Back Talk: Two Prostitutes’ Voices from Rome c. 1600

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Italian judicial archives like those of the Governor’s criminal tribunal in early modern Rome offer precious access to voices that we otherwise could never hear. In October 1602 and May 1603, for example, this court opened separate prosecutions against two police captains. One faced charges of murder and the other of incest. In these trials, two different prostitutes who had lived as concubines of the policemen bore witness. Both cases also included supplementary documents composed in the sex workers’ voices. These testimonies and additional texts all occupy in-between positions on a spectrum between oral and written domains of expression. Sharing an intermediate textual zone that has attracted increasing scholarly attention in early modern cultural studies, these several sorts of non-literary sources invite a comparative analysis and double modes of reading. On the one hand, they are “documents” to be read as (fairly) straightforward descriptions of the world; on the other, they are constructed texts conceived strategically to represent their speakers and negotiate more complex meanings. Through an interpretation that engages both modes, we hear the nuanced voices of two women of Rome, Amabilia Antognetti and Antonia Legnoverde. Not only do they speak, but they tell, assert, complain, plead, argue, and correct. The archival serendipity that yields two trials so ripe for comparison enriches our understanding of the two prostitutes’ shared situation. While each voice is distinct, they have common agendas. As prostitutes, they talk back against the liabilities of their transgressive and vulnerable positions. At the same time, each voice in its own way resists marginalization. Through public speech, both claim
legitimacy and seek, within the bounds of law and convention, a greater measure of respect and security.

“Chaste, silent, and obedient” runs the mantra of female virtues intoned in a welter of Renaissance prescriptive sources. The repressive weight of these constraining injunctions—clear and accessible to scholars in, for example, published conduct books, sermons, and law treatises—has invited some to represent the generic early modern woman as so utterly subordinate as to lack all agency or voice. While these precepts did tram-mel their deeds and words, women’s chastity, obedience, and silence were far from total. As a variety of other literary and archival sources disclose, real life was much more complicated. The dichotomous categories suggested by didactic works—good/bad, pure/ruined, docile/intemperate, quiet/outspoken—are inadequate to describe and explain the great range of female activity and expression. To be sure, space for women’s agency had to be negotiated. And in some respects constraints on their action intensified with the “progress” of history; in government, for example, the consolidation of early modern public institutions brought some potential benefits with more effective social services and security, but also in many settings sharpened the exclusion of women from the exercise of formal power. In the domain of women’s words, however, a flourishing feminist scholarship shows us not silence but rather a proliferation of voices.

As transgressive women—neither chaste, nor obedient, nor silent—courtesans have a special place in evolving discourses by early modern women. Since courtesans lived by exploiting their sexuality and, some few also, their verbal dexterity, cultural norms positioned them as exceptional women or, indeed, as the paradoxically admirable antithesis of the ideal-ized maid or matron. Although a few Italian courtesans broke silence with music, it is mostly the written words of a handful of others that have drawn scholarly attention over the years. When first encountered by a modern reader, these women’s texts may appear as a fitting and defiant resistance against norms that oppressed the virtuous. The deeper story of courtesan speech is less simply oppositional. Two of the most pungently transgres-sive voices are those imagined and ventriloquized in dialogue form by men, Francisco Delicado’s Lozana Andaluza and Pietro Aretino’s Nanna. With these lively, outspoken characters, whose speech and manners sub-
verted courtly ideals, their creators not only titillate and entertain, but also ironically mock elements of supposedly respectable Roman society before the Sack of 1527. The male-constructed voices of these imaginary characters contrast tellingly with those of real courtesan authors who had to navigate the shoals of moral and economic marginality. We know most of these women as writers of letters, with a few venturing also, like Veronica Franco, into poetry or, like Tullia d’Aragona, into philosophical dialogue. Emerging from recent feminist analysis of these texts by scholars of history and literature are a range of distinct personalities and tones of voice. These women may be strikingly assertive, persistent, or subtle as they write their way forward from positions of ambiguous vulnerability. At the same time, all share a propensity not to defiance and unconventionality, but rather to the opposite. In pursuit of security and legitimation in one form or another, they seek to master and deploy the reputation-building resources of high literary culture. Thus, seeking social security, Camilla Pisana, in her early sixteenth-century letters, casts herself in the role of attentive and accommodating surrogate wife. In a philosophical context, Tullia d’Aragona’s *On the Infinity of Love* of the late 1530s shifts the Neoplatonic model so that not just two men, but a woman and a man, by implication a courtesan and her lover, can come together in an elevated union of bodily and intellectual friendship. And, late in the century, in an unusually rich literary production that campaigned with dogged elegance for reputation, Veronica Franco, among other tactics, mantled herself with Venetian civic virtue. As these examples suggest, the characteristic feature of courtesan writers’ strategies was not outspoken violation of rhetorical and cultural norms, but rather the carefully artful exploitation of those very conventions and values. In a less exalted register of self-expression, I will argue that the prostitutes, Amabilia and Antonia, did something similar.

Before turning to these two women, I must address a vexed general problem of terminology. Even in the fairly open climate of twenty-first-century scholarship it is hard to find the right words to talk about sexually irregular and sexually mercenary women of the European past. Lover, mistress, concubine, kept woman, courtesan, prostitute, sex worker, whore: each of these terms designates a relationship between a woman and a man where social, emotional, sexual, and economic exchanges mix in different
combinations with different moral loads. These roles, in both their historical and modern forms, involve subtle distinctions that matter to us as students of the past. Consider the different resonances we attach to the following situations: a prostitute takes money impersonally for sexual service; a courtesan socializes with clients; a single woman requests a loan from a man she sleeps with occasionally; a woman lets a man pay the rent on an apartment where he visits her; a woman accepts jewellery from her married lover; a bride receives wedding gifts and a wife household support; a common-law sexual partner shares the bills. Such nuances also mattered to early modern people, but not necessarily in the same ways that they do to us. To render the past’s social relationships clearly, we must attend to unexamined resonances in our modern terms. Furthermore, our categories and expressions do not graft neatly onto the language or realities of early modern lives. For example, concerning the two women I discuss here, many of the archival sources refer to them as *curialis* or *cortegiana*, Latin and Italian words cognate with the English “courtesan.” And several historians adopt this more ingratiating label for Venetian or Roman women not unlike Amabilia and Antonia. I have, however, chosen “prostitute,” although this term, while formal, carries modern associations that risk degrading my subjects, whom I respect, below the usual threshold of scholarly comfort. To call them “courtesans,” however, enters a terrain of uncertain definitions and unwarranted claims.

Modern scholarship on Renaissance and early modern Europe often uses “courtesan” to assign cultural privilege to a sexually irregular woman, historically real or merely represented. In this labeling practice, cultural work, either her own or that of the person who portrays her, elevates the subject. Scholars designate as “courtesans” or “honest courtesans” women, like Tullia d’Aragona and Veronica Franco, who lived unchaste lives and yet claimed public prominence based on a concatenation of wealth, beauty, taste, manners, and, most distinctively, good education and artistic talent. This cultural privilege also tends, in such women’s careers, to obscure the sexual and any taint of the mercenary. Although illicit eroticism contributes to the allure of these highly cultivated women, questions about the precise nature of their sexual, social, and economic relationships with men are seldom asked and even less often answered. Parallel debates have
ruffled art history over whether eroticized female portraits always represent women of ill repute. But there, too, the master painter’s hand makes the subject a “courtesan” and not a prostitute. If scholars of literature and art call such sexually ambiguous, culturally notable women “courtesans,” should we use this term as well for women lacking that privilege?

