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Liminal Liberation: Courtesans and Embodied Anxieties in Sixteenth-Century Venice

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**LIMINAL LIBERATION: COURTESANS AND
EMBODIED ANXIETIES IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY VENICE**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by
Mandonesia Carter
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To Reia Dylan...for being my light, teaching me more in a
few years than I've learned in my entire life and
my greatest source of motivation in
accomplishing what often felt like the impossible.

And to Mina Jayme...thanks for the final push, kid.
It is my hope that this thesis reminds you
both of your ability to accomplish anything.

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Abstract

Invectives against the courtesan—a more educated, erudite, and socially elite version of the ordinary prostitute—were commonplace in early modern Venice. A metropolitan center by the sixteenth century, Venice had become one of the most tolerant cities in Europe, allowing the courtesan to rapidly rise far past her social standing. The courtesan, through strategic self-fashioning and self-promotion, blurred the boundaries of gender roles, class roles, and the conventional social hierarchy. This precipitated attacks from critics seeking to provide clarity of the courtesan's place and protect the interests of their patriarchal society. This thesis examines representations of the sixteenth-century Venetian courtesan in Italian Renaissance texts, in consideration of their corporeal language.

Considered here are the *Ragionamenti* by satirist Pietro Aretino, the malicious verses of poet Maffio Venier, and works by courtesan-poet Veronica Franco. The texts share a preoccupation with the courtesan's body and use body-centric language to shape and reflect notions of social placement. In investigating the texts in consideration of social placement and of the body, male anxieties about the subversion of social status and gender boundaries become apparent. The courtesan represents a body doing things that it should not do and, as such, gives us insight into the bodily consequences of crossing social boundaries. In a society where the distribution of power and of privilege depended on categorizing people, courtesans, and other groups on the margins of society, fueled male anxieties by penetrating prohibited spaces.

This thesis shows that the courtesan successfully rescues herself from her marginality, creating instead a liminal space by masterfully presenting herself in accordance to circumstance. The inability to place the courtesan provides her with agency and with the capacity to control her own body—her greatest weapon.

Chapter One. Introduction

In sixteenth-century Venice, there was a war of words waged on an entire group of women: the courtesans. Self-made, educated, and articulate, these women were able to write eloquently and gain access to resources that should have otherwise been denied to them because of their class and gender. This placed them in direct competition with male poets and ambitious intellectuals also seeking access to raised social status and favor with patrons. The courtesan possessed social ambiguity as neither noble nor whore and as neither male nor traditionally female. She was a marginal insider, a low-class wealthy person, a woman who could occupy space in the public sphere, and a walking contradiction. It was her transgression of boundaries that made her a threat in a society defined by rigid class hierarchy and gender roles. Her detractors provide an insightful look into the male anxieties that arose as a result of this breach. Contemporary writings about courtesans ranged from broad commentaries on the profession of courtesanship to personal attacks on specific courtesans. These texts provide a gateway to a more complete understanding of sixteenth-century gender relations and offer the foundation for this study.

Venice in the sixteenth century was a Mediterranean cosmopolitan center. It thrived as a foreigner-friendly, mercantile port city and its “strategic location between East and West further promoted its growth as a center for commerce and trade.”¹ This prosperity gave rise to a new and diverse merchant class as well as a fluid exchange of goods and information. As a result, Venice became synonymous in early modern European culture with social and cultural freedom and with

¹Margaret Rosenthal, primary historian of sixteenth-century courtesan Veronica Franco, published a website chronicling, in brief, the life of Franco and the context in which she lived. There is an informative section on early modern Venice. See Margaret F Rosenthal, ed., “The Time,” Veronica Franco Project (University of Southern California, 2013), <https://dornsife.usc.edu/veronica-franco/the-time/>.

toleration, both of foreigners and of marginalized groups within Venetian society. As tolerant as Venice was, other material factors also provided the courtesan with the space to flourish. Guido Ruggiero, in his study of sexual culture in Venice, suggests that Venice's toleration and then subsequent legalization of prostitution "provided a regularized and disciplined place for women in society who might otherwise remain dangerously unplaced."² He states,

by capitalizing on the sexuality of young women who did not have the economic status to fit into the society through the normal dowry system, one might argue that society created a secondary sexual economy that safely incorporated the sexuality of young women too poor to participate in the primary system.³

Ruggiero is arguing that Venice profited not only socially, but also economically from its acceptance of prostitution, including courtesanship. While Venice benefitted from her existence, the courtesan still had to navigate the social conventions associated with an existence as lower class and female in the early modern period. Accordingly, the original questions of this thesis are as follows: why did courtesans work so hard to distinguish themselves from prostitutes and why did this garner direct attention from sixteenth-century patricians, male members of the Italian elite?

Historians studying courtesans have been most preoccupied with three themes: the distinction between courtesans and prostitutes, the attempted regulation of courtesans, and the self-fashioning of courtesans through various strategies. Early studies are most concerned with defining and identifying courtesans as superior to common prostitutes; specifically, they

² Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 153.

³ Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, 153.

emphasize the importance the courtesan placed on establishing herself as different than the common prostitute. More recent studies turn to studying particular courtesans and their work in an effort to place her in her context and extrapolate her particular contributions to our overall understanding of the early modern period. In sixteenth-century representations of courtesans, the courtesan's crime is that she overstepped the culturally designed boundaries of social placement. Existing scholarship identifies the courtesan as a scapegoat for early modern Venetian intellectuals, frequenting salons and striving to advance themselves. These intellectuals were ambitious male writers soliciting patronage from the wealthy masters of the salons. Scholars argue that the competition the courtesan posed to male writers vying for patronage precipitated attacks against specific courtesans and more general satirical commentaries on the profession of courtesanship. On this particular subject, the scholarship prioritizes the dialogue between the courtesan and her critics but centers around a power struggle between the courtesan and the men with whom she competed. This is essential to understanding social dynamics in the courtesan's time; however, this approach only highlights the threat the courtesan posed to the upwardly mobile writers with whom she competed for patronage. Existing scholarship provides a general understanding of the world in which the courtesan succeeded, of the courtesan's social climbing tactics, and of the dynamic between the courtesan and her detractors. Commonly, works vilifying courtesans had similar motives: to defame the courtesan, discredit the profession, or dramatize the courtesan as a personification of an immoral society; previous scholars, however, have failed to notice just how common was the mention of the courtesan's body and body parts in these denunciations. Thus, this study will add to the existing scholarship by asking: What male anxieties are being manifested through these texts against courtesans and what could these

writings tell us about power dynamics as they related to class and gender in sixteenth-century Venice?

The slanderous critiques and satirical commentaries about courtesans, written by elite men, give us insight into the more specific ways that courtesans transgressed early modern hierarchies and the anxieties this offense provoked. Notably, tracts written disparaging specific courtesans often focused on insults relating to the body and worked to ruin a courtesan's reputation and desirability. An analysis of these body-centered texts reveals that male critics were aware of the role that the courtesan's body and her reputation played in her ability to gain status for herself and the support of wealthy patrons for which they competed. More general works denigrating courtesans attempted to define cultural norms and group the courtesan's experience with that of the more common prostitute.⁴ Italian humanist Sperone Speroni writes in his *Orazio*, for example:

That the name of courtier surely derives from the word court, and the court is the abode of courtesy, and courtesy is a virtue...now there is no question that the courtesan does not derive her name from the virtues of courtesy or any others thus acquired for she is devoid of all good and chock-full of vices...Now I do not know how or why it is customary for the world in which both word and deed are corrupt to insist on calling

⁴ For an example of a text making no distinction between courtesans and prostitutes and warning young men to avoid being associated with courtesans, see Francesco Sansovino, *Ragionamento di M. Francesco Sansovino nel quale brevemente s'insegna a giovani huomini la bella arte d'amore* (Venice: 1545). See also, for an example of a text maligning prostitutes in general, Sperone Speroni, *Orazioni del Sign. Speron Speroni Dottor et Cavalierr Padovano* (Venice: Ruberto Meietti, 1596).

them courtesans. I know without a doubt that those wretched monsters are unworthy of such a name.⁵

While Speroni does not mention the body, he disassociates the courtesan from courtliness. Categorizing courtesans with all other prostitutes allowed critics to refashion the courtesan's image and fit them into the context of these cultural norms. Centered around the female body, these works berating courtesans expose anxieties about the encroachment of femininity into masculine spaces.

Reading texts from the courtesan's detractors to assess the anxieties they reveal provides for a deeper understanding of social mobility, of gendered constructs, and of social control in sixteenth-century Venice. In her writings, the courtesan took on the task of defending not only herself, but also all women against the maligning texts that sought to depict them as both corrupt and inferior. Courtesan poets reclaim the female body and experience as one subjected to the conditions that were imposed upon it and simultaneously revalidate woman by celebrating her sexuality. These defenses, often in the form of poems or letters, highlight the courtesan's liminal and paradoxical existence as a penetrator of conventionally male social and intellectual spheres. Studying works authored by courtesans under the scope of perceptions of the body reveals that sixteenth-century definitions of womanhood were not straightforward in the case of the courtesan and these definitions further complicated notions of power.

In the early modern period, class and gender were social constructs prescribed by the elite as a means of social control and to help early modern Europeans make sense of the world around them. The prevalence given to bodies in the texts used in this study unveils the early modern

⁵ Translated in Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan. Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth Century Venice*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 26

preoccupation with the relationship between the body and space and the anxieties that arose surrounding this relationship. Centering around bodies, texts about courtesans have to be read in consideration of early modern ideas about the body, a person's relationship to their body, and how that could influence their experience. Literature disparaging courtesans reveals anxieties about the threat unplaced bodies posed to early modern social hierarchy—the inability to categorize individuals or groups of people into a socially accepted and fixed space. The ambiguity of courtesanship coupled with the individual courtesan's apparent breach of gender and class roles fueled male anxieties about social fluidity in a traditionally fixed world. This thesis examines those anxieties in textual representations of the sixteenth-century Venetian courtesan and how they manifested as body-centric assaults and commentaries on the courtesan and on women in general. It will additionally suggest that the male fascination with the courtesan's body was rooted in concerns about her liminal position as it related to class and gender roles in early modern Venice.

Literature Review

Over the past three decades, the history of the courtesan in Venice has become the subject of important early modern European scholarship. Initial studies focused on the courtesan in the context of her profession, as a prostitute.⁶ These works do not provide much explanation about the distinction between the courtesan and the ordinary prostitute, aside from noting that the courtesan was an elevated form of prostitute. Instead, they discuss all prostitutes as a marginalized group attempting to transgress its outsider status. Scholars recognized that Venetian prostitutes were marginal, not in number, but as social others. The most pertinent question in the earliest literature on prostitutes is, how did the prostitute's marginal existence fare against social

⁶ Guido Ruggiero presents an early and important work on prostitutes subverting social roles and existing on the margins in Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*.

norms? These studies used laws, court records from sex crimes, and other documents from the perspective of authorities to inform social placement of the prostitute. Early works, by default then, also asked, how did premodern societies understand sexuality and normal sexual behavior, what was the contemporary perception of prostitutes, and if prostitutes were outside the boundaries of conventional sexual norms what was at stake and for whom?

Important scholarship on the subject begins with Guido Ruggiero's *The Boundaries of Eros*. In this work, Ruggiero discusses the history of sexuality in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Venice, the Venetian "golden age." Specifically, the author is interested in the city's sexual culture, both licit and illicit, one that existed within and outside the complex and shifting boundaries of established sexual norms. At the forefront of his argument is his examination of legal records of sex crime in Venice. By defining, through legal proceedings, what was abnormal sexual conduct, early modern Venetian courts were also defining what was considered normal. Ruggiero argues that criminal sexual acts were persecuted not because they threatened morality but because they challenged the basic institutions of family and marriage. He claims that licit and illicit sexual acts "produced their own institutions, languages, values, and habits" and that the boundaries of Eros were "literally plural...neither neat and fixed nor particularly exact."⁷ Ruggiero also explores fornication, adultery, sodomy, rape, and prostitution, all of which "undermined legitimate sexuality."⁸

An underlying theme present in this work is social placement, or a person's prescribed place within the framework of social norms. As previously mentioned, legalized prostitution allowed Venice the opportunity to place otherwise unplaced women as well as to gain

⁷ Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 10

⁸ Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, 11.

economically from the practice. Further, Ruggiero adds that legalizing prostitution “served more the practical concerns of a male-oriented commercial society than any puritanical or overtly antisexual vision.”⁹ This contention suggests that the regulation of prostitutes was not, as one might guess, a matter of religious concern but one of social control. Since lawmakers—with the exception of some queens—were predominantly male in early modern Europe, it follows that “laws thus reflect male notions and worries.”¹⁰ Marriage was the preferred social placement for young Renaissance women. The institution of marriage served three purposes, in order of importance: “the procreation of children, the avoidance of sin, and mutual help and compassion.”¹¹ This placement—along with monastic life—was common among the upper classes, while lower-class, unmarried women occasionally became prostitutes or servants. Since marriage was an early modern woman’s highest calling, “unmarried women were thus suspect, both because they were fighting their natural sex drive and because they were upsetting the divinely imposed order, which made woman subject to man.”¹² Prostitutes complicated these concerns by actively embracing sex and working, for the most part, independently of men, with the exception of clients.¹³ Specifically, they were not legally dependent on men and could earn their own living.

Travelers’ accounts, such as those of Thomas Coryat and Michel de Montaigne, artworks, such as those of Titian, and literary works, such as those of Pietro Aretino, have given rise to vibrant interdisciplinary debate about the place of the courtesan in Venetian society. These works

⁹ Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, 155.

¹⁰ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 43.

¹¹ Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 31.

¹² Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 33.

¹³ It is not clear whether courtesans had to be governed by pimps or procurers since it is nowhere explicitly stated how the actual exchanges happen. Courtesans could however reject or accept clients as they pleased and often did so in order to brag about their association with revered men.

offer us the opportunity to examine the prostitute through the eyes of others, and to note the ways in which representations of the courtesan differ from those of the common whore. These sources allow us to understand that the courtesan's exalted image was as much a product of others' presentation of her as of her own self-presentation. For example, extrapolating contemporary perceptions through an analysis of sumptuary laws, portraits, poems, letters, other sources, Lynne Lawner argues that "society made the courtesan," while "art and literature advertised her, occasionally plunging her into the future and perpetuating her."¹⁴ Most scholars accept the idea that the courtesan played a part in securing her own success and lean toward an argument for agency. Thus, the distinction between courtesan and common prostitute came from the courtesan's ability to skillfully transgress the boundaries of her class.

