them to sell their bodies and their words.⁸⁶ Courtesans may have been despised for their sexual nature, but were empowered by the fact that they were economic agents: a figure that, again like the Jews, the Venetian state often sought to promote for its own benefit.

More than any other single example, the life and writing of Veronica Franco (1546–91) illuminates the lure of the courtesan’s conversation to foreign visitors: a lure which benefited not only the Venetian economy, as we have seen, but also Venetian diplomacy. At the height of her career, Franco attended the well-known literary salon of Domenico Venier, and published her volume of *Terze rime* in 1575 and a collection of 50 letters in 1580. Famous for her beauty, wit, and sexual prowess, Franco became one of the most celebrated courtesans in the Renaissance world; her life has been well studied and she needs little introduction. Her use of spoken

⁸⁴ Ruggiero, “Who’s Afraid of Giuliana Napolitana?” 286.

⁸⁵ On consumption in early modern European historiography, see N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), and D. Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600–1800* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On Italy in particular, see R. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art*, and Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: Doubleday, 1996). Some have argued by contrast that consumption was not as significant a force in the early modern world as we might think. See L. Martines, “The Renaissance and the Birth of Consumer Society,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998): 193–203.

⁸⁶ Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*, 8–9, 191.

language, however, merits a second glance, and one episode from her career in particular sheds additional light on the relationship between courtesans, speech, sexuality, and the state: her famous meeting with Henry III, the heir to the throne of France.

The 23-year-old Henry III of Valois, traveling back from Poland to claim his crown as the king of France in the summer of 1574, sent a letter to the *signoria* of Venice requesting permission to visit the city he had heard so much about.⁸⁷ His eight-day stay in Venice prompted the state to produce the most spectacular series of celebrations that the city had perhaps ever put on for a visitor. Rowed into the city on a galley of 400 men, Henry was escorted under a triumphal arch built by Palladio and painted by Tintoretto and Veronese. He was treated to fireworks, processions, boat races, musical and theatrical productions, and a banquet for 3,000 people in the Hall of the Great Council. Venetian dignitaries escorted him on a visit to the aging Titian's studio, and perhaps most incredibly, to a breakfast composed entirely – food, goblets, tableware, and all – of sugar. Henry toured the marvels of Venice, including its churches, palaces, shipyards, and villas on the mainland. Yet, perhaps the height of his sojourn, measured by his own enthusiasm, was his visit to Veronica Franco, who entertained him for an evening at her house. Their meeting was secret, however, he was most likely guided there by patrician officials, including perhaps Marco Venier or Andrea Tron or both. Franco made the secret public by circulating a letter and two sonnets in his honor, as well as by giving him a portrait of herself in enamel upon his departure. Though Henry III's visit to Franco was unofficial, it remains striking that patrician representatives of the Venetian state would have encouraged a courtesan to entertain a powerful visiting monarch. The courtesan Angela Zaffetta – the same courtesan whose conversational skills were deeply appreciated and admired by Pietro Aretino – similarly entertained Ippolito dei Medici when he was the Spanish ambassador's guest in Venice in 1530. Why were courtesans brought out to participate in stately politics? Why was it not enough for Henry III or Ippolito dei Medici to dance and speak with Venetian patrician women – the 200

⁸⁷ For a more complete account of Franco's visit with Henry III and Henry III's triumphal visit to Venice in 1574, see P. Nollac and A. Solerti, *Il viaggio in Italia di Enrico III, re di Francia* (Turin, 1890); Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 102–11.

or so noble women who were in fact specifically trotted out to meet Henry III at the celebratory ball in his honor?

One reason Franco represented a highlight of Henry's visit had likely to do with sexual pleasure. But another explanation links perhaps in the nature of diplomacy in the early modern world. Margaret Rosenthal has suggested that courtesans functioned as "a cultural code or cipher through which Venice, the secular city, publicized itself in the sixteenth century."⁸⁸ Rosenthal demonstrates how Franco accomplished a degree of civic patriotism through her written texts, especially her sonnets and letters, but how did courtesans also serve the city with their talk? As both Castiglione and Guazzo pointed out, court society tended to offer women a position as arbiters in taste and courtly politics – a voice that was traditionally denied to republican women. These writers hardly offered an accurate guide to reality because, as we have seen, Castiglione gave women little voice in his text. Nevertheless, women's personalities, like that of Isabella D'Este in Ferrara, often appeared to shape life at their courts more so than women in republics, and courtly settings put women in positions of power as conversationalists.⁸⁹ Courts were famously sites of spectacle and display and were well versed in the arts of wooing visiting dignitaries with the feminine splendors of court society – clothing, dancing, dining, courtly games, music, and talk.⁹⁰ Early modern courtly diplomacy functioned not unlike a marital wooing process. Marriage and diplomacy were in fact inherently linked in the courts of early modern Italy and Europe, as courts married their princes and duchesses off to one another in large part as a means of establishing political alliances.