Historians of early modern Italian society use “courtesan” somewhat differently to describe women who were clearly sex workers, but enjoyed some sort of superior status in the trade. Compared to the scorned “common” prostitute, these women likely boasted better graces, physical and social, that attracted more discerning and affluent clients. Consequently, at least for a while, they earned more and lived more comfortably. Yet nearly all lacked the cultural finesse that most often garners scholars’ interest. At least in Rome, boundaries between such upscale sex workers and the less fortunate we dub “prostitutes” were culturally and socially murky. While, in Venice, literally porno-graphic catalogues suggested a distinct hierarchy of ranks, the lexicon of daily life did not offer so clear an order. The same Roman sex worker at a given moment of her career could be described by different speakers and for different purposes by the more honorific cortegiana or the disparaging puttana. Greater success and visibility were recognized, as in the attribution to some of the title Signora. But fluidity of language also reflected fluidity of real life patterns: women moved in and out of the trade. Only some had the assets and stayed long enough to rise to personal prominence; even among those, decline likely caught up with them at some time. A few other shadowy women, perhaps of better breeding, who sometimes called themselves donna di partito or retirata, discreetly obliged male visitors. With a variety of arrangements into which many women slipped from time to time, it is difficult to set criteria for who was, or was not, a courtesan.

For several reasons, then, I choose to call Amabilia and Antonia not courtesans, but, generically, prostitutes. For livelihood, both traded sex—and other services—to multiple men to whom they were not married. Neither was a streetwalker; both practiced the common Roman form of prostitution where women entertained men, socially as well as sexually, in their own apartments. Each had traits that set them above many of their sex working peers. Amabilia could claim rank based on social recognition
and longevity; the more briefly visible, but literate Antonia was evidently her better in education. However, to dub these women “courtesans” based on these superiorities still begs the question of unclear criteria. With the unrolling of the Catholic Reformation, although Rome still had a hefty count of prostitutes, it no longer offered the heady celebrity enjoyed by Fiammetta, Tullia d’Aragona, or Isabella de Luna in the first half of the sixteenth century.19 If historians call these women courtesans, though some lacked any cultural distinction, for the end of the century the term has to mean something different. But what exactly? For my present purposes, there is also the matter of the archival sources through which we know and hear Amabilia and Antonia. While I see these sources as not mere “documents,” but also strategic self-representations, they are not the culturally privileged literary productions of Tullia d’Aragona or Veronica Franco. It seems both modest and more revealing to read them as “prostitute” texts, sharing some positional concerns with the courtesan writers, but different in mode.

The two prostitutes’ voices come to us with unusual fullness and complexity at a particular historical moment and in a particular institutional matrix. Through the sixteenth century, the popes, as local princes keen to improve physical security in their domains, oversaw the consolidation of governance and judicial discipline.20 An array of tribunals, both civil and criminal, were each served by a police captain (bargello) and a band of deputies who served writs and summonses, made arrests, and, in some cases, patrolled city or countryside. Although a measure of professional ethos was slowly emerging, the police often looked little different from the bravoes they were set to control.21 Feared and loathed, the cops and their leaders often abused their power, sometimes to feed their sexual appetites. At some moments, as in the two cases examined here, the call of public order propelled the criminal judges to prosecute the police themselves.

The two trials highlight the tangled relationships among the courts, the prostitutes, and the police. Sex workers and the criminal tribunals had considerable mutual familiarity. Not surprisingly, prostitutes faced routine judicial correction. More surprisingly, the Governor’s court, eager to expand its clout, readily took on cases brought by women to fend off or punish those who abused them.22 As the police lumbered around the city,
enforcing legal writs and arresting the disorderly, prostitutes were easy victims for harassment and exploitation. At the same time, the two disparaged professions often struck up alliances in which the women traded sex, companionship, and information for protection and money. It was not unusual that both the accused police captains kept their wives in their hometowns, while they lodged live-in girlfriends in their Roman households, and saw still other women on the side. These uneasy connections made prostitutes useful witnesses as the government set out to discipline the cops. The captains’ trials gave two women unusually prominent platforms from which to speak.

The workings of justice provided not only the occasion for these prostitutes’ speech, but also molded its forms and language. Here I first consider the general dynamics of speaking to and with the courts; later, I will take up the supplementary written documents through which the two women addressed the judges. According to legal protocol, court notaries recorded verbatim and in extenso the testimonies of complainants, defendants, and witnesses. Therefore, we can read a full and quite accurate transcript of words spoken, stories told, and explanations given by many ordinary men and women, including the illiterate. Though made under oath, judicial statements are often not wholly truthful and seldom fully transparent. Like other expressive genres, testimonies respond to circumstances, formal conventions, and varying practices of rhetoric and narration. Texts from trials are collaborative. Imbalanced power relations shaped the dialogue between witnesses and officials who posed questions, listened, and recorded all. Complainants bringing suits normally had to visit the magistrate’s office. Many witnesses faced further intimidation and discomfort. Those lacking property, patrons, and credible honor were often clapped into prison, where they awaited the investigating judges’ pleasure. Especially at first, they might not know why they were there—need they parry accusations or merely report the deeds of others? Even those who testified at the court’s office or at home had to reckon with their words’ uncertain consequences. When witnesses did speak, it was not in a public courtroom, but rather alone, face-to-face only with the interrogating officials. Testimony was secret. Yet, before the case proceeded to the next level, the defendant received copies of the transcripts with the speak-
ers’ names omitted. So, in the back of the witness’s mind lurked family, friends, and enemies who could be touched for good and ill by what was said. Responses varied according to skill and temperament, but there was always a need to speak strategically. Alongside the daunting setting and the lurking social risks, the legal preoccupations and language of the examiners shaped testimonies. This rhetoric was not necessarily unfamiliar. Those speaking to the courts had sometimes consulted lawyers in advance; many others relied on vernacular legal knowledge that circulated quite widely in this litigious society. Even so, the weighty hand of the law and its officers did not suppress all other domains of cultural practice and expression. Less obvious but still in play were habits and conventions such as those that molded vernacular speech and popular storytelling. In a collaborative dialogue with the magistrates, speakers drew on a many-faceted repertoire of words, ideas, and values to construct distinctive narratives and personae.

Let us turn now from general Roman contexts to the first years of the seventeenth century. In this moment, social and textual comparisons give access to the rarely heard voices of prostitutes Amabilia Antognetti and Antonia Legnoverde. The two had much in common. Both were then the resident lovers of police captains. Both relationships dated back some five years, and each had produced a child. These liaisons, while giving protection and respect, also bred trouble that provoked a crisis. In October 1602, Valerio Armenzano stood accused of arranging the murder of a small-time art broker whom he suspected of pimping for Antonia.24 In the second trial, seven months later in May 1603, the prostitute Amabilia figured not as motive, but as complainant and initiator. She charged Ovidio Marchetto with incest for his sexual relations with her prostitute younger sister, Madalena.25 But there were significant differences, too, in the women’s social resources. Antonia, a fairly recent immigrant, was without family in Rome; when she decided to break away from Armenzano, she had to stand on her own. Amabilia, on the other hand, had a mother and siblings who both needed and provided support. Indeed, Marchetto’s challenge to her family’s solidarity provoked the prostitute’s charges against him.