The vast majority of scholarship on courtesans' agency prioritizes three themes: the courtesans' negotiation of social freedom and identity, manipulation of social boundaries, and regulation by authorities and detractors. These themes are most prevalent in studies examining the courtesan's own cultural production, anti-courtesan literature, and contemporary depictions of the courtesan. This type of analysis privileges studies of specific courtesans and their relationships to their clients or patrons. Margaret F. Rosenthal's micro-historical article, "The Venetian Courtesan's Defense," analyzes one courtesan, Veronica Franco, and one of her poetic works, *Terze rime*. A focused study allows Rosenthal to ask more specific questions such as:

How did Veronica Franco, the foremost example of the *cortigiana onesta* in sixteenth-century Italy, succeed in infiltrating the academy of learned men? Were any restrictions placed upon her professional activities when she vied with men for public recognition and literary commissions? How

¹⁴ Lynne Lawner, "Preface" in *Lives of The Courtesans: Portraits of the Renaissance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987). The pages are unnumbered.

did social forces contain or compel the courtesan's cultivation of a literary identity in Venetian society? What were the maneuvers, both personal and professional, that the *cortigiana onesta* adopted when she obtained entrance into an elite literary circle and allied herself with powerful male patrons and intellectuals?¹⁵

Rosenthal analyzes Franco's poems in relation to literary practice in late sixteenth-century Venice. The poems provide are a dialogue between male and female voices, with Franco responding to a male attacker, Maffio Venier, in defense of courtesans and defamed women. Rosenthal indicates that Franco "reworked an existing love lyric tradition to suit her own designs and appropriated a public rhetoric traditionally denied Renaissance women."¹⁶ This pioneering work shows that the courtesan manipulated literary conventions to advance her own agenda and crossed over from the male-prescribed private sphere to the male-dominated public sphere. Ann Rosalind Jones in *The Currency of Eros* continues the argument that courtesans employed certain social-climbing strategies; she argues that these were used not only to survive but also to bargain with gender expectations. Jones writes a study of one genre, love lyric, during the Renaissance. Some specific questions Jones proposes to answer are:

How was [the female poet] to justify her self-publication to a suspicious public? How was she to make herself intelligible as a desiring subject through lyric conventions that assigned her the position of mysterious or inaccessible other?¹⁷ What were the constraints upon women's

¹⁵ Margaret F. Rosenthal, "Veronica Franco's Terze Rime: The Venetian Courtesan's Defense," in *Renaissance Quarterly* vol. 42, no. 2, (University of Chicago Press, 1989) 228.

¹⁶ Rosenthal, "Veronica Franco's Terze Rime," 230.

¹⁷ Ann Rosalind Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe, 1540-1620* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1.

participation in literary production? What contradictions in the system of early modern gender ideologies left room to move? Were there any positive arguments or models for women poets' activity?¹⁸

Her arguments are centered, however, around the Marxist notion of negotiation, which "accepts the dominant ideology encoded into a text but particularizes and transforms it in the service of a different group."¹⁹ The application of this concept to the argument for women's self-cultivation through the use of love lyric is Jones' largest contribution to the historiography of courtesans. She states female poets had to negotiate with "social and literary conventions of a period during which women were constantly looked at but rarely encouraged to have themselves heard."²⁰ Jones argues that, "working within and transforming the lyric discourses and systems of literary exchange...[the courtesan] exploited the fluidity of eros as currency."²¹ The courtesan poets were able to refashion their images in ways that provided them a second, more respectable medium of exchange.

Few scholars have argued points made arguments specific to the courtesan's body. Dolora Wojciehowski examines the poetic battle between courtesan-poet Veronica Franco and her detractor, Maffio Venier as an example of the real and imagined vulnerabilities of the body and the "brutal realities" of the courtesan's profession.²² She proposes the "virtual body" as a "historically, socially, and geographically contingent projection of personal and group identity."²³ This metaphor is Wojciehowski's most important contribution to the historiography

¹⁸ Jones, *The Currency of Eros*, 15.

¹⁹ Jones, *The Currency of Eros*, 4.

²⁰ Jones, *The Currency of Eros*, 15.

²¹ Jones, *The Currency of Eros*, 10.

²² Dolora Chapelle Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier: Sex, Death, and Poetry in Cinquecento Venice," in *Italica* vol. 83, no. 3, (American Association of Teachers of Italian, 2006).

²³ Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier," 371.

in that it offers an explanation to what was at stake. Since the virtual body influenced the collective perceptions of a person or thing, Venier and other critics could use this strategy to their advantage in dismantling the reputations of Franco and other courtesans. Pertinent to this study is Courtney Quaintance's approach in "Defaming the Courtesan," which discusses some invectives against courtesans as attempts to undermine her. Quaintance comments on the attack on the courtesan's body as an attack on the most powerful tool she possessed. She argues, defamatory texts are manifestations of a complex power dynamic between courtesans and literati that was played out in the public and private spaces of the city as well as on paper...[and] male poets used the literary topos of the courtesan to negotiate a barrage of anxieties: from broad concerns about their social and economic status to more intimate worries about sexual prowess.²⁴ Quaintance concentrates on the use of the courtesan by male writers as a projection of their own anxieties and the common negative tropes in literary representations of Italian courtesans. She contends, "even as satiric texts depict the courtesan as both literally and figuratively overpowered, they also represent her as an active agent who is a dangerous threat to wealth, social status, and honor."²⁵ Quaintance does not, however, center her arguments on discussions of the body in these texts.

Using evidence from Maffio Venier's verses and Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, This thesis examines an implicit but crucial theme in the texts: the relationship between the courtesan's body and social placement. In doing so, this study offers an analysis of early modern understandings of the form, function, and fluidity of the body in representations of the courtesan

²⁴ Courtney Quaintance, "Defaming the Courtesan: Satire and Invective in Sixteenth-Century Italy," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 200.

²⁵Quaintance, "Defaming the Courtesan," 200.

and how these conceptions manifested as anxieties about class and gender. This thesis is organized into four main chapters. It will begin with chapter two, a discussion of early modern understandings of the body, social placement, and how these intersected class and gender to provide context for the world in which courtesan texts were set. This chapter will first address the origins of misogyny and gender hierarchy as perpetuated by early modern European religious, medical, and philosophical authorities. It will then discuss the parameters that defined class and gender in sixteenth-century Venice and how the body was used to shape class-based and gendered social placement. Finally, it will point out the ways that courtesans transgressed prescribed boundaries. This section puts particular emphasis on the body's role in defining social parameters. Chapters three and four discuss male reactions to bodies doing things they should not. Chapter three will address satirist Pietro Aretino's the *Ragionamenti*, a caustic and comedic commentary of the courtesan's body and on the role of women. Aretino's work is discussed as an illustration of perceived concerns about the function of the body, as it relates to the body's role in society. Chapter four will analyze Maffio Venier's poetic attacks on famous courtesan Veronica Franco and her body as a means to put the courtesan back into her social placement and as an example of early modern views about bodily form. These berating verses are a part of the literary battle with Venier and defense of courtesans and women for which Franco is renowned. Finally, chapter five will examine Veronica Franco's *Terza Rime* and *Lettere*, her most important published work, as a personal voice of the courtesan experience and will illuminate her perspective of social placement. Franco's poems show the body as a site for social fluidity. While the courtesan is often studied in terms of her marginality, it is the argument of this chapter that the courtesan's self-presentation created a liminal existence through which she could acquire more agency. Through the analysis of these sources, I will argue that representations of the

courtesan and especially the courtesan's body reveal more general anxieties about social placement and, more specifically, the anxiety about the misplacement of individuals and bodies.

Chapter Two. Social Placement in Early Modern Venice

Early Modern Notions of Women

Sixteenth-century misogynistic texts about Venetian women echo the sentiments of centuries of scholars who used the biblical story of Adam and Eve as the foundation for the nature of humanity. According to retrospective interpreters, since Eve was created from Adam's rib, she was intended to be not Adam's equal but an inferior and incomplete version of man. Eve was the first to disobey God in giving in to the serpent's temptation and subsequently convinced Adam to join her. This narrative allowed commentators to "view Eve, and by extension all women, as the source of evil and sin in the world."¹ Eve was more severely penalized; in addition to being cast out of Eden, she was burdened with bearing the pain of childbirth and with submitting to the rule of her husband. The bodily processes of a woman's journey to motherhood—from painful menstruation to agonizing childbirth—were deemed as punishments, which all women would be expected to suffer to atone for the original sin. This led to the perpetuation of two concepts. The first of these was that because Eve was the first to succumb to temptation, women were by nature the weaker sex.

The idea of the nature of women as inherently weaker than men was solidified in physiological treatises rooted in Hippocratic theory revived and transformed by Galen. The Galenic humoral perspective of the body contended that the body, both male and female, was made up of four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. These humors corresponded "with the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—and with the qualities of hot, cold, wet, and dry."² Good health was defined as "the balance and mixture of the humours, whilst their

¹ Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 19.

² Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 36.

imbalance and separation [was] the cause of disease.”³ Sexual and gender differences were explained through the composition and interaction of the four humors. Men had a humoral nature that was hot and dry, while women were cold and wet. Biological polarities were reflected in comparisons of the female body to the male and the male body was used as the standard. The vagina, for example, was seen as an inverted and imperfect version of the penis. It was believed that women were “imperfect or misbegotten males, whose lack of body heat had kept their sex organs inside rather than pushing them out as they were in the more perfect male.”⁴ Further, menstruation was seen as a woman’s corrective cycle to balance her humors through the excretion of blood. Sixteenth-century understandings of the body were still shaped by Galenic humoral theory. This is evident in prescriptive literature which extracted from religious and medical authorities to solidify their beliefs as fact and comprised the most important basis for social thought and behavior in early modern Europe.

Prescriptive texts provided a blueprint for behavior in different spaces—at court, within the family, in public and domestic spheres—for people of different identities—men, children, princes, artists, and beyond. These writings took the form of treatises, conduct books, and stories written in the vernacular and were so widely circulated that they shaped early modern everyday life. Authors of prescriptive literature ranged from diplomats, such as Machiavelli, to early feminists, such as Christine de Pizan. While many of the texts endorse proper masculinity, the primary interests in many of them were ideals of femininity which upheld traditional gender roles and strengthened the early modern concern with controlling womanhood. It is important to note that prescriptive literature also had profound effects on the lives of men in early modern

³ Jouanna Jacques, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, ed. Philip van der Eijk, trans. Neil Allies (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), 335.

⁴ Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 38.

Europe; however, where men were taught how to advance and establish themselves as ambitious and dominant, women were taught to adhere to the world around them. This meant that the recommended qualities for the sexes were different in motive. In early modern texts, “men received the greatest praise for courage, wisdom, and power, and women, including female rulers, for piety, chastity, modesty, and obedience.”⁵ Prescriptive literature pervaded female existence by reinforcing a patriarchal view of the role of women and marking this view as the touchstone of feminine identity. Conceptualizing the sources analyzed in this paper within the framework of prescriptive texts reveals a deeper concern of early modern intellectuals: to define what it means to exist in a particular group in society.

Social Placement

Sixteenth-century social placement was determined by the groups in which you were or were not a member. Here “groups” can refer to certain parts of the female life cycle—daughter, wife, or widow. A person’s “group,” however, could also be his or her literary circle; for example, visiting intellectual academies was a sign of prestige and intellectual prowess reserved for a specific group of elite men. In both cases, membership or non-membership had profound effects on social identities. These identities allowed for social placement. Using “placement” as the key word acknowledges that this was orchestrated and in the control of a certain group: the male elite. Social placement in Renaissance Venice constituted what advantages or disadvantages an individual was given at birth, as well as what their cultural authorities imposed upon them as a result of what they were given. Social systems such as gender roles, class regulations, and moral standards were imposed and reinforced to allow these authorities to place people socially, influencing the distribution of power and designating exceptions as disorderly.

⁵ Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 25.

Since courtesans occupied a liminal space in relation to their class and gender, those two considerations of social placement are pertinent to their study.

Legislation played a profound role in determining definitions of social class. In his essay, Stanley Chojnacki redefines the understanding of Venetian nobility as a construct of strategic self-fashioning, as opposed to the past understanding of Venetian nobility as a product of late medieval legislation.⁶ By this definition, the identifying of what it meant to be noble can be viewed as a process. Chojnacki emphasizes the introduction of a “revolutionary body of legislation enacted between the 1490s and the 1530s that sought to regulate political behavior by asserting the government’s authority in the social life of the patriciate.”⁷ The laws of the fifteenth century reestablished credentials for men who could participate in the Great Council—which essentially determined nobility. This tightening of status was amplified by laws that dictated requirements for the nobles’ choice of wife—and by extension, the mothers of future nobles. Thus, fifteenth-century political legislation made “governmental attention to marriage and the women whom male nobles married the keys to the integrity and exclusiveness of the ruling class.”⁸ By the early fifteenth century, there was a full articulation of Venetian patrician status, specifically in regard to the criteria for being a member of the nobility. Two developments cleared up confusion about early modern patrician status: a 1422 law that associated patrician status with both parents, as opposed to solely the father; and the 1506 establishment of the Golden Book, which listed all patrician marriages, births, and deaths. Defining who was a member of the patriciate meant classifying everyone else as outside of the superior group.

⁶ Stanley, Chojnacki, “Identity and Ideology in Renaissance Venice: The Third Serrata,” in *Venice Reconsidered: the History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797*, ed. J. Martin and D. Romano (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

⁷ Chojnacki, “Identity and Ideology,” 264.

⁸ Chojnacki, “Identity and Ideology,” 264.