The Venetian republic, by contrast, did not marry its patrician women off to mainland courts, and Venetian social life did not revolve around a central court in which high-ranking women participated. With perhaps the great exception of Caterina Corner who was married to the King of Cyprus in 1468 so that Venice might gain control over the island, the Venetian state did not employ women and marriage for the purposes of diplomacy. Venetian women were contained in the city and according to many writers, either stuck in nunneries or physically enclosed in their

⁸⁸ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 3. See also 64, 73.

⁸⁹ See Larner, "Europe of the Courts," 669.

⁹⁰ See Stephen Kolsky, "Graceful Performances: The Social and Political Context of Music and Dance in the *Cortegiano*," *Italian Studies* 53 (1998): 1–19.

homes before marrying back into the Venetian patriciate to perpetuate the ruling class. The more staid republic of Venice, which was famous for wearing black, for enacting sumptuary laws restricting the display of luxury and magnificence, and for keeping its women behind closed doors, was not in the regular habit of pulling out all the stops for royal visits or of allowing its women to woo visiting dignitaries. But Venice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was one of the lone republics in an increasingly courtly and absolutist environment; it desperately needed to court the king of France to counter the political ambitions of Phillip II of Spain in an age of dramatic Hapsburg advances on the Italian peninsula. Though it could try to do so in part through pure spectacle and its own patrician women as it did in the official festivities it held for Henry III, at least some Venetian nobles recognized that the "courtly" conversation and talents of its most renowned courtesan might also prove politically useful as a bridge between republican Venice and this visiting monarch.

It was this liminal position of Venetian courtesans – who were good conversationalists like Castiglione's courtly lady and wore fashionable, sumptuous, clothing but were outside the rigid honor code that restricted Venetian noble women's physical and verbal presentation – that enabled them to function as a liason in political interactions between the republic and its courtly visitors. In the Roman context, in a discussion of "The Power of Speech in Love," Pierre de Brantôme, a sixteenth-century traveler and writer, commented that Roman courtesans "make great mock of the gentlewomen of the same city, which are not trained in witty speech like themselves." According to Brantôme, Roman ladies copulated "like bitches, but are dumb of mouth like sticks and stones." These wives were "without soul, wit, or conversation," and therefore held no more attraction than a marble statue, illuminating perhaps a need for conversation filled by the courtesan, who replaced courtly wives on the Venetian social scene.⁹¹ In Venice, Thomas Coryat similarly described the difference between wives and courtesans when he tried to explain the abundance of Venetian courtesans by remarking that Venetian nobles "coope up their wives alwaies within the walles of their houses for feare of these inconveniences. . . . So that you shall very seldome see a Venetian

⁹¹ Pierre de Brantôme, *Lives of Fair and Gallant Ladies* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1933), 166.

gentleman's wife but either at the solemnization of a great marriage, or at the christening of a Jew, or late in the evening rowing in a gondola."⁹² There is considerable debate regarding the numbers of women who regularly walked on the streets. As we have seen, many scholars now argue that Venetian public spaces were regularly inhabited by a wide variety of women.⁹³ Nevertheless, statements like Coryat's and Brantôme's suggest that Venice's own republican women could never be such good socialites and conversationalists – a necessary skill in the ambassadorial wooing process – as their more courtly counterpart, the *donna di palazzo* or courtesan.⁹⁴ As Rosenthal and Ruggiero have both noted, the Venetian courtesan's profession should not be understood as limited to her sexual activity or her body; her work was also "socially and intellectually defined."⁹⁵ Here, I would add that as a result of their eloquence, courtesans' work was also politically defined; it played a role in the political culture of the lagoon city, especially when it served diplomatic ends.

We will never know the private words exchanged between Franco and Henry III, and can never hear the exact language of what might have been the studied or sexualized speech of Franco or any other courtesan in her private quarters. Despite the centrality of conversation to courtesans' livelihood, any study of courtesans' speech can, at best, work only from an essential absence of evidence and circle around an empty, unknowable center. For this reason, as we have noted, much of this discussion has been based on constructions or descriptions of courtesans' language, typically by male writers. What can we glean, however, from written examples that come as close to speech as possible? Although such discussion springs from the printed page and not from examples of spontaneous, spoken language, the textual forms Franco employed lend themselves, at least to some degree, to scrutiny as a spoken voice. Many scholars have demonstrated the often fine lines that existed between the oral and the written and have argued for the myriad ways in which printed and spoken language have directly influenced one another.⁹⁶ The form of the *capitolo*

⁹² Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities*, vol. 1, 403.