Likeness and difference in social position contribute to patterns, in some part paradoxical, in the texts that capture the two women’s voices. While socially more prominent and secure, Amabilia’s textual posture is
assertive, but tinged with vulnerability and supplication. Antonia, though socially less advantaged, records striking claims for autonomy. Both prostitutes gave oral testimony to the court, though differently framed. Amabilia, as complainant, helped set the terms of the inquiry in a lengthy, uninterrupted initial statement. Though a prostitute, she called on public officials in the name of law and family values to right a private wrong that she had suffered. At the same time, in a discourse shaded with emotional ambiguity, Amabilia had to steer a narrative path that dodged her own culpabilities and also her sister’s. Similarly, but with amplified rhetoric, in two scribbly composed letters she begs the pope and his officers to expedite the prosecution of her case. Antonia, on the other hand, required only to answer a magistrate’s questions, would seem to have less room to maneuver, not only socially, but also discursively. Yet this prostitute forthrightly insists on voicing her personal independence and intellectual honesty. In early testimony she tells of rejecting her powerful lover, and at later sessions she struggles against repeated official efforts to make her testify falsely. Later, to clear her conscience and set herself right with the law, Antonia volunteers an autograph affidavit to revise her perjured testimony. For each woman, voice in different forms—oral deposition and supplementary written documents—reveals continuities of self-representation with modulations of tone. Despite notable commonalities of situation, Amabilia and Antonia emerge from the texts with quite different voices. Yet, as prostitutes in complex engagement with public authority, both work to construct legitimacy for themselves in discourses of law, family, and truth-telling.

Amabilia, widely known as Pilla and honored by some with the title Signora, was prominent in her profession. She and her sister Madalena, said to be daughters of a deceased merchant named Paolo Antognetti (aka Rossi), were in their early twenties. We can only speculate about their entry into sex work. Their mother, Lucrezia, perhaps had made a pragmatic decision, when widowed sometime in the previous five years, to support herself and young son by marketing the services of her two late-teenaged daughters. If so, she certainly was not the only mother to benefit from this expedient. The sisters each attracted valued regular clients (amici fermi) as well as others more ephemeral. The familial network must have supported their joint success. Amabilia lived all along with mother and brother
in the respectable Via Paolina (also called then, as now, Babbuino). Already in 1602 the location—"Signora Pilla’s corner"—was well enough known to serve as landmark in a trial. Since many prostitutes moved frequently, the family’s at least ten-year stay on the spot was a token of success. Madalena, though she sometimes lived apart, kept close ties with her mother and older sibling. Perhaps because of tensions around the lawsuit, parish records for 1602–03 show her dwelling in a separate apartment not far away in the Corso, another principal thoroughfare. These good addresses implied the money and connections needed to arrange exemptions from the rules banishing prostitutes to the back streets. As a further mark of local recognition, both sisters stood as godmothers, mostly to the babies of other courtesans.

Trouble developed inside the Antognetti family when Captain Marchetto fancied himself as the lover of not one, but of both sisters. In 1600 his publicly known alliance with Pilla had already lasted two years. He kept her in his home, sometimes for months on end, and was raising there the daughter, Apollonia, whom she had borne him. Although this liaison was for neither party exclusive, Ovidio’s deceptive campaign to possess Pilla’s sister was extraordinary. Sending a coach to collect her for a visit to a mysterious Monsignore and masquerading in clerical fur, Marchetto inveigled the younger prostitute into a house full of cops, borrowed for the occasion from another bargello. Upon her arrival, he surprised her with his true identity and with a jolly dinner of capon and macaroni shared with the other policemen. After supper Madalena bowed to his sexual demands. The policeman’s trick launched continuing relationships with both sisters. While sequential sexual liaisons with sisters were considered incest, concurrent ones were an offense even more blatant. Relishing the outrage, the bargello flaunted it. Marcantonio Castelli, a client of Pilla’s, reported a conversation at a midday dinner chez Marchetto. The men were talking about the sister prostitutes and Ovidio declared that Madalena was a better value. Castelli asked how, as Amabilia’s lover, he could say that. The policeman replied, “I know because I have fucked them both and I tell you the distinctly better goods is Madalena and not Pilla.” Although Ovidio afterwards reveled in flagrant braggadocio, he had used subterfuge to bring the younger sister to his will. Besides the moral crime of incest, his appe-
ties also offended family solidarity. While prostitutes regularly competed for clients, gifts, and prestige, they also, despite their rivalries, had to build alliances and rely on one another for support. Family ties were tighter still. Madalena would likely have been wary of challenging her sister’s claims. Hence, Marchetto preferred to hide his identity until the younger sister was under his physical control in a venue out of her jealous sibling’s sight. Amabilia, in turn, betrayed by her lover and her sister, eventually sought revenge.

In her initial complaint and, especially, in the scribal letters prepared later, Pilla’s rhetoric assumed a stance at once of moral outrage and vulnerable pleading. In these texts the courtesan asserted herself against her arrogant and powerful lover, but the liabilities of her gender and the ambiguities of her incomplete detachment from the *bargello* modulated her voice. A woman and a prostitute, she nonetheless turned confidently to Roman “giustizia”—a powerful institutionalized abstraction—for aid. The city judiciary’s ambition for itself and for improved public order encouraged it to take on cases, especially ones that promised to remedy serious, though uncommon, breaches such as incest. On the other hand, lawsuits demanded not only money for costs but also legally telling evidence. The courtesan needed credible witnesses willing to speak against the police captain. After breaking her ties with him, Pilla had to delay her complaint several months until a street fight among Madalena’s clients led three of them to take sides against Marchetto and so be willing to testify for her. The Captain, in turn, playing the system he knew well, induced associates in the court to obstruct the proceedings. Pilla replied with formal letters petitioning higher authorities to expedite the case. With evidence of cronyism at work and no judicial decision (yet found), this prosecution may well, like others, have gotten shelved along the way. Nevertheless, as a nuisance for Ovidio, even Pilla’s launch of the suit made its mark.

Spoken to a recording notary in the office of the Governor’s court, Pilla’s judicial complaint (*querela*) opened conventionally, “Your Lordship should know,” and continued “that it has been four or five years, as best I can tell (*salvo il vero*), that the said Captain Ovidio established a liaison (*amicitia*) with me and began to have carnal relations with me.” She began by invoking her claim to Marchetto’s good care, based on a long-
standing relationship that included not just sex, but sleeping the night in his bed and bearing him a daughter whom he recognized and kept in his house. But “recently,” Pilla declared, she had come to suspect that he was also sexually involved with Madalena. From there, the prostitute launched into a long, carefully crafted tale of Marchetto’s dealings with her and her sister. Manipulating issues of timing was central to her narrative strategy. As she delivered her story of the incestuous triangle, Pilla sought to cloak the ambiguities of her own position and to shift blame as much as possible away from Madalena and herself and onto Ovidio. To forestall suggestion of her own dilatory complicity, Pilla rhetorically compressed the more than two years that had elapsed between the beginning of the affair and her present denunciation. Her suspicions were first alerted, she recounted, by Ovidio’s public flirtation with her sister, and she had enlisted her serving woman as a spy. Consequently, Pilla could relate Madalena’s fateful visit to the mysterious Monsignore, as she had learned it from the servant Diana, who had accompanied her sister. The querela placed blame firmly on the bargello’s shoulders and insisted that Madalena had complied under duress. Spinning her tale, Pilla reiterated the theme of Marchetto’s menace against both her and her sister. Of Madalena’s initial reaction when the captain threw off his churchman’s disguise, Pilla claimed that her sister had cried out that she wanted to go home and only threats of stabbing (pugnalate) secured her cooperation. Just a few lines later, to explain her own impotence, Pilla cited the “very great insolence” of Marchetto’s threats and the police harassment that “forced” her to continue obliging his demands.38

To justify her continuing relations with Ovidio, Pilla also represented herself as at first unknowing. When she first confronted Madalena and Ovidio with her suspicions, both denied them roundly. Her sister reportedly jabbed back insultingly, “do you think that I would be a cop’s moll like you?” The captain in turn swore “by all Christ’s saints that he was not the sort of man to do such a thing.”39 These quoted sallies allowed Pilla to sustain her pretence of ignorance and showed, in hindsight, the lies she had suffered from those who should treat her well.