Women had their identities chosen for them from birth, in relation to the men in their lives. Women were daughters obedient to fathers, wives subservient to husbands, widows dependent on their adult male children, or nuns dutiful to Christ. Understanding these classifications of womanhood, it is clear that the overarching measure of the early modern woman's identity was her sexuality. This is apparent in texts which classified women by marital status—unmarried, married, or widowed. These writings were aimed at defining the parameters under which women could exist. In *Della Famiglia* (1432), Italian Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti examines the role of women in the family, assigning her a valued place while simultaneously and contradictorily reducing her to the sum of her familial relationships. This devaluation of female identity perpetuates the narrative that womanhood is contingent on these relationships. Alberti writes,

In her body he must seek not only loveliness, grace, and charm but must also choose a woman who is well made for bearing children, with the kind of constitution that promises to make them strong and big. There's an old proverb, "when you pick your wife, you choose your children." All her virtues will in fact shine brighter still in beautiful children.⁹

This proverb and Alberti's perpetuation of it can be viewed as a commentary on the female body as a means. A "well-made" body, for example, yields better children. Alberti expounds upon this idea, stating,

The natural philosophers require that a woman be neither thin nor very fat. Those laden with fat are subject to coldness and constipation and slow to conceive. They say that a woman should have a joyful nature, fresh and

⁹ Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence Books One-Four (I libri della famiglia)*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1969), 116.

lively in her blood and her whole being...they have no liking for either the undersized or the overlarge and lean. They find that a woman is most suited to bear children if she is fairly big and has limbs of ample length. They always have a preference for youth...particularly on the point that a young girl has a more adaptable mind. Young girls are pure by virtue of their age and have not developed any spitefulness. They are by nature modest and free of vice. They quickly learn to accept affectionately and unresistingly the habits and wishes of their husbands.¹⁰

Drawing upon classical models of the family, Alberti views beauty and the desirable physical qualities of womanhood as equal to the virtues of women—obedience, adaptability, modesty, and purity. *Della Famiglia* “reached a limited public” in Alberti’s own time because it was only printed in “three complete manuscripts and several partial ones,” while a print of the full work was not completed until centuries later.¹¹ Within this limited public, however, it was extremely popular and “circulated as a handbook among the bourgeois families” of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy.¹² It follows that within prominent families of Italy, there was a narrative that positioned feminine bodies and identities as directly related to a woman’s ability to wed and bear children—an early modern women’s highest aspiration. Reading sixteenth-century womanhood in this way sheds light on the expectations imposed upon women and their bodies.

In matters of class and gender, male authorities exerted social control by dictating how a body should look, who a body could interact with and how a body should behave. In sixteenth-

¹⁰ Alberti, *The Family*, 116.

¹¹ Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 152.

¹² Joan Gadol, *Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 215.

century Venice, stratification on the basis of class was much more than a categorical tool. In February of 1542, the Venetian Senate issued a set of sumptuary decrees addressing,

the excessive numbers of whores in this our city; they have put aside all modesty and shame, and...are so well dressed and adorned that on many occasions our noble and citizen women have been confused with them, the good with the bad, and not only by foreigners but also by those who live here, because there is no difference of dress.¹³

This decree reveals a predominant anxiety about distinguishing between classes and shows the perceived threat posed by those who adorned their bodies with something other than their predetermined class garments. The decree continues,

no whore living in Venice may dress in, or wear on any part of her person, gold, silver or silk, except for her coif...and such women may not wear necklaces, pearls, or rings with or without stones, either in their ears or in any other imaginable place, so that gold and silver and silk and the use of jewels of any kind shall be forbidden to them, whether at home or outside, and even outside the city.¹⁴

The Venetian Senate did not want nobles misrepresented by lower classes and wanted to keep the benefits of the patriciate reserved for those who were its members. A discussion of clothing also allows for a more complete understanding of social placement on the basis of gender. Margaret King considers the role clothing played in the status of women. She asserts that a women's "status derived not from the property she personally held, but from that of her husband,

¹³ David Sanderson Chambers, Jennifer Fletcher, and Brian Pullan. *Venice: A Documentary History, 1450-1630* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 127.

¹⁴ Chambers, Fletcher, and Pullan, *Venice: A Documentary History*, 127.

which cast its glow on her. A husband's aura adorned a woman even in death...when a married woman died, she was buried with the ornaments of her husband's rank."¹⁵ A woman's clothing and jewelry directly expressed the status of the men to whom she was related. Sumptuary legislation was more specific for women than for men since "the purpose of a wife's garb was to announce and enhance the image of the husband; in excess. It announced only her own guilty pride."¹⁶ The material adornments of a body were directly influenced by a person's social placement. As the first impression of a person, the way one's body was dressed revealed much about occupation, social standing, and privilege.

In socially stratified early modern Venice, interaction within groups allowed people to use self-presentation as a means to achieve particular results. The Venetian academies, for example, represent the intellectual life of the Venetian elite. In her article surveying the academy of Domenico Venier, Martha Feldman defines these spaces as,

regular gatherings, chiefly in private homes, for discussion, debate, and performance...[which] drew together diverse personalities with allied interests into settings whose loose structures agreed with the variable comings and goings of natives and visitors alike. These academies demanded little fixity in the way of activities or membership and could therefore easily accommodate continual intermingling of new ideas and faces.¹⁷

Since social status and wealth already determined whether a person could receive an education, frequenting academies—where one could parade his knowledge—elevated social standing even

¹⁵ Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 52.

¹⁶ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 54.

¹⁷ Martha Feldman, "The Academy of Domenico Venier, Music's Literary Muse in Mid-Cinquecento Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1991), 476.

further. The fluidity of the academy allowed for competition and the chance at upward mobility especially for those who could use self-presentation to their advantage. While the academy was meant to provide a space for open discussion among a group of intellectuals, it was reserved for men. Feldman defines Venier's academy, or salon, as a "meeting place for writers of every stripe: patrician diplomats and civil servants, cultivated merchants, editors, poets, classicists, theorists, and playwrights."¹⁸ The exclusivity of Venetian academies illustrates an instance of the opportunities given to certain bodies who were able to occupy those spaces. Similarly, marriage served a dual purpose: as a means to place female bodies in the only acceptable role, outside of convents, as a solidification of familial alliances. As stated above, Alberti believed that when you chose your wife, you chose your children. While women had little control over who was chosen for them, marriage simultaneously imposed expectations of them as wives and mothers. Male authorities were convinced of the necessity of marriage as a means to channel natural female sexual urges. Since women, with few exceptions, were confined to domestic spaces, marriage was one of the largest influences on female social interaction.

Outside of the institution of marriage, some women chose between two opposites: life in a convent or life as a whore. These options were for women who lacked the means to contribute to the dowry system or who wanted to escape the confines of traditional marriage. The convent, however, inserted women into a religious establishment that had customary rules, and so was deemed a conventional social placement. The sex industry, though regulated in many ways and tolerated in sixteenth-century Venice, was accepted but not necessarily socially acceptable. The courtesan, Venice's exalted version of the common prostitute, complicated this status further by using her body to transgress class and gender placements. Her status as a misplaced body was

¹⁸ Martha Feldman, *City Culture and the Madrigal at Venice* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: The University of California Press, 1995), 85.

brought about by her social ambiguity as well as her capacity for unprecedented and rapid upward mobility. In dressing like noblewomen, courtesans were distinguishing themselves from common prostitutes. Although sumptuary laws were not heavily enforced, the existence of laws restricting the dress of prostitutes highlights the need to impose such boundaries. Courtesans, adept at self-presentation, also penetrated male spaces and were able to “fashion a reputation that inextricably bound the sexual and the intellectual...plying the arena of public discourse in order to advance their social and economic positions.”¹⁹ The academies provided a setting where these women could promote themselves and their literary work, as well as gain access to elite men, their patronage, and their ability to provide favors. The courtesan used her body through sex, conversation, authorship, dress, and movement in traditionally male spaces to traverse class and gender boundaries.

The courtesan fashioned herself following the model of the courtier, outlined most famously in Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1527).²⁰ The ideal qualities prescribed by Castiglione intended to show courtiers how to please their lords. Sixteenth-century satirist Pietro Aretino—who was connected to Venier’s salon—drew a parallel between courtiers and courtesans, claiming that “whores and courtiers can be put to the same scales; in fact, you see most of them looking like defaced silver coins rather than bright gold pieces.”²¹ This comparison between courtiers and courtesans sheds light on the perceived equality between the courtesan and her male counterpart as it relates to a shared motive. Their similarities, however, were more profound than the desire for status. Feldman contends that “the courtier’s arts of service, transposed from the court to the city, were adapted by the Italian *cortigiana*

¹⁹ Feldman, *City Culture*, 15.

²⁰ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

²¹ Pietro Aretino, *Aretino’s Dialogues*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Marsilio, 1994), 136.

(courtesan),” and that they were bound by “professional continuity, rooted in courtly service through skilled performance: the ability to be many things to many people.”²² The courtesan and the courtier also shared the predicament of necessity to please their lords. The courtesan co-opted aspects of the courtier’s blueprint to serve her agenda, presenting herself as of a more elevated status than the common prostitute and as an equal to the men with whom she surrounded herself. Conversely, she adhered to the boundaries of her class and gender when it suited her needs, presenting herself as both vulnerable woman and modest writer, appealing to the desires of potential clients and patrons. The most successful courtesans presented an image of themselves as humble and confident, defenseless and formidable, student and master—accentuating social ambiguity in a way that made it impossible to assign a social placement to them. Affirming and flouting cultural norms, the courtesan was the perfect liminal figure in early modern Europe. This marked her as a target for patrician men who saw her as direct competition to already limited opportunities for upward mobility. The courtesan was not the real source of these concerns—prescribed social customs dictating manhood and masculinity were. Because of the Reformation and preoccupations with defining rules, these norms were merely ideals, which were in flux during the sixteenth century. The courtesan—the perfect example of a shift in early modern norms—was as a personification of male anxieties about class, gender, and unplaced bodies.

²² Martha Feldman, “The Courtesan’s Voice: Petrarchan Lovers, Pop Philosophy, and Oral Traditions,” in *The Courtesan’s Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. by Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 103.

Chapter Three. Defining the Courtesan – The Role of a Woman

“Whores are not women; they are whores.”¹

The Scourge of Princes

In the final canto of *Orlando Furioso*, Ludovico Ariosto names poet and prose writer, Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), the “*flagella dei principi*,” (scourge of princes) and “*il divino*,” (the divine).² These are the two nicknames, consecrated by one of Italy’s greatest poets, by which Aretino was known during his own time. The latter aligns with a customary practice to give writers such titles, and Aretino was a prolific writer. In the fifteen-year period when he wrote his most well-known work, the *Ragionamenti (Dialogues)*, he also wrote many of his other famous titles and published six volumes of his letters.³ The former title, still widely used by historians of the Renaissance, is the moniker that makes Aretino far more intriguing.

Aretino’s mother became the mistress of nobleman Luigi Bacci of Arezzo, Aretino’s hometown. This prompted his shoemaker father to leave the family behind.⁴ Aretino left home in 1506 at the age of fourteen and began to roam from place to place, helping in a painter’s studio, working at a bookseller’s shop, publishing his first book of poetry, then finally being taken in by the Roman banker Agostino Chigi. Aretino, after befriending an unnamed cardinal, was able to secure a more stable place as Medici Pope Leo X’s valet. When Leo X died however, Aretino began writing invectives against his Dutch successor Adrian VI.

¹ Pietro Aretino, *Dialogues*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Marsilio, 1994), 135.

² Edward Hutton, *Pietro Aretino: The Scourge of Princes, with a portrait after Titian* (London: Constable & Co Ltd, 1922), 142. For a reproduction of *Orlando Furioso* see Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*. ed. Cesare Segre (Milano: Mondadori, 2006).

³ These included “The Blacksmith,” “The Courtier,” *Jesus’ Passion*, *The Tantalus*, *The Hypocrite*, *The Philosopher*, and *L’Orazio*, all cited in “Chronology” in Aretino, *Dialogues*, 416.

⁴ “Chronology” in Aretino, *Dialogues*, 413.

Aretino was then forced to leave Rome for the first time, but remained in Florence where he became the favorite of the Duke of Mantua, Federico Gonzaga. Tensions with the papacy, caused Aretino to leave and return to Rome several more times until he finally settled in Venice in 1527, and remained there for rest of his life.

Despite his severe criticism of his society, Aretino was adept at making influential friends including: Pope Leo X, Pope Clement VII, the Duke of Mantua and the prominent Gonzagas, Giovanni delle Bande Nere, Jacopo Sansovino, Titian, and Lodovico Dolce, the Doge of Venice. With the patronage of the Doge, Aretino was able to secure his prominent status in Venice. His house on the Grand Canal became a center of Venetian artistic, intellectual, and social life; and Aretino himself became a highly esteemed and prominent figure in Venice. Aretino lived during some of early modern Italy's most significant cultural events, perhaps making him a bitter critic of his society. Aretino was born in the same year Columbus began his voyage to the New World. As he grew, he watched the start and progression of the Protestant Reformation and, almost ten years before the *Dialogues*, the 1527 Sack of Rome. Pietro Bembo, Erasmus, and Machiavelli served as literary predecessors for Aretino; and Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* appeared only eight years prior to the *Dialogues*. Having lived in Venice for almost a decade, Aretino composed the work for which he is most renowned, the *Dialogues*, a satire set in Rome⁵ featuring the courtesan as its subject.

Definitions of Womanhood and the Courtesan's Role

In the *Dialogues*, Aretino points to courtesanship as one of the few options available to early modern daughters. The more accepted options were convent life and marriage. As stated in chapter one of this thesis, early modern womanhood was determined by the female life cycle.

⁵ Rosenthal argues that Aretino set the *Dialogues* in Rome "just to be on the safe side," since the work was a clear picture of Venice's lax morals and pervasive corruption. "Introduction" in Aretino, *Dialogues*, 6.

Women were always daughters, mothers and wives, or widows—identified with phases of reproduction. Because the role of women was “defined by sexual and economic relationships to men, society made little place for the woman who was unattached to man or God.”⁶ Most daughters transitioned seamlessly from the authority of a father to the authority of a husband, transferring the management of their bodies from man to man. Patriarchal authority ensured that the body was functioning or being used properly at each phase of life. The highest priority of a daughter’s body was chastity—to remain a virgin until marriage. Accordingly, daughters who could receive an education did so with two purposes: “to guide the young woman to develop those traits of character most suited to patriarchal marriages” and “to train her in those skills most useful in the domestic economy.”⁷ The education of the Renaissance daughter was intended to reinforce her function as obedient servant to familiar duties and her body’s function as sexual capital in the marriage market. Upon marriage, the function shifted to motherhood. This phase in the life cycle occupied the majority of most women’s lives as the main function of a wife’s body was to be fruitful in order to preserve the family. Women spent much of their time either pregnant or nursing until they became pregnant again. Outside of the confines of marriage, nuns were the only other socially acceptable type of life available to women. Nuns pledged themselves to God and to their virginity, denouncing all other worldly titles and thus removing themselves from the conventional cycle which attached woman to man based on sexuality. The female body in the convent was freed from the male management of the body’s function, but had to remain chaste and in service to God. Some women were driven, instead, by necessity to become courtesans, which allowed them to escape both marriage and the convent.

⁶ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 29.

⁷ King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 164.