⁹³ On this debate, see Chapter 4, n. 41.

⁹⁴ Andrea Calmo also alluded to the appeal of courtesans to ambassadors. See Calmo, *Le lettere*, 364.

⁹⁵ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 4; Ruggiero, "Who's Afraid of Giuliana Napolitana?" 282.

⁹⁶ See Chapter 1, n. 4.

that Franco used showcased poetic debate in which poets answer one another in a sparring dialogue. It represented a type of dramatization of speech in a conversational manner, and both Ann Rosalind Jones and Margaret Rosenthal agree that Franco's letters also evoked a decidedly conversational tone.⁹⁷ Franco herself noted the conflation and overlap of speaking and writing, as she referred to the parallel expressions or "appeals through my voice or in ink."⁹⁸

Franco's letters and *capitoli in terza rima* reveal and even showcase her spoken, verbal dexterity. Many of her letters and poems allude to "pleasant" and "sweet" conversations with various men, and we can imagine that many other courtesans similarly shared this type of talk with their lovers and clients. One letter specifically stated that one of the main talents it took to succeed as a courtesan was "grace and wit in conversation."⁹⁹ Other letters refer to instances in which Franco was insulted, and in her famous response to such insults, Franco asserted that if language was a weapon, women were no less agile than men in launching verbal attacks.

The sword that strikes and stabs in your hand – the common language spoken in Venice – if that's what you want to use, then so do I: and if you want to enter into Tuscan, I leave you the choice of high or comic strain, for one's as easy and clear for me as the other. . . . Whichever of these you wish to use, as you do elsewhere, to speed on your arrows in a contest of insults exchanged between us, choose the language that you prefer, for I am equally happy with them all, because I have learned them for exactly this purpose. (167)

In response to a lover who has offended her, she retorted that "the deceiving tongue that lies to do me harm I will tear out by its root, after it's been bitten against the palate with repentant teeth" (133). In her writing, Franco displayed her rhetorical skill in contests with men, as her confident voice forcefully asserted itself in her written words. In addition to demonstrating her abilities as a verbal combatant, Franco further underlined her expertise in oratory by arguing that she, unlike her male

⁹⁷ Jones and Rosenthal, "Introduction: The Honored Courtesan," 7; Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 123, 133.

⁹⁸ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 100–101 (*Capitolo* 8, line 54).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39 (Letter 22). See also 32 (Letter 13), 42 (Letter 37), 152–53 (*Capitolo* 15, line 95).

counterparts, also understood the strategic value of verbal restraint and silence. Discussing verbal dueling, she stated that:

An inexcusable wrong is committed by a man who defames a woman in her absence, even if what he says is obviously true. . . . And one advantage my opponent used was to spread rumors while I was away, false tales untouched and unmixed with truth. And yet for all this I did not rise in anger but rather rejoiced when, by keeping silent, my truth prevailed over what he had said. . . . This is what I did, for most unfairly defamed and blamed by a cowardly man, I consoled myself with higher thoughts. (235–37)

Franco argued, as comportment writers had long suggested, that effective speech involved not only verbal assertiveness but responsiveness and a tactical knowledge of when gains in reputation and status could be made through simple silence and verbal control. And yet, Franco's eroticism and eloquence set her apart from the chaste, silent women of the Venetian patriciate and the idealized woman described by prescriptive writers.

In her speech, writing, and public presentation, Franco occupied a political position – one that Venetian patrician women never did – as the state's feminine voice, going so far as to state that she defended and spoke "for all women."¹⁰⁰ As the republic showed its allegiance to the French leader Henry III by handing him the more staid, republican gift of "the keys of the city" by permitting him to participate in civic affairs (for instance, by allowing him to attend a voting session of the Great Council), some of its representatives offered up Veronica Franco to extend to Henry III the more courtly, feminine gifts of sex and conversation that its patrician women were not in a position to offer. In other words, courtesans replaced wives as the conversational, feminine, representatives on the social scene, and through her own literary self-fashioning, Franco drew on "a pool of positive associations with the feminized city-state and [raised] her status as a courtesan by demonstrating her participation in a patriotic discourse to which distinguished male writers from Petrarch and Aretino to Domenico Venier had contributed."¹⁰¹ Though Veronica Franco and Angela Zaffetta represent only two cases of courtesans wooing foreign dignitaries and Franco's moment with Henry III was but a fleeting

¹⁰⁰ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 164–5 (*Capitolo* 16, line 79).