Then the compressed timeframe of Amabilia’s complaint fastforwarded to the moment about six months earlier, a year and a half after the business began, when she admitted knowledge of the incest and, finally,
broke with the *bargello*. While anger creeps into this phase of the narrative, Pilla still worked to protect her offending sister. She reported that Madalena returned to the house one morning, evidently from Marchetto’s bed, to hear her older sibling shout, “traitor, you know perfectly well that I have a child with Ovidio and that he has been ever so long my lover and yet you have dared to get involved with him.”

Note that in reporting this confrontation with her own sibling, Pilla invoked the family-like bonds of her relationships as concubine and mother of a young child. While the younger sister this time confessed, the elder again shifted blame onto their duplicitous lover. As retold in the complaint, Madalena again insisted that repeated threats forced her to go along. Pilla, in turn, “despaired, seeing how Ovidio’s lack of conscience led him to consort with us two sisters.”

Then she went to face down the captain at his own house. To her reiterated laments, the impenitent policeman shot back a promise of yet more culpable deeds that further mocked proper family ties.

Reporting these rough words, Pilla hoped to convict the shameless policeman of a nefarious crime. In reply, she invoked for herself the language of respectability: “I shouted at him saying that this was no way for a gentleman to behave . . . and that in future he should never again come to my house, nor keep me.” Despite this bold declaration, Pilla still could not reap her rhetorical advantage. As she had had trouble severing ties with Ovidio, so she could not break off this conversation. She reported Ovidio’s taunting rejoinder about the gifts—yellow silk stockings and many *scudi*—that he had given not to her, but to Madalena.

After that day, however, when he had tried again to visit her, Pilla had refused. Ovidio had retaliated by lavishing more attention on Madalena and by suing Pilla in the Governor’s court for the return of everything he had given her.

Against her powerful lover Amabilia called upon the state to help secure her revenge. Her legal complaint offered a strategic account, embellished with quotations from other people. Her motives emerge less from
her direct words than from the narrative choices she made. Although she berated Captain Marchetto for “lacking conscience,” to condemn him she relied less on her own reproaches than on his neglectful behavior toward herself and their child. Though angry at her sister, she still wanted to shield her from the duress of the criminal law. Perhaps because she and Madalena were themselves liable to charges of incest, even if forced into it, Pilla did not use this term, even to besmirch Ovidio. Her ire was complicated by the ambivalence of her position. Like Madalena, she was a victim of Ovidio’s force, including harassment by cops sent to her home. Yet not only the captain’s sticks, but also his carrots—whatever resources he continued to supply to Amabilia and her daughter—likely extended her cooperation. At the same time, she was furious at having to share Ovidio’s favors, especially with a sister, whose family loyalty should, at least in principle, have foreclosed such direct competition.

Two letters composed in Amabilia’s name and bound with the trial involve a different sort of collaborative composition from the oral complaint. In the second instance a scribe was engaged to supply effective epistolary form and rhetoric, rather than simply as a mechanical hand to record her spoken words. Both missives—one addressed to the pope and the other to a judge, the Governor’s lieutenant for criminal cases—charged that court officials, cronies of the police captain, were obstructing her case and asked for intervention to speed the prosecution. The two documents look to have been written by a professional scribe (probably the same one) at least a month after the case was launched. The letter to the Luogotenente came second and referred to the earlier one to the pope. Only the first bears a date and the explanation that the illiterate Amabilia marked the “+.” This inscription confirms that the prostitute did not herself record the missives and likely had help in their composition.

Compared to the judicial complaint in Amabilia’s own words, the heightened language of the scribal letters conveys less ambiguity and bows the prostitute more deeply into the posture of vulnerable supplicant. Both missives seek to persuade men of authority to action. Using the formal third person, they speak “for” Amabilia and deploy a rhetoric of moral outrage and religious humility. Each letter begins with a standard epistolary prostration. The letter to the Lieutenant opens with florid
conventionality: “Amabilia Antognetti the most humble petitioner of your most illustrious lordship.” To the pope the letter writer amplifies a similar address by describing Amabilia as a “poor and most devoted widow.” Such a claim from a prostitute seems to us implausible, even fraudulent. Nevertheless, since the plea goes on to cite, as in the complaint, her unsanctioned sexual relationship with the police captain and their bastard daughter, it seems unlikely that the phrase, “povera vedova devotissima,” actually seeks to mask her status. Rather, it deploys the familiar Christian topos of a needy woman to cast Amabilia as supplicant at the feet of her spiritual father. Both letters, furthermore, dramatize how her associates have done her wrong. To the pope goes only a compact narrative of events, but for this audience the letter writer peppers the tale with colorful and judgmental language on the themes of moral excess and sin. It describes Marchetto, driven by “his unbridled appetite,” forcing Madalena “in fear of her life” to consent to his “shameful” and even “Lutheran,” that is, infidel, demands. Engaged sexually and thus incestuously with the two sisters, he has persisted in his “diabolical life.” Briefly, the letter shifts tone to request, pragmatically, a prompt resumption of the proceedings, since several of the witnesses are about to leave for war. In conclusion, Amabilia renews her plea to His Holiness that he order the Governor to act against “so many crimes and misdeeds that like offal should be abhorred above all others and that give so many bad examples in this Holy City of such Lutheran or infidel wickedness.” The second letter, to the Luogotenente, a secular magistrate like those who heard the original querela, is more procedural. Its substance draws not on general knowledge of social relationships but rather on familiarity with specific details of judicial practice. Furthermore, it names prominent officials who, it alleges, have been impeding the case and threatening Amabilia. The prostitute may well have consulted lawyers on how to proceed, but we need not assume that the scribe has supplied the legal particulars. He may have offered flourishes, missing from the complaint, but present in the pope’s letter, such as the loaded “sceleratagine [behavior of scoundrels]” and the superlative “suspettissimo.” In the letters, the social, gendered, and rhetorical vulnerabilities evident in Pilla’s complaint are amplified and turned into claims for help. While her prosecution of Ovidio shows assertiveness, the language and narrative strategies of her
collaborative texts betray the uncertainties of her position. Yet, even as a prostitute, her voice can cloak her in the conventional stance of vulnerable womanhood, cite the bonds of family obligation, and invoke moral superiority over her faithless lover.

Though speaking from a social and discursive platform quite similar to that of Amabilia Antognetti, Antonia Legnoverde creates a quite different voice. She, too, shows some vulnerability to the pressures of the male magistrates. But, rather than exploit this rhetorical posture, she works to fashion a more self-respecting alternative. In representing herself as independent and, in her own way, an “honest” prostitute, Antonia may flout the female norms of chastity and obedience to men, but she insists on conforming her words to the dictates of religious conscience and the law.

In time and place Antonia’s story runs parallel to Pilla’s. In October 1602, Captain Valerio Armenzano, recently chief of Rome’s largest police force, was charged, along with one of his henchman, with murder. The victim was a small-time broker in the burgeoning market for paintings, a Frenchman known in Rome as Giacomo Landi. Here the state, rather than an individual complainant, initiated the prosecution. Antonia entered the story as a witness and as the alleged motive for the murder. She had lived for several years as the captain’s concubine, though not his only sexual companion. Jealous, Armenzano suspected Giacomo of pimping for Antonia and so arranged for one of his policemen to dispose of the pesky Frenchman. Though Giacomo survived the assault by arquebus, he died of his wound two days later. There followed a long, very shaggy dog story of a trial, which Captain Valerio, like Marchetto, delayed with obstructions. In this case, however, the prosecutors, keen to get their man, countered with some dubious maneuvers of their own that in turn sparked further protests from the defendant. Eventually, Armenzano was convicted of murder and abuse of his authority; sent to the galleys, he went only after further negotiation lightened the sentence.