Pietro Aretino's *Dialogues* takes the female body as its centerpiece, simultaneously providing an understanding of the relationships between sixteenth-century men and women and the resultant perception of women's place in society. The work is written as a conversation between three women—two former courtesans, Nanna and Antonia, and Nanna's daughter, Pippa. Nanna and Antonia discuss the three options available to sixteenth-century women, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of life as a nun, a wife, or a whore. This chapter will examine how in the *Dialogues* Aretino, reflecting early modern notions of the social function of the female body, viewed the courtesan—the most liberated female body—as a manifestation of moral decline and social degradation. He points to the power these women could wield in their own right but emphasizes their vices—deceit, betrayal, greed, dishonesty, and sexual exploitation. The courtesan and the courtesan's body are juxtaposed to the immorality and corruption of Aretino's own society, connecting gender role transgression to dysfunction.

A theme present throughout the *Dialogues* is the distinction between courtesans and prostitutes. Although, Aretino refers to all women in the profession as “whores,” he discusses the skill with which some of these women present themselves to their clients. Aretino implies that what separates the courtesan from the prostitute is her ability to play the role of a woman of higher status. He almost applauds her insincerity as a method used to her advantage, highlighting that much of the courtesan's interaction with clients involves a form of mask-wearing. For Aretino, this is the difference between a courtesan and a common prostitute. In addition—because of her role-playing—the courtesan was unlike the prostitute in that she manipulated male perceptions of herself to gain control of her own body. The prostitute's body was subjected, by necessity, to male control as a sexual commodity. The courtesan, however, offered more than merely sex and enjoyed the freedom to reject or accept clients, directly controlling the

commodification of her body. The courtesan also distinguished herself from the prostitute by personally drawing these distinctions, making it explicit that she was not common, and used this notion to be selective in her clientele. This process of role-playing was cyclical in that the more the courtesan acted like a superior prostitute, the more she could claim to be a prostitute of raised status, allowing her to enjoy the privileges of and to continue presenting herself as an elevated prostitute. Blurring the distinction, as shown in subsequent chapters, allowed detractors to confiscate the courtesan's mask and remove her prestige. The *Dialogues* reveals the drawing of separation between courtesans and prostitutes as a site of male anxiety.

The Dialogues

Nanna, the main speaker in Aretino's *Dialogues*, begins the discussion of courtesans by telling Pippa about life as a whore. The courtesan's body is depicted as a weapon, a tool with which she protects herself from the squalor associated with being low-class. Aretino praises the courtesan for her resourcefulness:

NANNA: There is no cruelty, no treachery, no thievery that
can dismay a whore...A whore turns everything to her
advantage: from a needle to a toothpick, a filbert, a cherry,
a tuft of fennel, or the peel of a pear.⁸

Throughout the *Dialogues*, Aretino emphasizes the courtesan's skill in getting others to do what she wants them to do. Much of the skill is being able to put on a façade:

ANTONIA: Yet with all that cunning and craftiness, they
can barely avoid ending up selling candles, and often the
French pox acts as the avenger of all those bilked men. Ah,

⁸ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 114.

yes, it's really a fine sight to see one of those whores when she's no longer able to hide her age behind paint and makeup, pungent toilet waters, ceruse, fine gowns, and broad fans, and must start pawning her necklaces, rings, silken gowns, and headdresses as well as all her other trappings, and has to enter one of the four minor orders.⁹

The courtesan used makeup, her dress, jewelry and other accessories that were often prohibited to women of lower status in order to present herself as a noblewoman. She strategically chose the adornments of the nobility as her costume in order to cover up her inferior status. The use of such bodily adornments to appear of a higher social rank was one of many ways that she contributed to her appeal. Aretino highlights the importance of the finding a balance:

NANNA: I never behaved like such women. A whore without brains is the first to suffer from it. You've got to know how to handle yourself in this world, and try not to set yourself higher than a queen, opening your door only to monsignors and noblemen.¹⁰

Courtesans strategically crafted a mystique that was built not only on their bodies but also on their bodies' abilities. The courtesan's singing voice carried "an ambivalent but almost magical power," moving "from the mouth of the singer to penetrate the ears of the unwitting (but often willing) male victim."¹¹ Though the difference between courtesans and prostitutes is never made

⁹ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 114.

¹⁰ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 116.

¹¹ Bonnie Gordon, "The Courtesan's Singing Body as Cultural Capital in Seventeenth-Century Italy," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 182.

expressly clear, it seems to be a combination of qualities: the courtesan's education and erudition, her attractiveness, the status of her clients, and the offering of more than just sex. A courtesan's literacy and ability to sing was a significant factor than distinguished her from the common prostitute. Aretino considers these capabilities tools to lure men:

NANNA: The truth is that the accomplishments whores acquire are only snares to catch the fools...And a whore who starts singing and can read music from a book at sight, stay away from her—in fact run away as fast as you can, even in your bare feet.¹²

Considering Maffio Venier's implication of the courtesan as a threat to masculinity, it is possible that, at least in this period in Venice, courtesans were understood as deceitful women who thrived on taking advantage of the men they encountered. Aretino discusses the courtesan's ability to wield power over men:

NANNA: I won't deny that a whore uses every possible wile to blind and bedazzle them. We make them eat our excrement, and our periods too. There was one whore—I won't mention her name—who, in order to get her lover to pursue her even more passionately, gave him a flock of the French disease-crusts to gnaw on, since she had plenty to spare.¹³

Nanna speaks of "the French disease," or syphilis, as if it were not only commonplace among courtesans, but also as if it were not a deterrent for men seeking their company. Aretino gives

¹² Aretino, *Dialogues*, 127.

¹³ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 129.

Nanna this level of self-awareness throughout the *Dialogues*, suggesting that everything the courtesan did was deliberate—to add to her image and, ultimately, turn her body into capital. The function of a courtesan's body was to make money, thus she had to portray an image worthy of payment. The common prostitute exchanged her body as a good. The perception of the courtesan's body was contingent on her talent to perform an image of herself that pleased the desires of her clients; thus, the courtesan exchanged her body as a good and as a service. She also had the liberty of being selective about to whom she sold her services.

The courtesan was often criticized for the nature of her profession in that she sold her body for money. This practice is depicted as the source of the courtesan's depravity. Through Nanna, however, Aretino presents the conversion of the courtesan's body into currency as a necessity. For Nanna, the courtesan's exchange of her body has nothing to do with morality, and everything to do with the fact that she wants money:

NANNA: I had one man among my lovers to whom I was under a rather heavy obligation, though a whore, who has no feelings for anything but cold cash, knows neither obligation nor disobligation.¹⁴

Aretino presents money as a dominant force in the world of the courtesan and compares its strength to the power of the female body.

NANNA: I shall tell you that a pair of luscious buttocks can accomplish more than all that the philosophers, astrologists, alchemists, and necromancers have ever wrought.

¹⁴ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 115.

ANTONIA: You see, you see where the mysteries of
enchantment are found!

NANNA: They are found between the legs, in the crack,
and that crack has just as much power to charm money out
of shinbones as money has to lure the crack out of
monasteries.¹⁵

In this instance, Aretino offers a satirical view of values in sixteenth-century Venice. While the female body is portrayed as a great force that rivals the achievements of intellectuals, money is depicted as just as potent—powerful enough to change the minds of nuns committed to their virginities and significant enough to cast aside morality. Aretino is commenting here on the greed of both Venetian society and of the courtesan. Comparing the female body to money reminds Aretino's readers that the courtesan used her body as capital. Nanna relates a good whore to a good merchant:

NANNA: And then you must behave like a good daughter
and do it with a will, Pippa, because the caresses that make
cocksmen come quickly spell their ruin, and when you
bestow them with especial sweetness you murder them.
Besides, a whore who does that particular job well and
neatly is like a dry goods dealer who sells his goods at a
stiff price, and one can compare the lewd tricks, the sly
twists, squeezes, and titillations of an adept and crafty

¹⁵ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 130.

whore to the goods that come out of a dry goods dealer's shop.¹⁶

The tactics of a successful courtesan are like “those of a clever merchant who inflates the cost of his merchandise because he knows his goods can be found anywhere else and thus can command high prices.”¹⁷ Nanna provides a vivid explanation of the metaphor equating the courtesan's charms and body to the merchant's goods:

PIPPA: What a strange comparison you make.

NANNA: Well, look here, this is a dry good's dealer: he has gloves, looking glasses, laces, beads, ribbons, thimbles, needles, girdles, buttons, fringes, soaps, sweet-scented oils, Cyprus powder, wigs, and a hundred thousand different items. So in her shop a whore has sweet little words, laughs, kisses, and killing looks; but all this is nothing, for she has in her hands, cunt, and ass all the rubies, pearls, diamonds, and emeralds, the very melody of this world.¹⁸

Nanna suggests that the courtesan has ways to raise her perceived value. She compares the allure of a courtesan to “stock” and tells of an instance where she toys with a client:

NANNA: I had let him have a nibble of it once or twice, but nothing more, and after that I picked a fight with him over some nonsense, calling him all sorts of names—
“clown,” “horse's ass,” “rogue,” “cheapskate,” “filthy

¹⁶ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 173.

¹⁷ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 36.

¹⁸ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 173.

wretch,” “idiot,” “ignoramus”—and then to top it all off, slammed the door in his face. Realizing the mistake he had made, the wretched man turned twisted-neck monk, and I was happy.

ANTONIA: But why?

NANNA: Because a whore’s stock goes up when she can boast of having driven men to despair, ruin, or insanity.¹⁹

This addresses the courtesan’s use of her body as capital and the effect that perceptions of her had on her value. Nanna insinuates that the courtesan’s value increased if she seemed to be able—not that she actually was—to exert emotional control over her clients. As discussed in chapter four of this thesis, the courtesan emasculated her clients, causing them to abandon morality and to surrender their wealth. Nanna implies that the courtesan could make men dependent upon her and could make them believe that there was something individual, special, and irreplaceable in their emotions. The courtesan’s control over the male mind—a danger of employing her services—was worth risking to acquire the “goods” she was offering. The courtesan had other ways of contributing to her own success and Nanna spends a significant time teaching Pippa the art of courtesanship.

Most of the actions that make a courtesan good at her profession are related to vices. Nanna states, “there is no cruelty, no treachery, no thievery, that can dismay a whore.”²⁰ A good courtesan must be adept at deceiving her clients into thinking she is vulnerable:

¹⁹ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 123.

²⁰ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 116.

NANNA: I also often wept when I saw a man come to visit me who hadn't come for two days in a row, so as to make him think I was crying with joy at seeing him again.

ANTONIA: You certainly had a great stock of tears on hand.

NANNA: But I never cried with more than one eye.

ANTONIA: Oh, are there people who can do that?

NANNA: Whores cry with one eye, married women with two, and nuns with four...whores cry with one eye and laugh with the other...don't you know that we whores (I prefer that word for us) always have a smile in one eye and a tear in the other? The proof that this is true is that we laugh over every bit of nonsense and cry over every triviality; indeed, our eyes are like a sun surrounded by shifting clouds, which first shoots forth a beam and then is obscured. In the very middle of a bout of laughter, they will suddenly burst into tears...And with this arsenal of stunts, I murdered more men than those who die on straw throughout this most reverend realm. Nothing in fact is more necessary to our profession than the tears and the laughter I refer to; but you must use them at the right moment, for if you let the opportunity slip past, they won't

have any effect and are like damask roses, which, if not
picked at dawn, lose their fragrance.²¹

The manipulation of emotion was integral to the courtesan's self-presentation, allowing her use her body to influence social situations. Nanna addresses the body language of a successful courtesan. She teaches responses to a kiss on the forehead, instructing Pippa to "turn gently toward him and heave a soft sigh."²² There are even rules for how a courtesan should communicate through her gestures and facial expressions:

NANNA: if you can manage another blush at the same
time, you will burn him to a crisp from the very start... The
reason is that simultaneously sighing and blushing are the
signs of love and set the passion hammers throbbing... And
when you talk to one man or another, look at him without
lewdness, as monks do nuns who keep their vows... And
when you want to laugh, don't raise your voice whorishly,
gaping your mouth and displaying everything you have in
your throat, but laugh in such a way that no feature in your
face becomes any less beautiful; just the opposite—
increase your beauty by smiling and making your eyes
gleam and twinkle, and rather let a tooth fall out of your
mouth than an ugly expression.²³

²¹ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 139-140.

²² Aretino, *Dialogues*, 169.

²³ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 169-170.

The courtesan, in following these guidelines, exploited her clients by creating an appealing image of herself. Aretino implies that this image satisfied the desires of the courtesan's consumers, who were literally buying into the courtesan's deception. Furthermore, they believed her lies, which were another mark of a good courtesan. Nanna brags about the joy she gets from lying to her clients—specifically about “[her] connections and relations, [and her] land holdings and estates.”²⁴ The courtesan's role-playing and ability to deceive others into believing that her performed self was her real self was another necessary quality of her success. Aretino depicts the courtesan as one who revels in committing all of the deadly sins:

NANNA: I almost pee in my drawers when I think of the preacher who established only seven mortal sins for all the people in the world, whereas the lowliest whore that lives can provide him with at least one hundred...My dear Antonia, gluttony, anger, pride, envy, sloth, and greed were more on the self-same day as whoring.

ANTONIA: And where does that leave a whore's lust and love of lewdness?

NANNA: Antonia, my dear Antonia, the man who drinks all the time is never thirsty, and the person who sits all day at the table is rarely hungry.²⁵

He proposes that courtesanship may be the eighth deadly sin, insinuating that the woman who makes a living selling her body for money is perpetually immoral. Aretino compounds this by writing Nanna as a character who celebrated her immorality. Nanna claims to take “great delight

²⁴ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 140.

²⁵ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 131.

in causing scandals, kindling feuds, breaking up friendships, rousing hatreds, goading men to curse each other and brawl.”²⁶ She contends that “whores are not women...they are whores,”²⁷ emphasizing that their first priority is to themselves, rather than to a patriarchal ideal.

Courtesans transcended the social placements available to women by occupying a space as a liminal figure—specifically, they were not model women and yet they were not mere prostitutes. Common prostitutes were not inherently subject to the patriarchy because their existence was not tied to a man or male-controlled institution, with the exception of their reliance on men to pay for their services. By attempting to regulate prostitution, Venetian authorities subjected the prostitute to male management. Dressing above her rank, penetrating elite male literary circles, and writing poems were ways the courtesan not only subverted the patriarchy, but also ways in which she created a new space to accommodate her existence.

Aretino implies that courtesans were purveyors of immorality and were not successful if they could not manipulate their clients. Ultimately, Antonia recommends Pippa become a whore:

ANTONIA: The whore violates neither her monastery nor her husband; indeed she acts like the soldier who is paid to do evil, and when doing it, she does not realize that she is for her shop sells what it has to sell. The first day that a tavernkeeper opens his tavern, he does not have to put up a sign, for everyone knows that there one drinks, one eats, one gambles, one screws, betrays, and cheats, and anyone who would go there to say his prayers or start a fast would find neither altars nor Lent. Gardeners sell vegetables,

²⁶ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 143.