¹⁰¹ Jones and Rosenthal, "Introduction: The Honored Courtesan," 11.

one, these examples nevertheless point to a Venetian need to create patterns of verbal exchange and political sociability not based on kin, lineage, or republican political organization. Through these meetings, courtesans profited by drawing attention to themselves and elevating their social status; the state profited by forging a diplomatic link with other European states.

Venetians formed myriad connections between speech, gender, and political culture in the ways in which they discussed, disciplined, and promoted courtesans and their language. Through punitive laws and magistracies, tourists and travelers, the poligrafi, the sale of conversation, and through the occasional diplomatic voices of its courtesans, various aspects of Venetian society both criticized and exalted the words of these women. For this reason, the role of courtesans' language in political culture ultimately cannot be characterized in any single manner. As with the language of gossip, Venetians reacted in a variety of ways to the language of courtesans. It was at times appreciated and sought out, and at other times condemned and persecuted. In the interstices of such tensions, however, it is clear that courtesans' verbal prowess at times benefited the civic arena, economically, culturally, and politically.

In this way, though courtesans were consistently labeled as sorceresses and Sirens whose seductive language threatened male identity, courtesans would perhaps more correctly be understood as Odyssean. Odysseus, like courtesans, commercialized language by trading songs as commodities, turning a profit as he crossed the Mediterranean by offering his poems and stories in exchange for riches and supplies.¹⁰² The business of courtesanry and Venetian political culture might seem unlikely bedfellows, but courtesans' language clearly made positive contributions to the Venetian economy and Venetian civic identity as courtesans functioned for both locals and foreigners as a symbol through which Venice publicized itself. The fact that courtesans provided a model for another female voice poised to emerge in Venice in the seventeenth century—the opera singer—underlies this idea of the verbal economy, or the exchange of spoken or

¹⁰² There are many examples of the exchange of words for goods or profit in the *Odyssey*. For instance, In Book 11:339–53, Odysseus agrees to tell the court of Alcinoous the story of his journey in exchange for more loot to take home; in book 14:507–14, Odysseus receives clothing from the swineherd Eumaios in exchange for the telling of his “blameless fable.”

sung words for money.¹⁰³ For the Homeric hero, poetic performance was not just a part of aristocratic ritual or gift exchange but represented a commercial transaction, much as it did for Venetian courtesans whose linguistic expertise was the root of both their disparagement and their promotion as entrepreneurs who traded on their words.

¹⁰³ Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 14–15.

Conclusion

In a 1607 manuscript attacking Venice in the name of the pope and the Jesuits, a Catholic writer named Antonio Persio listed every offense that the republic of Venice had ever committed against the papacy or the church, devoting two chapters to the city's sins. His discussion of Venetian lasciviousness included a damning description of the Venetian theater. "At the time I lived in Venice," Persio recounted,

comedies were introduced in such a way that an expensive building like an amphitheater was constructed where almost all the nobility gathered, and there were nobles who begged the comedians to say the worst and dirtiest things they knew how to say, and these nobles brought their wives and children to this corruption. . . . Noble women went with their shoulders and chest bared to the stomach, showing their breasts.¹

The Jesuits harshly condemned such a display of sex and impropriety. For Persio, dirty words and physical exposure almost seemed equivalent to incest and rape. At the same time, however, Persio described how nobles hungered for the delights of foul language and actively sought out its

¹ "Al tempo ch'io quivj dimoravo v'erano introdotte le Comedie in modo, che per esse era stato fato un'edificio dj gran spesa aguisa d'un anfiteatro ove si riduceva quasi tutta la nobilta, et v'erano nobili che pregavano li Comedianj che dicessero le piu grasse per non dire piu sporche cose che mai sapessero, et essi ci menavano poj le mogli et le figliuole alla quale corruttele . . . le nobile Venetiane andar con le spalle e con il peto igude sino all'ombelico mostran le mamelle," Antonio Persio, *Trattato de'portamenti della repubblica di Venetia verso la Santa Chiesa*, Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli, MS XI E. 40, cc. 134, (Naples, 1607), 38 r-v, cited in *Inventari dei manoscritti delle biblioteche d'Italia*, 131, Marciana mss. italiani, Classe 7 (nn.1-500), ed. Pietro Zorzanello and Giulio Zorzanello (Florence: Olschki, 1956), 104. Little or nothing is known about the life of Antonio Persio. I thank E. J. Johnson for pointing out this source.