The focus here is on Antonia Legnoverde’s tale and her role in the trial. From her we have an initial interrogation, two briefer recalls, and then, as an orphan document tacked on to the end of the transcript, an undated affidavit in which she volunteers some striking afterthoughts about her earlier words recorded by the court. In tracking Antonia’s voice,
we must follow two entwined but distinct narratives, that of the trial itself and that, mediated through the first, of Antonia’s relationship with Valerio. To begin, the magistrates extracted some details of the prostitute’s life story. A native of Palermo, circa 1597 she had married a man living in Naples. Of this shadowy husband the court learned neither name nor trade. A year later, traveling with the mail courier, she had accompanied her mother-in-law and brother-in-law north to Rome. Although she came with her in-laws, once in the city, they disappear from her story. In the next year or so, her husband did—once—come looking for her in Rome, but, finding her pregnant, promptly left. Then, some four years after she had left him, Antonia received written notice—a fede, she called it—that he had died.

Antonia leaves obscure her motives for leaving her husband and migrating to Rome. Perhaps she first intended to look for work as a servant, as Captain Valerio later told the court. She herself says nothing of domestic service, but rather resorts to a common euphemism, “in Rome I did what other women do.” Like other new arrivals to the city, she gravitated to the post stop where she herself had landed and where her Sicilian paesani or other southerners would likely gather. There Captain Armenzano spotted the attractive newcomer; he came over to chat and soon invited her to his house, where they promptly had sex. For the next five years, Antonia lived as “donna del Capitano Valerio” and bore him a son. Mostly she lived in Armenzano’s house, although sometimes he lodged her for spells in another man’s dwelling. The fact that Antonia was living apart from Valerio during Lent in 1601 suggests that the temporary separation may have been a faint gesture of religious discretion.

The events that triggered the trial began in June 1602, when Captain Valerio returned to the city after a visit to his hometown near the Adriatic coast. He arrived back at his Roman house to discover his “woman,” Antonia, in conversation with Giacomo Landi. Giacomo had been a visitor to the house for some months, as an aspiring client and agent of the captain. Although the Frenchman insisted that he had come only to inquire about his patron’s return, Valerio believed that Giacomo was there to pander Antonia. More than a year earlier, a similar suspicion led the policeman to have severely beaten and abusively jailed a woman who ran
errands for Antonia. Olimpia da Morlupo was implicated in the delivery of an eel, a Lenten treat, that Antonia had ordered, but which the jealous Valerio believed was her gift to a rival lover.60

Similarly, when the Captain’s suspicions resurfaced in the summer of 1602, rather than blame Antonia, he focused his anger on an underling—this time the solicitous Giacomo. As the season wore on, Antonia evidently tired of Armenzano’s jealous rages. Early in August she decided to leave him and to live on her own as a prostitute. Accordingly, she moved herself into an apartment near S. Maria in Via, where she entertained clients, including two wine merchants.61 Valerio, buffeted by mixed motives, tried in vain to persuade her to return. On a September evening, he called at her new quarters to harangue her. Apparently without a sense of irony, the policeman protested forcefully against the “shame” of her departure that left “the child she had given him to be called the son of a whore.” He said that “he did not want her to act the whore, that she should get her head straightened out, and many other words and threats.”62 But his anger at Antonia proving fruitless, Armenzano deflected his vengeance onto the man who putatively made her leave. By October fifth, Valerio had arranged for one of his senior deputies to assassinate the Frenchman.

Antonia testified three times near the beginning of the long trial. Like many rootless witnesses she was jailed and held until judges decided they had heard all they needed. On October 8, within a day of Landi’s death, she was questioned in the prison of the Borgo, near the Vatican. On this first occasion most of the questions touched her recent dealings with Valerio. She responded fully, describing in detail conversations with the Captain and with others. Giving little sense that she felt personally threatened by him, despite his jealous angers and violence, she made clear right away that she did not speak as Valerio’s dependent or concubine. Forthrightly, she announced, “I no longer live in the house of Captain Valerio . . . I myself chose to leave [there], because I did want to stay any longer.”63 Later in her first testimony, Antonia returned to this theme. To her ex-lover’s heated protests in September, she had retorted that “I was a free woman (donna libera) and wanted to live on my own if he no longer wanted to pay my keep.”64 Her taunt here about his refusing to pay her expenses is gratuitous, because to the next question she explained, “the Captain indeed said to me
that I need not whore because he would have maintained me and set me up in honorable quarters and I could live there honorably.”

Antonia thus clarified her priorities; she would rather be a “whore” on her own than the more honorable, but dependent kept woman. In contrast with Pilla’s voice, Antonia’s not only disdains goods, but also ignores the bonds of motherhood.

While Antonia’s claim to autonomy contrasts with Pilla’s muddled efforts to detach herself from Ovidio, we need to contextualize her rhetoric. In the records of the Governor’s court the phrase “donna libera” appears from time to time, nearly always applied to prostitutes. At its most basic, it responds to a key judicial question to women, “are you married or single?” Since most prostitutes were not wives, they could reply, “I am a free woman.” That meant that plying their trade did not expose them to weighty charges of adultery. Some prostitutes who adopted these words, however, did have steady clients, who offered benefits, but at an implicit price. Caterina de Palma da Bari, for example, reported, “I am a free woman who lives at the disposal (requisizione) of a man whose friendship (amicitia) I have had for over a year and who takes care of all my needs.”

Caterina, while without the constraints—and securities—of marriage, had, like many prostitutes, accepted the keeping of a special client in return for being at his beck and call. But another prostitute, Persilla di Santo da Orvieto, rather than responding to the standard query, introduced the rhetoric of freedom herself and did so to describe a situation much like Antonia’s. After a liaison of “many years” with a servant in the household of the Duke of Torres, Persilla “left his friendship because he mistreated me, and I am a free woman and I want to live on my own.” Persilla’s words here—both the “donna libera” and the desire to live “a modo mio”—echoed Antonia’s. For both claiming the stance of “donna libera” meant more than merely being unmarried.

Consistent with this posture of self-possession, Antonia’s testimony does not exonerate herself by heaping blame on others—either Valerio or Giacomo. As she navigated through the officials’ leading questions about the dealings between the two men, she tried to show sympathy for the hapless Frenchman without casting too much blame on the Captain. Antonia’s first testimony described the incident when Armenzano returned to
Rome to find Giacomo calling at his house. In her account Valerio asked Giacomo, “what are you doing here?” and he replied, “I came here to find out when your lordship would return.” Then the concubine followed her lover into the bedroom, where she helped him change his clothes. There he exploded, “that scoundrel, what’s he doing with you? Slut, slut, he’s pimping for you, that scoundrel!” She knew, said the testimony, that the captain was much riled, for when he saw Giacomo talking with her, a sudden pallor showed his displeasure. As the magistrates continued to probe Antonia for evidence of Valerio’s grudge, she spoke with pity of the Frenchman, “that poor fellow never pandered for me nor even spoke of such a thing, and the Captain is wrong to hold such an opinion against Giacomo.” At the same time, on behalf of her former lover, Antonia tried to minimize her inculpatory testimony. Although admitting that her ignorance came in part from no longer living with Valerio, she denied discussing Giacomo with him, hearing him forbid the broker to visit the house, or knowing of the Captain’s doing the underling any damage. At most she acknowledged hearing about the rift at secondhand.