²⁷ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 135.

druggists sell drugs, and bordellos sell curses, lies, sluttish behavior, scandals, dishonesty, thievery, filth, hatred, cruelty, deaths, the French pox, betrayals, a bad name and poverty...from what I have understood of your talk, a whore's vices are really virtues.²⁸

Aretino concedes that the courtesan is, to some extent, outside of the patriarchy. He declares that, considering the options available to sixteenth-century women, the courtesan is the most viable because she is the most honest. Her vices are virtues because they are as much a part of her lifestyle as her sex work. She never pretends that she is not corrupt; rather, she embraces her immorality.

By satirizing the courtesan, Aretino highlights the lax morals and rampant corruption of his own society. Aretino's opinion of courtesans and the intention of the *Dialogues* is left to interpretation. His tone, however, is one of intrigue and acceptance of the power wielded by the courtesan. It is plausible that Aretino saw similarities between himself and the courtesans. They were both manipulators of reputations. Aretino used his pen to satirize and damage perceptions of elite men and institutions while the courtesan used her body and her pen to construct a persona of her own. Aretino, perhaps, is comparing the courtesan's honesty in her acceptance of her vices to his honesty in displaying the depravity of sixteenth-century Venice. An immoral society had limited functionality and needed correction before it could serve a meaningful purpose.

Considering the parallel Aretino draws between the courtesan and his own immoral society, it is reasonable to suggest that unregulated courtesans did not serve a meaningful purpose in early modern society. By regulating courtesanship, authorities attempted to place the courtesan's body

²⁸ Aretino, *Dialogues*, 158.

under male management; but, as Aretino observes, the profession was a magnet for agency and upward mobility. As the wife and mother's body functioned to procreate, the nun's body functioned to serve God. The function of the courtesan's body, however, was to appease the desires of others in order to acquire wealth and status. Her purpose was not tied to a man or any patriarchal authority. This made her a transgressor of gender boundaries and, consequently, a female body functioning contrary to the way it should.

Chapter Four. Defaming the Courtesan—The Beginning of a Battle

But I think that death trembles,
For she must believe that she sees herself in a mirror,
As she does not realize that you are different from her mirrored image¹

[*Ma mi me penso che la morte trema,
Ché la die' creder de vederse in specchio,
De no s'aver da dar essa medema.*]

The Poetic Battle

In 1575, Venetian courtesan poet Veronica Franco published her famous defense of courtesans, the *Terze Rime*. It is a collection of poems written as a rebuttal to verses composed in that same year by Maffio Venier (1550-1586), an ambitious writer who spent much of his time at the salon of his uncle, Domenico Venier, who was also a patron of Franco. Maffio Venier performed poems—many of which were “excruciatingly savage and pornographic”²—attacking Franco and denouncing courtesanship. Venier himself was a “Venetian cleric, celebrated vernacular poet, and Franco’s nemesis.”³ With similar literary ambitions, Venier and Franco both frequented Ca’Venier, the prestigious vernacular literary academy of Venetian aristocrat, Domenico Venier, who was also Maffio’s uncle and Veronica’s patron. Venier launched poetic attacks against Franco because she gained favor, protection, and patronage from his uncle, Domenico, allowing her to achieve the success Venier desperately desired. While the courtesan’s gender certainly played a role in the tension that gave rise to these offensive poems, it was her

¹ Manlio Dazzi, ed., *Il fiore della lirica veneziana: Il libro chiuso di Maffio Venier: (La tenzon con Veronica Franco)* (Venezia: Neri Pozza, 1956), 32.

² Dolora Chapelle Wojciehowski, “Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier: Sex, Death, and Poetry in Cinquecento Venice,” *Italica* vol. 83, no. 3 (2006), 368.

³ Wojciehowski, “Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier,” 367.

upward mobility and ability to thrive despite her social status that precipitated these attacks.

Venier presents a vivid picture of Franco's body that moves from mild insults in the beginning to grotesque imagery by the end. He was well aware of the role that perceptions of the courtesan and the courtesan's body could play in her ability to gain both status for herself and support of wealthy patrons for which he competed.

Venier launches a poetic exchange with Franco, a style common to Renaissance literature. Using sexual insult, he attacks Franco through the part of her that is most vulnerable—her honor. Poetic battles allowed writers to provide commentary on aspects of character, and are not necessarily indicative of the writer's feelings about the person about whom they were writing. There was a performed component of these types of texts which allowed for the tone of a verbal duel; these poems were meant to be perceived as warranting a response. The witnesses of the battle between Venier and Franco—the assembly at Ca' Venier—“would not have been disinterested spectators of their unparalleled poetic insult-slinging.”⁴ The audience would have been invested in Venier's vehement threat of syphilis as well as in Franco's bold rebuttal and reclamation of her own body. This chapter will examine the poems and suggest that tracts against courtesans were not only a tool to put the courtesan into a social placement but also a manifestation of anxieties about bodily form—more specifically, about negative physical attributes on women and female ugliness.

Renaissance culture and depictions of women are steeped in ideals of beauty derived from classical sources that equated outer appearances to inner moral character and created a narrative that the merit of women was based not only on their actions but also on their physical beauty. These depictions were often presented in the form of prescriptive literature or art which

⁴ Wojciehowski, “Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier,” 369.

set standards of attractiveness to which women could aspire. In Renaissance representations of female bodies where the women in question would have any semblance of agency, early modern authors used “female ugliness as a vehicle for a literary agenda in which the woman continues to be an object, and a negative one at that.”⁵ Early modern writers fascinated with depictions of female ugliness rejected the idealism that influenced notions of beauty. Focusing on women’s physical appearance—a tactic that shifted women from subject to object—these negative portrayals suggest that female agency was viewed as abnormal. The elderly woman, for example, was the “female type most targeted by male poets’ discrimination and hostility.”⁶ The misogynistic views of old age penalized older women, who were either unmarried or widowed, by deeming them old hags and potential witches. Women who aged past their youth were also thought to have aged past the age of ideal beauty. Writers drew parallels between prostitutes and other marginal women, such as witches and old women, by highlighting their grotesque features to reinforce their status as an archetypal “other.” These women show that “the male imagination envisions ugly femininity as transgression and authority.”⁷ Undermining established power relations and distorting gender differences, transgressive femininity signaled imminent danger and therefore warranted condemnation. In invectives against particular courtesans, detractors punish the courtesan by criticizing her body specifically in an effort to ruin her reputation and desirability. This approach reveals “masculine fears and anxieties about women in positions of authority or women acting beyond the boundaries of the conventional space assigned to them.”⁸ The present chapter will examine Maffio Venier’s three sonnets, which equated class violation to

⁵ Patrizia Bettella, *The Ugly Woman: Transgressive Aesthetic Models in Italian Poetry from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 82.

⁶ Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 26.

⁷ Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 65.

⁸ Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 66.

deformity and implied that not adhering to class placement had both real and metaphorical bodily consequences.

In order to understand Venier's story as one of class anxieties, it is important to provide insight into Venier himself. His father, Lorenzo, was a disciple of Pietro Aretino, and also wrote poetry slandering specific courtesans with the intention of reprimanding them for encroaching on the male patrician spaces.⁹ Venier's uncle, Domenico Venier was a prominent patrician and head of an academy at his private home, Ca' Venier.¹⁰ Venier, while belonging to a prominent patrician family in Venice, spent his life as a self-proclaimed outcast who occasionally returned to Venice for short periods. Margaret Rosenthal describes him as "an irresolute vagabond, nervously moving from court to court in search of patronage or a religious sinecure, perhaps in order to avoid the political responsibilities required of a Venetian patrician."¹¹ This left him in debt and struggling to attain for himself more prestigious governmental and ecclesiastical positions. Rosenthal is the first to propose that Venier unleashed his frustration on courtesans, "owing to difficulties in his own life, during which his privileged status as patrician son could not guarantee him support or stable employment."¹² There is no evidence that Venier had particular cause to defame Franco, but perhaps it was the favor his uncle, Domenico, so graciously bestowed upon her. Attacks against courtesans, specifically and more generally, were a topos of sixteenth-century literature¹³ and perpetuated a history of misogynistic texts which emphasized enduring stereotypes of women—as daughters of Eve, as inherently more sex-

⁹ Lorenzo Venier's wrote his poem, *La Zaffetta* (1531), about Angela Zaffetta who was allegedly raped as punishment for rejecting Lorenzo. See Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan. Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth Century Venice*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 37-41.

¹⁰ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 17.

¹¹ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 49.

¹² Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 50.

¹³ Pietro Aretino, Lorenzo Venier, Maffio Venier, Sperone Speroni— frequenters of Ca' Venier with whom Veronica Franco was likely to cross paths—all wrote disparaging courtesans. These texts are also their most famous works.

driven, as capable of destroying men. Venetian writers of the sixteenth century attempted to project “their ambivalent feelings about the dynamics of patronage onto the courtesan.”¹⁴ Venier deflects his anxieties about his own social position onto Franco and centers her body as a means to publicly humiliate her and destroy her reputation.

The Sonnets

Venier’s first poem against Veronica Franco, *Franca, credéme, che, per San Maffio* [*Believe Me, Franca, by Saint Maffio*], is the mildest of the three and begins by stating that Franco leaves him conflicted:

It is four months that I have debated
If I should fall in love or back away¹⁵
[*L'è quatro mesi che fazzo custion (discuto)*
Se me diébbo infrisar o star indrio]

Venier acknowledges that Franco entices him but implies that there are things about her that he cannot bring himself to ignore. He then condemns her for charging for her services:

I mean that she asks for five or six scudi if you want to kiss
her, and that for fifty she barely gives you a fuck. It truly is
a shame that families do not tie up those who pay such
prices, as though she had balsam or manna on her cunt.¹⁶
[*Intendo che, quando'un ve vuol basar,*
Volé cinque o sie scudi, e con fadiga
Con i cinquanta ve lassé chiavar.]

¹⁴ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 18.

¹⁵ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 23.

¹⁶ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 54.

Venier denounces the courtesan's profession, stating that her prices are too high for the services rendered. He criticizes those who pay for sex—often patrician men within the courtesan's literary circle—and asserts that they act as if the courtesan had covered her genitalia in enticing substances.¹⁷ Venier speaks specifically of Franco's beauty, praising her as "lovely, sweet, kind, and well mannered":

It's not because you're not beautiful and polished,

Lovely, sweet, kind and well-mannered¹⁸

[*No perchè vu no sié bella e pulia,*

Cara, dolce, gentil e costumà]

He makes it clear, however, that he would never pay for Franco's services and accuses her of hiding behind a façade of love for her clients. Venier adds:

I would cut off my member, and in despair / Have my balls

made into an omelette / If I were ever to pay the person I

screwed¹⁹... Because screwing is neither pleasant nor tasty,

kisses are not kisses, and thrusts no longer thrusts without

that certain thing that one calls Love.²⁰

[*Me tagiaràve el cazzo, e, desperà,*

De stì cogioni faria una fortàgia,

¹⁷ "Manna" in the early modern period referred to a honey or a dew-like substance that was understood to produce miracles. See R. A. Donkin, *Manna, an historical geography* (Boston: Junk, 1980). "Balsam" was a valuable sap, or substance from a tree that was deemed to have medicinal qualities. See Marcus Milwright, "The Balsam of Maṭariyya: An Exploration of a Medieval Panacea," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, vol. 66, no. 2 (2003).

¹⁸ Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier," 374.

¹⁹ Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier," 374.

²⁰ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 53.

*Co' pagasse una volta, co' ho chiavà...
Perché el fopper no ha gusto né savor,
I basi no xé basi, e spente spente,
Senza quell certo che se chiama Amor.]*

This first poem points to an inner conflict within Venier where he simultaneously emphasizes the merit of beauty and denounces the courtesan for using her beauty for financial gain. He continues:

No doubt such talents are worth a lot and so is beauty. But dearer and more precious by far than beauty and talent is freedom.²¹

*[Val certo ste virtù val la beltà,
Ma l'è più cara assai, più preciosa
De bellezza e virtù la libertà.]*

By emphasizing the value of freedom over a courtesan's company, Venier equates paying for sex to imprisonment or slavery. He claims that those who do pay for sex are equals to Judas, who betrayed Jesus for money and is known as the personification of treachery in Western culture. Dolora Wojciehowski points out that Venier sees compensating a courtesan as a self-betrayal of masculinity and bodily integrity.²² Venier suggests that by paying for courtesans, patrician men were surrendering their power, their freedom, and their morality to a woman. Venier's answer to this act of emasculation shown in subsequent verses that shift from a critique of the courtesan's profession to a comprehensive assault on her body.

²¹ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 55.

²² Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier," 375.

The second sonnet in the series, *An, fia, comodo? A Che muodo zioghémo?* [Wouldn't you like that? What sort of game is this?],²³ marks the beginning of Venier's dehumanization of Franco. He first complains of her self-importance, stating:

I salute you, I bend to the ground,
And you don't deem me worthy.²⁴
[*Ve saludo, me piego in fina in terra,*
...no se degnemo.]

This suggests that Venier was angry at Franco for dismissing him as he greeted her, but also possibly as a client. His disapproval of Franco and her actions, in any case, follows this first stanza as a fueled and pointed attack of her body and her status. Venier highlights his depiction of Franco as a broken woman [*sfondraizza signoria*] by repeatedly making animal references in order to strip away her humanity. He refers to her as:

The deadly enemy of cats and dogs, for if they are gnawing
at a bone, you scoundrel, try to grab it from between their
paws.²⁵
[*Nemiga capital de cani e gatti,*
Che se i rósega un osso, mariola,
Ti credi de cavàrghel dalle zatte.]

In an attempt to dehumanize Franco, Venier portrays her not only as worth little enough to be considered an enemy of animals, but also as an equal to animals with whom she would savagely

²³ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 55.

²⁴ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 28.

²⁵ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 55.

compete to get what she wants. Franco is so ugly that even animals can recognize her repulsiveness:

If you go on the street without clothes,
May the dogs see that you are so ugly²⁶
[*Se ti va' per strada senza vestimenti,*
Che i cani veda che ti è così brutta]

According to Venier Franco is a vile child born under the stairs [*infame nassua sotto alla scalla*]²⁷ whose wretched house seems to be a court but is really a stable [*che quella grama ca' paia una corte; Ma pur, stàndoghe ti, la xe una stalla*].²⁸ Venier then moves into a complete assault of Franco, dismembering her body in the process, finding disgust in individual body parts and spends pages of the poem dissecting and reviling them.²⁹ He claims she has a face that frightens itself [*vis(s)o da far paura esso a se stesso*]³⁰ and is full of wrinkles [*pien de grespe*]³¹ Of her eyes, he states:

Besides, you've got that kind of eyes that when you want to see something you pop and roll them as though you were in the hands of a priest and an exorcist.³²
[*Ti ha' po quei occhi, che, s'ti vuol vardar,*
Ti i stravolzi che el pàr che te sij sotto]

²⁶ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 31.