A week later, on October 14 and 16, at the Corte Savelli prison in Via Monserrato, Antonia was questioned again. The examining magistrates sought more detail on her encounters with Captain Valerio in September. They still wanted to fill out their case about motives for the murder, but they also wanted to prove supplementary charges against the police chief, involving other abuses of his authority. The first recall thus began with queries about the four days in September, when the frustrated Armenzano, without official cause, had had Antonia jailed in the “secreta,” the smaller section where prisoners were kept incommunicado. Twice, while holding her there, Valerio went to browbeat her. His goal was the same as when he had earlier visited her home, so likewise were her responses. In her words, “he told me that he did not want me to whore and [found] me obstinate because I said that I wanted to do things my way and that I no longer wanted to feel under his thumb.” How did he take this, asked the court? She answered, “wouldn’t your Lordship expect the Captain to take it badly, since I told him that I wanted to be my own woman?” Here again, Antonia asserted her independence, not only claiming to have faced down her powerful ex-lover on his own hostile turf, but also lightly teasing the
interrogators, while acknowledging the audacity of her stance.

While Amabilia’s scribally composed letters amplified the vulnerable voice in her oral complaint, the rhetoric and posture of Antonia’s written affidavit elaborated on her spoken testimony’s theme of stubborn autonomy. This last document is hard to place. Though bound at the end of the trial, there is no internal reference to it, and it bears no date. Yet it concludes with an elaborate statement claiming veracity and authorship: “this I say as if under justice I had sworn to tell the truth and this is the truth written in faith (in fede) in my own hand and undersigned by my own hand, I Antonia Legniovverde Palermitana.” Antonia, though a prostitute of no identifiable privileged status, was clearly not only literate in Italian, but sufficiently trained that she could prepare a three-page, neatly written letter that delivered a sustained narrative and argument. While it is possible that someone else put Antonia up to making this statement, presumably on Captain Valerio’s behalf, the affidavit itself betrays no sign of it. If there were collaboration in its language and content, likely she had much the upper hand. It reads just like the Antonia of the testimonies, as she, though a prostitute, fashions a persona as autonomous woman and truth-teller. She explains her motives in taking this unusual initiative in the first lines of the document: “being in past days ill and in need of confession, the confessor laid on my conscience that I must give faith to the truth if the Lord restored my health, or else he would not give me absolution.” Here she links the languages of truth and of faith, both legal and religious. Prostitutes’ piety was complicated, but not a contradiction in terms. Although the church refused communion to active prostitutes, it was always keen to work their repentance. So, the court heard about prostitutes’ attending mass, viewing processions, or fulfilling vows. Some of these claims were false or, if true, largely instrumental. Even for a sex worker, going to mass was a legitimizing reason to give for moving about town. And churches, especially the suburban pilgrimage sites of the Seven Churches cycle, though places of prayer, could also be places of assignation. Nevertheless, with Mary Magdalene to emulate, sexually irregular women sought salvation in the end. Seeing their trade as a temporary expedient in a profane world where everyone sinned, some, at least, were likely as pious as their variably god-fearing respectable neighbors. We do not know for
a fact that Antonia was active as a prostitute when, probably some time between six months and a year after her oral testimony, she fell ill and sought out a priest. But with no evidence of marriage, it seems likely that she was still the self-employed sex worker that she had been in October.

In the affidavit that Antonia crafted, the sin on her conscience was not illicit sex, but rather unfinished business from Valerio’s trial, that is, perjury. Here Antonia elaborated the autonomy theme of her oral testimony with claims that she, the prostitute, spoke truthfully and that the guardians of order were in fact the liars. Immediately after explaining the circumstances in which she wrote, Antonia embarked on a long tale of the efforts of some court officials to make her bear stronger witness against Captain Valerio. Thus, the interrogators had wanted her to say that Armenzano went suddenly pale when he discovered Giacomo with Antonia at his house, that the policeman had threatened the Frenchman, and that he had beaten his concubine for entertaining the alleged pimp. According to her affidavit, Antonia had protested that these things were not true. One official threatened her with torture—la corda—if she would not say the right lines. When menace appeared to have little effect on the stubborn woman, the magistrates tried bribery. For her cooperation they promised her “as much as she wanted” from Valerio’s goods—which they expected to confiscate upon his conviction. Also, they argued that the Captain would make her suffer if he ever got free. Antonia responded, however, that lying would put her soul in jeopardy. That, she declared, she would not do for anyone. In further discussion the interrogator reiterated that his version, making Armenzano look guilty about Giacomo, was the truth and told the notary to record it. Antonia protested again that they should not write those lies, because her “conscience could not accept it.” But, the affidavit said, she did not know what got written, because the men spoke Latin, which she did not understand. As we saw when examining her first testimony, the details of Valerio’s pallor and his scathing words about Giacomo did make it into the official transcript. Several other, more extreme and less plausible, allegations did not. Then, after demanding her silence, the officials let Antonia go. This last injunction was likely standard procedure, although the prostitute’s narration links it specifically to the falsified statements.

Official pressure did not end there. Antonia’s affidavit rehearsed the
same themes in yet more maneuvers. Soon after her release from the jail where she had testified, three men from the court visited her house where, again, they urged her to do “what the judge wanted because it would be good for me, that they would favor me and make me more respected than any woman in Rome.” But Antonia still refused to lie. Then the judge himself called on her. Seeking to turn the whole matter into a scheme (burla), he promised to take her under his protection if she would only testify that Armenzano had deflowered two sisters. The magistrate continued, then and on another occasion, to propose a long string of accusations against Valerio to which Antonia should testify. Even though the trial suggests that Armenzano had committed at least some of these offenses, at its beginning at least, the court craved more damning testimony and went to some lengths to bribe or bludgeon it out of a prostitute whose integrity they clearly discounted. The Antonia of the affidavit bowed to none of the powerful judges’ blandishments or threats. By implication she had once allowed some false words to enter the record. If not, she would have felt no need to rectify her testimony. But when she, removed from the court’s immediate pressures and ostensibly to save her soul, took pen in hand, she constructed herself as a feisty and adamant speaker of truth.

In Rome at the turn of the seventeenth century Amabilia Antognetti and Antonia Legnoverde were living parallel lives as prostitutes. As the sometime concubines of police captains, they knew both the comfort of steady maintenance and the stresses of dependence on powerful and exploitative men. Both had also to fend for themselves. The criminal courts, in pursuit of public order, disciplined prostitutes, but also, on occasion, the police as well. Such trials provided a platform from which the two women’s voices, largely in oral form, but also in writing, were heard and recorded and thus, anomalously, come down to history. While their bodies defied conventional injunctions to chastity, obedience, and silence, their words positioned them as more than mere transgressors. Despite tense circumstances, both spoke up with considerable self-possession, on behalf of themselves and of others. In so doing, each in different ways invoked culturally approved norms drawn from law, religion, and the ethics of family and honor. Amabilia, charging her lover with a serious moral breach, succeeded in bringing her cause to the eyes of public authority. Her voice narrated stra-
tegically to defend herself and her family from the damage of unavoidable complicity. Later, with scribal assistance, her rhetoric deployed womanly vulnerability and moral outrage to petition the pope himself against the manipulative and malicious Ovidio. Antonia’s words, in contrast, surprise us with sustained claims to autonomy and legal rectitude. Her tale speaks insistently of her choice to break with Valerio, but she resists official pressure to impugn him with perjured testimony. She then takes unusual steps formally to retract falsehood that damages him, but also, more importantly, her own soul. The archival documents through which we hear the voices of Amabilia and Antonia lack the cultural privilege of high art and literature. Therefore, I have called the women themselves prostitutes and not courtesans. Even though literate, Antonia does not belong among the literary courtesans who negotiate their social marginality through prestigious education and the mastery of refined artistic skills. Nevertheless, the Roman prostitutes’ voices claim legitimacy through the invocation of values shared with their larger early modern society. In this they differ in register, but not kind, from those of courtesans. The two women were, in some real ways, transgressive and marginalized, but they had both voice and self-respect.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Albert Ascoli and Barbara Spackman for the opportunity to present a version of this essay to the Italian Studies colloquium at University of California, Berkeley. My thanks also to several readers of earlier drafts, in particular, Julia Hairston and the women’s early modern writing group in Toronto.


6. Compared to the rich feminist scholarship on early modern women writing in English, that on their continental counterparts is smaller, but growing. For anglophones, an introduction to Italian women writers is Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood, eds., *A History of Women’s Writing in Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13–91 (for essays surveying different genres for 1400–1700), and 282–337 (for a bibliographical guide). The “Other Voice” series from the University of Chicago Press has translated and introduced texts from a variety of early modern Italiane, including (alphabetically): Laura Battifera, Giulia Bigolina, Maddalena Campiglia, Vittoria Colonna, Cassandara Fedele, Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’ Medici, Olympia Morata, Isotta Nogarola, Suor Bartolomea Riccoboni, Margherita Sarrocchi, and Arcangela Tarabotti. Broader analyses of Italian women’s writings include Virginia Cox, “The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1995): 513–81; and Diana Robin, *Publishing Women. Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation in Sixteenth Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Italian women painters and musicians have also received notable attention, although how much to read their work as personally expressive remains a subject of debate; see *Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque* (Milan: Skira, 2007), the catalogue of an exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D. C.


12. See note 15.


23. Married 24 years, Valerio Armenzano mostly kept his wife in his paese in the Marche: TcG: Processi, xvii secolo (hereafter Processi), busta 23, ff. 128r-v. In a letter to the pope, Ovidio Marchetto’s accuser said, probably hyperbolically, that he kept “la sua consorte nelli stinchi di frienze,” that is, in a prison called Le Stinche in Florence, or perhaps its district: TcG: Processi, busta 26, f. 794.
24. TcG: Processi, busta 23, ff. 1–314. When the pope’s government prosecuted an abusive official, it often piled on multiple charges, some of which, as here, included or implied sexual misconduct. For another example, see Thomas Cohen, Love and Death in Renaissance Italy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 127–67.
26. In a database of 975 prostitutes from parish records (stati delle anime in the Archivio storico del Vicariato di Roma [ASVR]) for 1600–1610, about 10% shared a household with their mother at some time. The presence of mothers correlated directly with prostitutes’ households that could be tracked over two or more years. The choice to live on the avails of filial prostitution was not necessarily always a top-down imposition by mothers on daughters.
27. ASVR: Stati delle anime, S. Maria del Popolo, 1601 (ff. 18v, 85v), 1602 (ff. 11v, 55), 1603 (ff. 64, 106v), 1604 (f. 13v), 1605 (f. 15), 1606 (f. 15v), 1607 (f. 12), 1610 (f. 37); for 1608, TcG: Processi, busta 67, ff. 103v–107v.
29. ASVR: Stati delle anime, S. Maria del Popolo, 1602 (ff. 9, 55), 1603 (ff. 61v, 106v). In 1606–1607 Madalena shared a household with the rest of her family.

30. ASVR: S. Maria del Popolo, Battesimi: for Amabilia, June 1601 (f. 75), August 1604 (f. 112); for Madalena, November 1600 (f. 65v), September 1605 (f. 123).

31. TcG: Processi, busta 26, ff. 796, 799v. Marchetto had also paid a legal bond for Amabilia in 1601: TcG, Fideiussioni, busta 46, f. 182. He had earlier held the biggest post as Bargello di Roma, but at the time of the lawsuit, he had been shunted to patrolling the city’s outskirts as Bargello di Campagna: TcG, Processi, busta 26, ff. 796, 802.

32. Ibid., ff. 796v, 798, 800, 803v–4. Here, too, the police chief flouted the rules he was supposed to enforce. Riding in coaches was forbidden to prostitutes, although they did it and were occasionally prosecuted for it: TcG: Processi, busta 26, ff. 1163–73 (1603); busta 90, ff. 548–56 (1610); busta 91, ff. 1137–47 (1610).


34. TcG: Processi, busta 26, f. 800: “lui disse à tavola che Madalena era meglio robba de Pilla et domandandoli io se che cosa ne sapeva essendo che lui non havesse che trattar se non con Pilla, lui mi respose io lo so perche l’ho fottute tutte due et ti dico che è meglio robbra assai Madalena che non è Pilla”; see also f. 799. Note that the Italian reproduced in these notes follows the orthographic vagaries of the manuscripts, with a few, minor interpolations for clarity; abbreviations have been expanded.


37. TcG: Processi, busta 26, f. 796: “V[ostra] S[ignoria] deve sapere che sono ad quattro ò cinque anni salvo il vero che il detto Capitano Ovidio pigliò amicitia mia et cominciò ad haver à trattar con me carnalmente et sempre, da cinque mesi in qua in fiuri [a marginal addition explains this phrase: cinque mesi sono che no ha amicitia], ha trat-tato con me carnalmente che molte volte ho dormito con lui et in detto tempo ho hauto di me una figliola femina, chiamata Appollonia che la tiene lui al presente in casa et ultima-mente comincià à sospettar che non havesse che trattar carnalmente con Madalena mia sorella per le molte carezze che li faceva in casa mia proprio.”

38. Ibid., f. 796v.

39. Ibid.: “dicendome che te pensi che sia sbirriera come che te et anco feci il simile con il Capitano Ovidio il quale giurava per quanti santi haveva Christo che lui non era homo da far tal cosa.”

40. Ibid., f. 797: “io comincià à gridar con lei dicendoli, traditore tu sai bene che io ci ho una figliola con Ovidio et che ha hauto tanto tempo amicitia mia et tu hai hauto tanto ardire di metterte con lui et haver che trattar con lui.”

41. Ibid.: “io mi comincià a disperar vedendo la poca coscienza che haveva hauto
Ovidio à trattar con tutte dui noi sorelle.”

42. Ibid.: “et io mi comincià a disperar vedendo la poca coscienza che haveva hauuto Ovidio à trattar con tutte dui sorelle. . . . [at his house] lui all’hora mi rispose che cosa hai coglionà, è vero che io ho hauuto che trattar con te et con Madalena tua sorella et l’ho fatto perché il seme non voglio che vadi fuori di casa et tanto se ne fusse grande il tuo figliolo [in fact, a girl; likely a scribal lapse] tanto lo fotteria et poi potriamo andar su il tetto.” I am guessing that this last phrase was meant to suggest something done where others could get a good view.

43. Ibid., ff. 797r-v: “et io all’hora comincià à gridar con lui dicendoli che non era proceder da homo da bene à far quello che haveva fatto et che per l’avenire non si accostasse mai piu à casa mia et che mai piu me ment[i]onasse.”

44. Ibid., f. 797v: “all’hora lui me disse che te pensi che se io ho hauuto Madalena che non l’habbia pagata et me disse che lì haveva fatta una zimarre de perpignano et un paro di calzette di seta gialla et che lì haveva dato molti scudi (then he [Ovidio] said to me [Pilla], do you think that if I fucked Madalena that I wouldn’t have paid her, and he told me that he had gotten her a wool cloak and a pair of yellow silk stockings and that he gave her a lot of money).”

45. Ibid., f. 794: “Io Ottavio Filicis a pregieri de la sopra detta Amobilia [sic] per non sapere lei scrivere Come dice ó fatto la detta soto scrizione de nome suo et di sua propria mano fora qui sotto una croce questo di 29 di giungno [sic] 1603 Jo. Ottavio Filicis mano propria. [two crosses below].” The hand and spelling of this statement and signature are different from those of the body of the letter. The page with the address appears at f. 813v.