²⁷ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 55.

²⁸ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 29.

²⁹ The fragmentation of the female body was commonplace in early modern poetry, which used Petrarchan models of portraying women as Laura. Women were “scattered” into fragments—skin, hair, eyes, lips, etc.—to describe their beauty. For more on this see Nancy J. Vickers, “Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme” in *Feminism and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Lorna Hutson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁰ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 30.

³¹ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 30.

³² Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 56.

El Prete che te vògia sconzurar.]

Her mouth is rotten polluted slime [*La bocca è co' è un fango (marzo) corrotto*]. Her breasts are so misshapen that she can use them to steer a boat:

And you also have those damn ugly teats with which, I
hear, you disport yourself in a boat and use those very teats
as oars.³³

*[Ti ha' po quelle tettazze maledette
Che ti va, intendo, a spasso in un albùol
Per canal, e (si) ti voghi con le tette.]*

Her skin is so thin and tight on her face and body that her blood cannot pump properly:

Your skin is so tight on your bones,
For this reason, you can never be red,
Because neither blood nor anything else can enter.³⁴

*[Ti ha pò la pelle a i ossi tanto aderente,
Che ti no puól per questo esser mai rossa,
ché no ghe puól entrar sangue, né niente.]*

By the end of the poem, Franco is all bones [*ti è mo tutt'ossi*],³⁵ exposed by Maffio and stripped down to an emaciated version of humanity. Whereas in the first poem Maffio lauded Franco's beauty, he completely contradicts himself here by putting her body on public display for his peers to see that she is not deserving of the praise in the first place.

³³ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 56.

³⁴ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 31.

³⁵ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 32.

Venier was both fascinated and repelled by the courtesan because she adopted the Venetian civic myth—an image of Venice in the form of a female icon which blended the Virgin Mary, Justice, and Venus as “the visualization of political ideal.”³⁶ This icon was created “to remind all visitors and citizens that Venice was founded miraculously, according to legend, on the day of the Annunciation to the Virgin (25 March), and born like a Venus Anadyomene from the sea, pure and inviolate.”³⁷ The purity of the Virgin Mary was at one extreme of the myth while the immorality of Venus was at the other. The courtesan attempted to use the female icon by positioning herself “at Venice’s public center, both in her literary activities as a writer and editor and in her public interactions with celebrated visitors to the republic.”³⁸ In reproach for the courtesans’ participation in male-dominated social spaces, detractors “drew their satiric arsenal from the polarized extremes of angel and whore embodied in the civic myth.”³⁹ Venier and other authors maligning courtesans were intrigued by the courtesan as “Venus” in a theoretical sense, but her licentiousness provided them the means to degrade her.

In this second sonnet, Venier goes further by accusing Franco of carrying and spreading syphilis.⁴⁰ He speaks of her half bladder [*mezza vesiga*]⁴¹ in which she holds a sea of pustules and larceny [*un mar de brozze e de forfanteria*].⁴² She is plagued and all covered in scabs [*ti xé tutta impiagà, tutta rognosa*]⁴³ and could serve more chastity [*posse servir pì castità*].⁴⁴

³⁶ David Rosand, *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 1.

³⁷ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 13.

³⁸ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 16.

³⁹ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 16.

⁴⁰ For the history of syphilis in early modern Venice and of the representation of the sexualized female body as diseased, see Laura J. McGough, *Gender Sexuality and Syphilis in Early Modern Venice: The Disease that Came to Stay* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). See also Jon Arrizabalaga, John Henderson, and R. K. French, *The Great Pox: The French Disease in Renaissance Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

⁴¹ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 30.

⁴² Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 56.

⁴³ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 32.

⁴⁴ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 33.

According to Venier, Franco not only has syphilis but she spreads it to others every time she practices her profession. Venier has already emphasized the threat Franco posed to the Venetian patriciate; but by condemning her body as old, plagued, dry and so ugly [*vecchia, impiagà, secca e sì brutta*]⁴⁵ he moves into a deeper argument about what she really is: an image of immorality and destruction. Venier portrays Franco as a reflection of death:

But I think that death trembles,
for she has to believe that she sees herself in a mirror⁴⁶
[*Ma mi me penso che la morte trema,*
Ché la die' creder de vederse in specchio]

In Venier's title he asks Franco "what sort of game is this," underlining his mistrust of her and his assumption that the courtesan is by nature deceitful. This poem aims to expose that deception and to reveal courtesanship as a plague in itself. Syphilis here is a metaphor for unchecked class transgression, which similar to a contagious disease could disrupt order in any society. Venier deprives Franco of her agency by attacking her on the very point upon which it is built, her physicality and her beauty. In the second sonnet, Franco is a shell of herself, condemned for her profession through the employment of bodily insults; by the third poem, she is unrecognizable.

In the first stanza of third poem, *Veronica, ver unica puttana* [*Veronica, veritabily unique whore*],⁴⁷ Venier begins by calling Franco cunning, thin, flabby and flaccid, and moldy and skinny and rotten and mustier [...*idest furba, fina, fiappa e frola, e muffa e magra e marza e pi Mariola*]⁴⁸ Franco is no longer merely a representation of death, but an actual monstrosity. She is

⁴⁵ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 33.

⁴⁶ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 32.

⁴⁷ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 57.

⁴⁸ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 37.

a monster in human flesh [*mostro in carne umana*].⁴⁹ She is compared to stucco, plaster, cardboard, leather and plank...a crocodile, hippogriff, ostrich. [*Stucco, zesso, carton, curàme e tòla... cocodrilo, ipogrifo, struzzo*].⁵⁰ These insults portray Franco as inhuman, as inanimate object, and as comparable to undomesticated animals. Franco's body is so disfigured that it is a grotesque manifestation of depravity. She wages war against health [*mantien guerra contro la sanita*],⁵¹ renders the present century one-eyed, or blind [*rende orbo sto secolo presente*], and putrifies the atmosphere [*putrefar l'aer d'intorno*].⁵² Venier consistently underscores the threat Franco poses to Venetian society while simultaneously waging his own war against her body. Critiquing her face further, he highlights her green forehead [*fronte verde*], yellow eyes [*occhi zalli*], rusty nose [*naso ruggine*], and her mouth full of gossip [*bocca piena de zanze*].⁵³ Venier's poetic dissection of Franco's face suggests that her physical attributes are disfigured, perhaps as much a contributor to her monstrosity as her lack of morality. Venier again associates Franco with syphilis:

And at Easter and Christimastime / every hospital sends
you a gift basket. / Are you not the beloved adopted
daughter / of the French disease?⁵⁴

[*E te manda da Pasqua e da Nadal*
Un sturuól de regàllia ogni ospedal.
No estu del gran mal Francese la diletta fia adottiva?]

⁴⁹ Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier," 375.

⁵⁰ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 37.

⁵¹ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 39.

⁵² Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier," 376.

⁵³ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 37.

⁵⁴ Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier," 376.

Expounding on the second poem, where Franco spreads syphilis, here she is also product of the disease. She is a contagion, a danger to masculinity, and a danger to sixteenth-century Venice as a whole. Using metaphors for space, Venier further mutilates the courtesan:

Her box is bigger than a boat,
Her anus bigger than a washtub
Queen of the bordello.⁵⁵
*[Potta pì larga, che no xé un battello,
Bus de culo pì largo d'un mastello,
Rezina del bordello.]*

She is a vacuum or a large hole as a result of her sins. Venier contends that the courtesan is irredeemable, as there is no prescription nor elected medicine for her [*...quella contra de chi no val ricetta né medesina eletta*]. In the final stanza, he defines her as the personification of emptiness:

Because you are a chasm,
A depth, an abyss, a chaos⁵⁶
*[Perchè ti è un precipitio,
Un profondo, un abisso, un caos de quanto]*

While the second poem sheds Franco of her bodily form, this poem breaks her down further and equates her to a void. Similar to being inside an abyss, once one succumbs to the courtesan's charms, they are no longer able to see clearly nor escape. Thus, over the course of the three poems, Venier has transformed the courtesan from an expensive beauty to an ugly seductress to a grotesque image of death and disease and finally, to a devouring abyss.

⁵⁵ Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier," 376.

⁵⁶ Dazzi, *Il libro chiuso*, 40.

Since this poem would have been widely circulated, at least throughout Franco's circle, it is evident that Venier's motive was clear: to make the courtesan undesirable. This would in turn ruin her appeal to patricians and simultaneously remove her as an obstacle and competitor in his own ambitions. While the courtesan possessed other talents, it was her beauty and aptitude for procuring money for sex that gave her the social advantage over Venier and his peers. Male patrician writers acknowledge their inability to compete with the courtesan physically by attempting to destroy the image of her body. Venier's literary attacks on the courtesan's body sought to eliminate her advantage by aligning her with negative attributes of bodily form. He completely disfigures, dismembers, and defames the courtesan in a public display of his own literary talents, representing her as repulsive while elevating himself.

These poetic attacks illuminate two points about the body and social placement in early modern Venice. First, public humiliation was a consequence for women who used their bodies to step outside of social boundaries. Second, as Venier makes clear, social transgression was equivalent to abnormality, monstrosity, and deformity. The courtesan, with her transgression of the confines of social status and subversion of gender boundaries, was a prime example of bodies occupying spaces they should not. The representation of her as deformed by male writers reveals an anxiety about misplaced bodies; without social placement, a person lacked appropriate bodily form. The reproach the courtesan received was rooted in the fact that her very existence destabilized early modern ideals of beauty which only praised physical attractiveness if social conformity followed.

Chapter Five. Defending the Courtesan—The Creation of Liminality

"She must, whether she likes it or not, sit with someone else's
buttocks, walk with someone else's feet, sleep with someone else's
eyes, and eat with someone else's mouth."¹

—Pietro Aretino

Venetian courtesan-poet Veronica Franco (1546-1591) was known both for her literary skill and subversion of traditional social status and gender boundaries. Franco published two works which this chapter will examine for her representation of herself as a courtesan. In 1575, she published a collection of poems, *Terze rime (Poems in Terza Rime)*, twenty-five poems written in the *terza rima*.² Then five years later, Franco published her *Lettere familiari a diversi (Familiar Letters to Various People)*, most of which were written in the 1570s, as a means to “establish her reputation firmly as a courtesan to the elite.”³ For the *Letters*, Franco composed two dedicatory sonnets which record a visit to her by Henri III, King of France—an encounter meant to be secret:

As from heaven down to a humble roof
Beneficent Jove descends to us here below,
and to avoid blinding mortal eyes
with such a noble sight, takes human shape:

¹ Cited by Margaret Rosenthal. “Epilogue” in Aretino, *Dialogues*, 396.

² Italian poet Dante Alighieri invented the *terza rima* in the thirteenth century as the structure of *The Divine Comedy*. The poem is arranged in tercets, or lines grouped in threes, with the rhyme scheme *aba bcb cdc ded*. See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. Robin Kirkpatrick (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

³ Ann Rosalind Jones and Margaret F. Rosenthal, “Introduction,” in Veronica Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, eds. Ann Rosalind Jones and Margaret F. Rosenthal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9. The translation of the *Lettere* and the *Rime* by Jones and Rosenthal is the first and only full translation into English.

so to my poor dwelling came Henri,
without royal show, which blinds and dazzles—
Henri, whom fate chose for such an empire
that one world alone cannot contain it.
Even so disguised, into my heart
he shone such a ray of his divine virtue
that my innate strength completely failed me.
So, assured of the depth of my affection,
he took my image, in enamel and paint,
away with him in a gracious, open spirit.⁴

Franco, in this sonnet, in her *Letters*, and in her *Poems* highlights her relationships to powerful men and the favors that they would grant her. Her connections with elite men were a factor in the advantage she had over male writers in her literary circle—as evidenced through the defamatory verses of Maffio Venier, discussed previously in chapter four. Franco’s *Poems* encompass an array of subjects; but her defense of herself and of women in general, which will be discussed in this chapter, are her most well-known literary pieces. The collection of twenty-five poems is structured into two parts. The fourteen poems in the first part are arranged in *capitoli*, “a verse form used by thirteenth-century Provençal poets for literary debate,” which was common among members of Ca’Venier.⁵ The *tenzone*, “a poetic debate in which one poet answers another’s poem in a combative dialogue,” is a form of the *capitolo* which Franco uses in her *Poems*.⁶ The

⁴ *Poems and Selected Letters*, 27.

⁵ “Introduction” in Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 7.

⁶ “Introduction” in Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 7.

capitolo allows poets to employ a pattern of presenting a challenge and a response. Using the *tenzone* specifically, Franco's first group of poems present male-authored poems as the challenge followed by Franco's response, and vice versa. The second group consists of poems all written by Franco.⁷ Together, the *Rime* and *Letters* reveal the intricacies of Franco's social life, her literary skill, and her ability to fashion an image of herself that contributed to her upward mobility. It is through these works that we are able to study Franco so comprehensively and to unearth details about her, as both poet and courtesan.

Franco was born in 1546 to a family considered *cittadini*, "native-born citizens who belonged by hereditary right to a professional caste that made up the government bureaucracy and were also members of the powerful confraternities."⁸ Franco's mother, Paola was a courtesan who, along with Franco, is listed in the *Catalogue of All the Principal and most Honored Courtesans of Venice* (1564) a document chronicling the registered courtesans in Venice.⁹ Authorities, however, faced obstacles in legally defining courtesanship electing that a prostitute "is a woman who either has not married at all and is sexually active with one or more men, or is married but does not live with her husband."¹⁰ The sixteenth-century courtesan, "defined, then, only by what she is not...never received a precise legal definition of her own."¹¹ Franco's mother was married briefly, most likely through arrangement, but none of her children were fathered by her husband. The marriage was advantageous to Paola because "a courtesan's reputation social standing was made more secure if she were married, or more importantly, if she were protected by Venetian patricians."¹² Franco herself was married as well, also for a short

⁷ Maffio Venier's poems, responded to in *Capitoli* 16 do not actually appear in the *Terza rime*.

⁸ Biographical information on Franco found in "Introduction" in Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 2.

⁹ As stated in Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 66. For a reproduction of the *Catalogue* See Rita Casagrande di Villaviera, *Le cortigiane veneziane nel Cinquecello* (Milan: Longanesi, 1968).

¹⁰ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 67.

¹¹ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 67.