47. Ibid., f. 795. The page with the address appears at f. 812v.

48. Ibid., f. 794: “che in essa [causa] se scopriranno tante sceleratesse et misfatti ch’esso come offale le doveva abhorrire piu d’ogni altro et non dar tanti cattivi esempii in questa santa Citta in usar tali misfatti termini da luterani et Infideli.”


52. TcG: Sentenze originali, busta 9, no. 82 (July 1604), no. 134 (December 1604).
The trial for information, having investigated Armenzano’s abuse of police powers in his relations with other women as well, concluded in March 1603; such a gap between magisterial investigation and sentence was unusually long.

53. TcG: Processi, busta 23, ff. 42v–43
54. In later testimony Captain Valerio claims, somewhat vaguely, that Antonia’s in-laws stayed at his house a few days and then left again for Aquila: Ibid., ff. 131r-v.
55. Ibid., ff. 42v–43; this occurred during one of the times Valerio had her housed for some months by another man, Cesare Durante, either because of the pregnancy and/or because the Captain was out of town during the war of Ferrara.

56. Ibid., f. 130v: Captain Valerio said, “Antonia me referi che s’era partita di Napoli perchè non ci voleva star piu, et che voleva trovare un padrone.” (Antonia told me that she left Naples because she didn’t want to stay there any longer and that she wanted to find a master [that is, an employer].) Although we do not know what Antonia thought at the time, the intention to become a servant was the conventional thing for a young migrant to do; it also neatly fit Valerio’s stance of respectability to claim that he had first taken her into his house not as a concubine, but as a serving girl. In “Storie di prostituzione,” 271–2, Storey rightly points out that it serves the Captain’s own interests to emphasize Antonia’s discourse of autonomy. To represent her indocile streak as already in play when she left Naples, Storey, however, misquotes Valerio’s report of Antonia’s words as “et non voleva trovare un padrone” (and she did not want to find a master).
57. Ibid., f. 42v.

58. Ibid., f. 43: “vedendomi detto Capitano li alla posta de Napoli che parlavo col procaccio, detto Capitano mi venne à parlare et mi menò in casa sua, et in questa occasione l’ho cognosciuto et c’ho havuto che fare [sex].” Although at the time of the trial Antonia had detached herself from Valerio, she was quick to represent herself to the court as from the start in Rome “donna di Capitano Valerio” and not mere servant.

59. Ibid., f. 105. Such a tactic would be consistent with Valerio’s rather questionable claims in the trial that he was trying to mend his sexual ways: ff. 136v–37.

60. Ibid., ff. 105–10: Testimony of Olimpia da Morlupo.

61. Ibid., ff. 43v, 112.

62. Ibid., f. 44v: “detto Capitano una volta sola è venuto à casa mia dove venne una sera à bravarmi in quel principio dicendomi che io gli volevo far questa vergogna lasciando quel suo figlio che io gli havevo fatto aciò non si potesse dire che fusse figlio di una puttana, dicendomi che non voleva che io facessi la puttana che stessi in cervello et di molte altre parole et bravarie che non mi ricordo.”

63. Ibid., f. 43v: “da casa del capitano Io me ne son voluto proprio partir io che non ci son voluta star piu.”

64. Ibid., f. 45: “Io gli resposi che ero Donna libera et che volevo far a modo mio se lui non mi voleva mantenere.”

65. Ibid.: “detto Capitano mi diceva proprio che io non facessi la puttana perché lui mi haverebbe mantenuto et messomi in qualche loco honorato et che ci fussi potuto stare honoratamente.” Valerio, in spinning his exculpation, explains how he urged her to enter a
pious refuge (casa pia) or the service of a respectable lady or offered to find her a husband: ff. 136v–37v.

66. Ibid., ff. 47r-v: Testimony of Marcella, wife of Adriano, a painter who did business with Valerio. She reported a conversation with her friend Antonia; marvelling, Marcella asked, "come poteva fare di star senza il Capitano Valerio, et anco il suo figliuolo, et non son come havesse trovato meglier partito" (how could she manage to live without Captain Valerio and also her son, and it’s not as if she had found a better arrangement); to Antonia she attributed this reply "che non si curava della sua robba ne del suo figliuolo, et che valeva più la libertá che haveva di star da se che quanto havesse potuto havere dal Capitano Valerio" (that she was not concerned about her belongings nor about her son, and that she valued more the liberty that she had on her own than whatever she could have had from Captain Valerio).


68. TcG: Costituti, busta 592, f. 243.


70. TcG: Processi, busta 23, ff. 43v–44: "Il dispiacere che hebbe il capitanio ritrovando detto Giacomo insieme con me è questo, et arrivando in casa vedendocila disse queste parole à Giacomo, che fai qua tu, respose lui, son venuto qua per vedere quando V[ostra] S[ignoria] tornara, et andando io in camera per aiutarlo a spogliare si voltò contro di me dicendome, questo furbo che ci faceva quà con te, poltrona, poltrona ti faceva il ruffiano questo furbo."

71. Ibid., f. 44.

72. Ibid., f. 46: "questo poveraccio mai mi ha fatto il ruffiano ne tampoco parlatomene mai di tal cosa et haveva torto il capitanio ad havere questo pensiero contro detto Giacomo."

73. Ibid., f. 100v: "detto Capitano ragionava con me con dirmi che non voleva che io facesse la puttana et vedendomi ostenitata perche io dicevo che volevo far à modo mio et che non ne volevo sentir più a stare sottoposto a esso."

74. Ibid.: "non vuol V.S. che detto Capitano havesse à male questo poiché Io li dicevo che volevo essere Donna da me."

75. Ibid., ff. 313r–314r. Its placement with the transcript of the trial for information, but with no mention of it there, suggests that it was added after March 1603, but probably long before the first sentencing over a year later in July 1604.

76. Ibid., f. 314: "e questo che io dico si come in giudizia giurai di dire la verita e questo e per la verita schritta in fede di mia proprio mano esotto schritta manu propria. Io Antonio Legnoverde Palermitana."

77. Ibid., f. 313: "esendo a li giorni pasati amalata in bisognio de confessare, il confessore mi mese per carico di concienza che io dovesse far fede de la verita come il signore me rendeva sanita [word corrected], altrimente non voleva darmi la suluzione; io
lo promesse Addio e a lui.” Several corrections suggest that Antonia copied this version from a draft. At the same time anomalies of spelling, like “suluzione,” indicate composition by someone literate, but not professionally so.

79. For this reason, prostitutes were identified in the Easter census records (stati delle anime) that sought to enforce annual communion. On early Catholic outreach to prostitutes in Rome, see John O’Malley, The First Jesuits (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 182–5.

80. On prostitutes attending mass, see TcG: Investigazioni, busta 384, f. 24; Querelle, busta 8, f. 22v; Costituti, busta 594, f. 54; busta 596, f. 185; Processi, busta 44, ff. 701v, 703; busta 58, f. 317. On prostitutes viewing religious processions, see Procession: TcG: Costituti, busta 589, f. 47. On prostitutes on pilgrimage see TcG: Costituti, busta 590, ff. 19v–20.


82. Ibid., f. 313v.

83. Ibid.: “[one official] mi pregava che io facesse quello che voleva il giudice perché saria stato bon per me che loro me haverebiro favorito et fattomi rispettare piu che donna di roma; io non volsi consentire niente perché erano busie.”

84. This idea of sororal incest, though not defloration, may echo the contemporary Antognetti affair.

85. Interestingly, Giulio Carretti, the deputy Governor, one of the senior magistrates named here by Antonia, was likewise identified by Amabilia as abusing his power. This problem was both rife in the papal administration and the subject of a number of individual efforts at correction.