¹² Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 66.

time. This suggests that the men with whom the courtesan associated were a key aspect of her self-presentation. It was her mother who introduced Franco to courtesanship and served as a “go-between” for her services.¹³ Franco had been educated by private tutors alongside her three brothers and continued her education “by mixing with learned men, writers, and painters, whom she met in various social circumstances.”¹⁴ Franco was able to thrive as a courtesan due to her ability to use the status of the men around her for personal gain. It is unclear how Franco met the Venier family, but in the 1570s, she became connected to Domenico Venier and his academic salon.¹⁵ The support that Franco “received in the 1570s from Domenico Venier and other influential men in Venetian society was crucial to her career as honest courtesan.”¹⁶

The courtesan occupied a liminal space in sixteenth-century Venice. Since prostitution could be regulated in the city, the profession was accepted—in the sense that it was tolerated. There was still, however, a stigmatized existence for prostitute, who were still judged as deplorable. The courtesan separated herself from the common prostitute by employing her intellectual prowess, connections to elite men, and literary talent to procure patronage and favors. Equipped with these gifts, the courtesan enjoyed a wealthy and comfortable existence, presenting herself as a woman of status. Prostitutes and courtesans are often discussed by scholars in terms of their marginality, emphasizing the courtesan’s exceptionalism. It is the aim of this chapter to focus on the fluid nature of the courtesan—that is, her strategy of moving back and forth across the boundaries of her social status as well as of her sex and gender. The very fact that the courtesan was able to accomplish this fluidity suggest that social placement itself was, to some

¹³ A go-between was the person who received money for the courtesan’s services. “Introduction” in Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 2

¹⁴ “Introduction” in Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 5.

¹⁵ “Introduction” in Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 5.

¹⁶ Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 89.

degree, malleable. This chapter discusses one representation of sixteenth-century Venetian courtesans as portrayed by a courtesan herself, Veronica Franco. It will analyze both Franco's *Letters* and *Poems* in consideration of the fluid nature of the courtesan to propose that the aforementioned representations of courtesanship were grounded in concerns about the liminal existence of a female body.

Operating from a liminal space, the courtesan's career success was dependent on her ability to traverse boundaries according to convenience. As female poets with male subjects, courtesans were faced with a problem of,

assuming the unfeminine role of praising men in a code based on the elevation of women, thereby overturning established social and gender patterns. At the same time, they must retain a womanly facade of chaste decorum while asserting themselves as poets, being contemporaneously passive and active, object and subject.¹⁷

Veronica Franco's *Poems* and *Letters* emphasize the fluid nature of courtesans, depicting them as both defenseless and aggressive, timid and confident, and condemnable and virtuous. Franco's work revealed that the courtesan had to be fluid in the use of her body as well as in the representation of her body.

In *Letter 22* Franco pleads with a fellow courtesan not to turn her daughter into a courtesan. She refers to this common practice—mothers teaching daughters how to be prostitutes—as “evil intent” and threatens to revoke her friendship should her recipient go

¹⁷ Fiora A. Bassanese, “Private Lives and Public Lies: Texts by Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance,” in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 30, no. 3, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 309.

against her advice. Franco, having learned her profession from her mother, strongly urges her friend to change course:

I also fulfill a humane obligation by showing you a steep precipice hidden in the distance and by shouting out before you reach it, so that you'll have time enough to steer clear of it. Although it's mainly a question of your daughter's well-being, I'm talking about you, as well, for her ruin cannot be separated from yours. And because you're her mother, if she should become a prostitute, you'd become her go-between and deserve the harshest punishment, while her error wouldn't perhaps be entirely inexcusable because it would have been caused by your wrongdoing.¹⁸

Franco argues, presumably not for the first time, that virginity must be guarded in order to procure decent marriages for young sixteenth-century Venetian women. She reveals that she tried to secure a place for the daughter at the *Casa delle Zitelle*, a charitable institution and shelter for poor, unmarried women founded in order to preserve their chastity and to ensure the possibility of marriage.¹⁹ Franco also promised to use “all the means at [her] disposal” in order to place the daughter at the *Casa delle Zitelle*. This part of the letter reveals some of Franco’s feelings about her profession as a negative option for early modern women. Franco warns that turning a daughter into a prostitute was a sure way to ruin oneself and to “slaughter in one stroke your soul and your reputation, along with your daughter’s.”²⁰ She combines her warnings with a discussion of the daughter’s body:

¹⁸ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 22, 37.

¹⁹ “*Zitelle*” is the Italian word meaning “spinster” or “old maid.” *Casa delle Zitelle* translates to “House of the old maids.” It was an early modern Venetian charitable institution founded to aid young women who were at risk of becoming prostitutes. For more on the *Casa delle Zitelle*, see Monica Chojnacka, “Women, Charity and Community in Early Modern Venice: The Casa Delle Zitelle.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1998): 68-91.

²⁰ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 22, 39.

Where once you made her appear simply clothed and with her hair arranged in a style suitable for a chaste girl, with veils covering her breasts and other signs of modesty, suddenly you encouraged her to be vain, to bleach her hair and paint her face. And all at once, you let her show up with curls dangling around her brow and down her neck, with bare breasts spilling out of her dress, with a high, uncovered forehead, and every other embellishment people use to make their merchandise measure up to the competition.²¹

Franco, like Pietro Aretino, is using goods as a metaphor for the courtesan's body. In her dress, the daughter is appropriating courtesans wearing their costume—similar to the courtesan's adoption of the noblewoman's costume, as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. She is attempting, however, to objectify the daughter in a way that will guide the mother toward a different option. Through this description, Franco offers a depiction of the physical appearance of the courtesan using phrases such as “in a style suitable for a chaste girl” and “signs of modesty” in order to express that courtesanship fell outside of traditional ideals of feminine honor. Franco then shifts to a criticism of the daughter that concurrently exalts the courtesan:

[your daughter]—who, considered from the purely carnal point of view, is really not very beautiful (to say the least, for my eyes don't deceive me) and has so little grace and wit in conversation that you'll break her neck expecting her to do well in the courtesan's profession, which is hard enough to succeed in even if a woman has beauty, style, good judgment,

²¹ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 22, 38.

and proficiency in many skills. And just imagine a young woman who lacks many of these qualities or has them only to an average degree!²²

Franco attempts to dissuade the mother by underscoring the immense beauty and skill it took to succeed as a courtesan. This part of the letter suggests that the daughter, though appearing to appeal to a male audience, is not capable of actually becoming a courtesan. Franco suggests specifically that the daughter lacks the skill and body essential to a courtesan's success. She implies that in order to thrive as a courtesan and separate oneself from the common prostitute, a woman must be much more than merely beautiful. She also reveals that she is aware of the qualities that allow her to be successful, making her employment of these virtues—beauty, style, good judgment, and proficiency in many skills—all the more strategic.

Franco then shifts to a perspective that describes courtesanship as a misfortune. She acknowledges that courtesanship comes with wealth, luxury, and delight, but the means to acquire those advantages negates their worth:

This is a life 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. To make oneself prey to so many men, at the risk of being stripped, robbed, even killed, so that one man, one day, may snatch away from you everything you've acquired from many over such a long time, along with so many other dangers of injury and dreadful contagious diseases... What wealth, what luxuries, what delights can outweigh all this? Believe me, among all the world's calamities, this is the

²² Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 22, 39.

worst. And if to worldly concerns you add those of the soul, what greater doom and certainty of damnation could there be?²³

Franco attempts to deter her friend from turning her daughter into a prostitute by pointing to the physical and spiritual dangers of the profession. Violence against courtesans was an imminent hazard of the job.²⁴ In *Capitolo 24*, Franco writes about the aggression of a scorned client who “offended an innocent woman with [his] sharp tongue and ill-disposed heart.”²⁵ She states that after he attacked her verbally, he “threatened her mightily and swore [he] would slash her face, naming the day and the hour [he would] do it.”²⁶ Franco is showing that the courtesan had to risk the bodily consequences of her occupation. As evidenced here and by Maffio Venier’s verses, those consequences manifested themselves as diseases, as well as literary, verbal, and physical violence.

Franco considers courtesanship to be a type of “slavery terrifying to even think of.”²⁷ She asks, “to eat with another’s mouth, sleep with another’s eyes, move according to another’s will, obviously rushing toward the shipwreck of your mind and your body—what greater misery?”²⁸ The courtesan here presents a paradox about body ownership. While she uses the body, her principal asset, to advance herself socially, she also accepts its subjection to men. Acknowledging and even being an active participant in her metaphorical enslavement, the courtesan both wields and transfers power through her body. A crucial aspect of the courtesan’s fluidity was her talent in knowing when to exercise that power.

²³ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 22, 39.

²⁴ Lorenzo Venier’s *La Zaffetta* (1531) is a paramount example of violence as a punishment for courtesans. See Lorenzo Venier, “La Zaffetta,” *Raccolta di rarissimi opuscoli italiani del 15 e 16 secolo* (Parigi: Stamperia di Ch. Jouaust, 1861).

²⁵ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, *Capitolo 24*, 244.

²⁶ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, *Capitolo 24*, 245.

²⁷ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 22, 39.

²⁸ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 22, 39.

The line, “to eat with another’s mouth...,” is also a direct invocation of Pietro Aretino’s *Dialogues* in which his character Nanna says something similar about the slavery of courtesans:

Can the woman I described be happy, since if she stays, goes, sleeps, or eats, she must, whether she likes it or not, sit with someone else’s buttocks, walk with someone else’s feet, sleep with someone else’s eyes, and eat with someone else’s mouth? How can she be content when all people point her out as a slut and a public whore?²⁹

Courtesanship is depicted as a profession which could irrevocably ruin a young woman’s reputation. Franco posits, “once you’ve thrown the stone into the water, you’ll find it very hard to get it out again.”³⁰ She is imploring her friend to preserve her daughter’s virginity since the depravity of courtesanship is irreversible. *Letter 22* shows Franco as fluid in her interpretation of courtesanship and of her body. While pointing out the dangers and defects of her profession, Franco also distinguishes herself from the common prostitute, bringing attention to the qualities—which she herself possessed—of a successful courtesan.

Franco is adept at presenting herself as both poetic student and master. In some of her letters she implores men, presumably past clients or patrons, to edit or critique her work. She writes, for example, to a friend who has sent her some sonnets, attaching two of her own. The language she uses suggests that she holds this man in high regard intellectually and that she is timid in displaying her own work to him:

Since I can't praise enough your Lordship's divine writing and the sonnets you have composed, conforming so closely to the strictures of rhyme, or even find the words to thank you as I should for the many honors and

²⁹ Cited by Margaret Rosenthal. “Epilogue” in Aretino, *Dialogues*, 396.

³⁰ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, *Letter 22*, 39.

favors I've received from you, I'll keep silently in the depth of my soul my admiration of your skill and the memory of what I owe you...To whom as a sign of my gratitude, though warned against it by my judgment, I send two sonnets written in the same rhymes as your four. I, too, would have written four, which, though they wouldn't be worth a single one of yours, would at least show that I'm eager to learn...May your Lordship make up for my lack with your skill, and wherever I may be, I will still be yours.³¹

This language would have appealed to the recipient in that it portrays Franco as modest, even if she was not.³² This was characteristic of Franco's letters, some of which requested assistance in correcting her work. In *Letter* 41, for example, she writes, "I'm sending you this volume of my letters, which I've collected as best as I could, so that you may read it, and by compensating with your wisdom for my imperfections, you'll partly excuse and partly correct my mistakes."³³ By underlying positive feminine personality qualities—modesty, in this case—Franco was able to remind her male recipient and potential patron of her feminine virtues. She was skilled at both working within and challenging the boundaries of her gender. As Franco presented humility in her writings, she also conveyed pride and confidence. It is important to note that Franco was self-assured enough to respond in the *Poems* in the same style as the challenger. Similarly, In *Letter* 6, she mentions that she is returning the gift of sonnets with some of her own. Additionally, Franco established herself as a courtesan who set standards for the type of men she allowed to enjoy her services. Clarifying her own interest, she writes to a man who sought her affection:

³¹ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, *Letter* 6, 31.

³² One of the virtues of women, according to Leon Battista Alberti, discussed in chapter two of this thesis. Women should be "by nature modest and free of vice."

³³ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, *Letter* 41, 43-44.

You know full well that of all the men who count on being able to win my love, the ones dearest to me are those who work in the practice of the liberal arts and disciplines, of which (though a woman of little knowledge, especially compared to my inclination and interest) I am so fond. And it's with great delight that I talk with those who know, so as to have further chances to learn, for if my fate allowed, I would happily spend my entire life and pass all my time in the academies of talented men... by living a settled life in the tranquillity of study and showing me the profit you gain from honest learning rather than any of the world's goods, you could lead me to love and cherish you.³⁴

Pointing out that she is only interested in learned men, Franco presents herself as a provider of intellectual companionship in addition to sexual services. The mind had to compliment the body for the courtesan; this was a prerequisite for access to her services. Since the courtesan connected with her clients intellectually as well as physically, the men had to prove that they were worthy of her company. The courtesan, in return, verified her merit as an exalted form of the prostitute. It was essential to her success that she emphasizes her value of the mind since her education was one of the main qualities that awarded her an elevated status. Vital to the courtesan's prosperity also was her flair for knowing when to show dependence and when to prove her status as a literary savant.

Franco hints at her need for defense against detractors, writing to a friend who praised her in her absence while she was being verbally attacked. In *Letter 31*, she writes:

³⁴ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, *Letter 17*, 35-36.

Good luck of having your courteous protection on my side in my absence—protection that was not only a shield supplying me the surest defense against those insults, but also, because it sheltered me from the onslaught of hostile accusations rather than support my arguments, succeeded in making me the winner through praise. This praise, given me by your authority, was affirmed in the opinion and speech of everyone who was there, so I was assured by one person present at the scene, who told me that in this controversy my opponent had lost a great deal and I had come out well ahead. I attribute this entirely to your kindness.³⁵

Franco's use of terms such as "shield," "sheltered," "winner," "lost," indicates the idea that a battle was fought on her behalf and implies that she understood her dependence to men. *Letter 47* continues this language, using the metaphor of a written debate as a form of battle. In this letter, it appears plausible that Franco has read the verses of Maffio Venier. She is writing to apologize to a man she suspected to have composed satiric verses about her. She claims to have assumed the recipient wrote them because of rumors she heard about the verses' authorship. Franco posits that she was attacked without provocation:

Men who have talent similar to yours try to prove themselves by discussing subjects void of any interest and to make up for their scant material with an abundance of good judgment and invention. This is exactly what was done by the man who has written those verses against me, for if I don't deserve great praise, neither certainly do I deserve blame

³⁵ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 31, 41.

so much that someone I've never harmed and who doesn't know me should write against me with such venom.³⁶

She tells the recipient that since it was not him who attacked her, she “no longer [has] a reason for a duel or challenge,”³⁷ mentioning that this is her response to his letter. Franco also thanks him for his acceptance of a literary battle between the two of them. She reframes the challenge, however, as an opportunity for her to practice her skills for when she may have to duel her actual detractor:

And because I need it, I'll take advantage of it with the same confidence that I want you to have in me, And I'll avail myself of it especially against whoever wrote that composition attacking me, if he ever comes to light. In the meantime, so as not to abandon the training in arms that I need, I entreat your Lordship, as the perfect instructor, to teach me some secret stroke, or, rather, to take the sword into your own hand, not one with a sharp edge but one for play, and to engage with me in a duel as virtuoso as you like, challenging me to a response by sending me whatever opening lines are convenient for you, in whatever language suits you.³⁸

Franco uses the description of battle, weapons, war, and wounds to present herself as defenseless against her disparagers while also actively engaging in a literary duel with them. In the poems in defense of the courtesan, terms like “blood” and “sword,” invoke images of bodily harm and reaffirm the bodily consequences of transgressing social boundaries. Franco, noted Venier’s

³⁶ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 47, 45.

³⁷ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 47, 45.

³⁸ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, Letter 47, 45.

body-centric language as a personal attack and knew that words denigrating her body could ruin her reputation:

Even less than to any other should a man
do this to women, whom nature created
for the use that brings most delight to men:
weak in body, and not only quite unfit
to injure others, but also far distant,
through their timid hearts, from self-defense.

This should have restrained your hand
from striking those relentless blows
now marked on my naked female breast.

How this came about I can't really say,
except that from my side you pulled out
your weapons, dripping and red with blood.³⁹

Franco provides two reasons a man should not attack a woman's body. First, the function of the female body is to bring pleasure to men, which is the expected viewpoint of a woman who used her body in this way for a living. Second, women's bodies are weaker and unable to defend themselves. Franco accuses her detractor of "striking those relentless blows now marked on [her] naked female breast." A blow to her body and, as a result, her reputation was one from which it was nearly impossible to recover. The image of dripping blood suggests that the assailant was stained with the evidence of his crime. Franco is making it clear that the invectives against her

³⁹ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters, Capitolo* 16 lines 10-21, 161.

are harmful to both her and her detractor who, by facing her in poetic combat, “will have nowhere to run.”⁴⁰

In the second half of the *Terza rime*, where all of the poems are by Franco, she uses this space to reply to defamatory verses; *Capitolo* 16 responds to Maffio Venier’s three poems about Franco. She begins by criticizing his lack of chivalry in launching his unprovoked assault.

It is not the deed of a knight who's gathered
lofty virtue in his undefeated heart
and set his mind entirely on honor,
with insidious and hidden weapons
to strike without warning an unarmed woman
and to deal her blows that mean her death.⁴¹

Franco accuses Venier of behaving dishonorably, attacking an unsuspecting and undeserving woman. Her approach insinuates again that Franco was aware of the damage that condemning works about the courtesan and the courtesan’s body could do to her occupation, reputation, and social status. Attacks on the courtesan’s body could “mean her death” since that was her main occupational tool. Further, Franco reproaches her challenger for his aggression toward a woman—the weaker sex—who is unguarded and incapable of defending herself. Franco proclaims that her opponent has an unfair advantage over her, citing her inexperience in literary battle. She writes eloquently that while she thought she would never heal from her wounds, she gained the courage to protect herself.

⁴⁰ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, *Capitolo* 16 line 196, 171.

⁴¹ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, *Capitolo* 16 lines 4-9, 161.

Franco vows to combat her adversary “with a heart entirely aflame for revenge.”⁴² Here Franco shifts fluidly from defenseless and unprepared woman to assertive and equipped warrior:

Though a woman, born to milder tasks;
and, blade in hand, I learned warrior's skills,
so that, by handling weapons, I learned
that women by nature are no less agile than men.
So, devoting all my effort to arms,
I see myself now, thanks to heaven, at the point
where I no longer fear harm from anyone.⁴³

The knowledge the courtesan possesses, which allows her to penetrate male circles, is equal to that of the men within those groups. That knowledge is the “weapon” Franco is addressing, admitting that she is able to wield it just as well as any man. She rejects the claim that women are naturally the lesser sex, stating that women, given proper weapons and training “will be able to prove to all men that we have hands and feet and hearts like [theirs].”⁴⁴ Franco is emphasizing the bodily similarities between men and women, affirming that the female body is not inferior. Through the deprivation of education and the skill necessary to use their knowledge, women are made to appear weaker. Fully equipped female bodies would be able to occupy the same spaces and accomplish the same feats as male bodies. Franco then declares herself a champion for all women:

And to prove to you that I speak the truth,
among so many women I will act first,

⁴² Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters, Capitolo* 16 lines 55-57, 163.

⁴³ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters, Capitolo* 16 lines 33-39, 163.

⁴⁴ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters, Capitolo* 16 lines 64-66, 163.

setting an example for them all to follow...

And I undertake to defend all women
against you, who despise them so
that rightly I'm not alone to protest...
and I now challenge you to single combat:
gird yourself with weapons and valor.

I'll show you how far the female sex
excels your own. Arm yourself however you please
and take good heed for your survival,
for I will answer you with blows
(though leaving the choice of field to you)
unlike any you've ever felt before.⁴⁵

While Franco challenges her enemy to a literary battle, she also informs him that he cannot win against her, since she is fighting "in the name of vengeance and self-defense."⁴⁶ Franco warns him of her skill in writing, boasting that she can write in any language or poetic style. Her confidence is heightened as she launches her counterattack:

I would like to ask you to recite
the beginning of the *canzone* you sent my way,
since this written work is addressed to me.
"Verily unique," among other things, you called me,
alluding to Veronica, my name,
and in your discourse you blamed me severely.

⁴⁵ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters, Capitolo* 16 lines 73-99, 165.

⁴⁶ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters, Capitolo* 16 lines 108, 167.

But, according to my dictionary, I fail to see
how one can properly call something "unique"
in a critical sense, by way of condemnation.
Perhaps you're speaking in an ironic way,
but amphibology fails to communicate
the point you evidently want to make.⁴⁷

Franco demonstrates her intelligence to Venier, dissecting his poem as he had dissected her body. Displaying her intellect, she educates him on his misuse of the words “unique” and “prostitute” claiming that the ways he uses these words actually makes them compliments to her. By turning the meaning of Venier’s words toward positivity, Franco is reclaiming the body that Venier stole and distorted. She implores Venier to prepare himself to spar with her:

So make ready now your paper and ink
and tell me, this time, without further delay
which weapons I must wield in combat with you.

You will have nowhere to run from me
for I am prepared for any test of skill
and I wait impatiently to start the fight.⁴⁸

Instead of defending her body directly, Franco confronts Venier with a duel of poetic practice. Venier had created a version of Franco that depicted the courtesan as an ugly and soulless monster. Franco accuses Venier of having an infection of his own—that of malice and

⁴⁷ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters, Capitolo* 16 lines 136-147, 167-169.

⁴⁸ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters, Capitolo* 16 lines 193-198, 171.

cowardice.⁴⁹ Franco constructs “a poetic realm in which she dramatizes the mind and soul of the courtesan interacting in forceful, even triumphant ways with her male critics and patrons.”⁵⁰

In *Capitolo 23*, however Franco writes to a patron, asking for his advice in how she should respond to her detractor. Thus, even in a bold proclamation of wanting vengeance for slander, Franco is still inclined to ask for male permission, recognizing that without it, her odds of effectively defending herself were far lower.

In order to achieve success, the courtesan required an existence both within and outside of the confinement of her class and gender. This chapter suggests that an essential quality of successful courtesans is their ability to be fluid in their self-representation. Franco was able to distinguish herself from common prostitutes while remaining modest about her other talents. She heeded the dangers of her profession and reveled in its advantages. She showed vulnerability and courage depending on circumstance; and she shielded herself with patrons and defended all women accordingly. Veronica Franco “exemplifies the courtesan’s strategies for survival in the social and literary milieu of sixteenth-century Venice by manipulating existing poetic traditions to suit her own designs.”⁵¹ Her poetic responses offer evidence that the boundaries of social status and gender prescribed to sixteenth-century women could be subverted.

⁴⁹ Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, *Capitolo 23* lines 172-174, 241.

⁵⁰ “Introduction” in Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 13.

⁵¹ Rosenthal, “Veronica Franco’s *Terze Rime*,” 257.

Chapter Six. Conclusion

After the publication of her *Terza rime* (1575), Veronica Franco published the previously discussed *Letters* (1580); in the same year Franco faced trial by the Inquisition, escaping charges only with the help of Domenico Venier. By 1582, however, she was living in poverty.¹ The courtesan, having spent her entire life building a reputation that separated her from common prostitutes, ended up in the neighborhood near the church of San Samuele, where the poorest prostitutes lived.² The last years of Franco's life were not chronicled as vividly as were her youth, but we know that she died in 1591 at the age of 45. It is not clear whether Venier's attacks on Franco affected her fate; but Franco's final years in poverty show that the courtesan's status was fleeting—most likely as a result of her aging past the beauty of her youth.³

This thesis has observed representations of the Venetian courtesan's body and social placement in sixteenth-century texts. Cultural anxieties—specifically about social placement—were revealed through textual critiques of courtesans and their bodies. In early modern Europe, social placement and the management of female bodies was male-centered, serving and preserving the ideas of patriarchal authority. The only appropriate spaces for women were those in which they were subordinate to men. Transgressive female bodies were deemed as social “others” and were pushed into a marginal existence. In early modern Europe, and perhaps in general, marginality meant limited access to resources, reduced agency, and narrow opportunities. In accordance with this definition, while sex workers in this period were regulated

¹ M. Rosenthal provides an excellent account of Franco's Inquisition trial in which Franco was accused of practicing witchcraft. Documents related to the trial are reproduced in Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 197-203. Rosenthal also discusses Franco's tax report which proved that she was living in one of the poorest prostitute neighborhoods in Venice. See Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 115.

² “Introduction,” in Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 4. Rosenthal discusses Franco's tax report which proved that she was living in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Venice. See Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 115.

³ The two pillars of successful courtesans were sex and intellect. Courtesans who aged past the beauty of their youth lost one of their most valuable assets.

and thus a part of the social order, their existence was similar to marginal groups. Tracing defamatory works and satire about courtesans, we can see that the courtesan toppled power dynamics surrounding social status and gender in sixteenth-century Venice. Aretino's satire reveals to us an inherent male concern with the female body challenging notions about the function of the body. The expectations of women were centered around the prescribed virtues of chastity, obedience, silence, and modesty. Observing Aretino has shown how personal experiences of marginality, in viewing oneself and others, were mobilized into general critiques of bodies performing contrary to expectations. As shown through the vicious literary attacks of Maffio Venier, the bodily consequences of social status and gender subversion were public humiliation and dehumanization. A transgressive female body was seen as ugly, inhuman, and deformed.

In opposition to the ideal of femininity, which defined woman in terms of her relationship to man, the courtesan was the personification of transgressed boundaries. Through courtesan Veronica Franco, we gained insight into her circumstantial self-presentation which served to create an image of herself as intellectual master and sensual servant. Her main task was to make her clients, the male elite, forget that she was a whore while reminding them of her womanhood. It is the argument of this thesis that the courtesan's success was dependent upon her ability not to be defined. This drove male writers—who championed patriarchal ideas of social placement—to attempt to define the courtesan, a mission often expressed as literary attacks against her. The courtesan's detractors used body-centric language, condemning the courtesan's most significant asset, her body. Her successful marketing of her body induced in her critics the need to admonish her for encroaching upon male-dominated spaces. Through the use of their bodies and writing, Franco and other courtesans were able to transform their marginality into liminality, both

adhering to their feminine role and penetrating masculine spaces. This fluid existence—which traversed and confirmed social boundaries—was the site of unprecedented possibility.

This thesis builds upon the scholarship of Renaissance historians who have acknowledged the courtesan as a figure who disrupted gender identities in sixteenth-century Venice. It has been suggested that the courtesan's detractors disparaged her as a scapegoat for their own insecurities about their social status and gender identities. The body-centric language of these tracts, however, has not been studied in consideration of early modern notions of neither the body's form and function nor the body as a site for social fluidity. This thesis, therefore, analyzes the writings of Maffio Venier, Pietro Aretino, and Veronica Franco, contemplating the ways in which their language shaped and reflected the courtesan's experience of her body. Attempting to control the courtesan's body was an effort to place her in society. This was common in early modern texts which sought to define what was deemed normal as well as what was considered abnormal. There was privilege attached to normality; thus, the assignment of social placement gave the dominant group—the male elite—control over privilege. The courtesan, operating from a purposely misplaced position, was able to enjoy the advantages of a normal body. The inevitability of poverty—if she did not die young—suggests that these advantages were revoked if the body somehow lost its use.

The courtesan was the epitome of a liminal figure, existing on the threshold of binary concepts of identity. As such, she could determine how that space was presented. The courtesan created an image of her body in reality and in the imaginary, appealing to male desires as well as affirming male anxieties rooted in the need to preserve privilege. I am intrigued, however, by the view of historians which favors the idea that certain groups of women in history were transgressive. Men were also subjected to social and gender binaries. Viewing representations of

courtesans as manifestations of bodily anxieties, there is the opportunity for exploration—perhaps through comparison to general works about the body—into the ways in which the courtesan’s detractors experienced their own bodies. Additionally, there is potential for a larger project surveying the ways in which other women, across time and space, rejected binaries to create a liminal existence of their own. Perhaps with more examples of female liminality, women who occupy these spaces could be liberated from being studied as the other, “other voice.”

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Vita

Mandonesia Carter was born in 1994 in Metairie, Louisiana, but raised in Kenner, Louisiana. Although she was unaware, her interest in history was fostered at a young age when she was placed in the third grade, in the gifted/talented program for social studies. During her undergraduate career at Louisiana State University, she studied biology, then math, then finally found a home in history, graduating with a B.A. in History and a minor in Italian in 2016. Accepting her love for both history and Italy, she married the two in her graduate career, opting to study Renaissance Italy. She worked during this time at the Louisiana Art and Science Museum and then at the LSU Museum of Art where she discovered a passion for the female production of material culture. This led her to studying women in the Renaissance and finally to courtesans—who were often poets. Armed with the desire to contribute more to Women’s Renaissance History, Mandonesia embarked upon this journey. She is a candidate to graduate with a Master’s of Art in History degree in December 2020.