IN SEARCH OF ROMAN PROSTITUTES

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This is a detective story—a true account of the problems and rewards of research. To reveal the ending would spoil the story. Admirers of "The Name of the Rose" read on . . .

An appendix of documents in Pietro Tacchi-Ventura's *Storia della Compagnia di Gesù in Italia* includes the statutes of a Roman confraternity called la Compagnia della Grazia.[1] Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, had established this confraternity in 1543 to administer another institution, likewise established by Loyola, the Monastery of Saint Martha for reformed prostitutes. The statutes of La Compagnia della Grazia stipulated that any woman who wanted to enter the monastery had to answer a set of questions. Tacchi-Ventura's appendix also contained the set of questions:

> How old is she?
> From which diocese or area did she come?
> Does she have relatives? Which ones? Where do they live?
> Is she married or single, or engaged to be married?
> If she is married, why did she leave her husband, or why did he leave her? Is she willing to return to him?
> If single, would she like to get married or remain in the convent?
> Has she ever taken vows to become a nun? If so, why did she leave?
> Is she pregnant?
> Does she have or has she had any contagious diseases?
> Does she have any children? If so, where are they?
> Does she have any debts?
> Is she involved in any litigation?
> Has she committed any serious crimes?
> Does she have any property, either personal or real estate?

At the end of this list came the following statement: "These questions should be read to every woman who enters this house, and the answers written in *the book of the secretary*."[2]

This book, if it still exists and could be found, would contain valuable information on Roman prostitutes, information that is usually not

available to historians. The book of the secretary would permit a study of the social history of prostitutes in Rome during the latter half of the sixteenth century. With some significant exceptions, scholarship on prostitutes in the preindustrial period has lacked this type of information. One can find a large number of books and articles on *prostitution* few on *prostitutes*.[3] The general picture that emerges from these studies of prostitution is familiar to many scholars. Prostitution was widespread and generally accepted by most segments of society in late medieval Europe. For example, Jacques Rossiaud's article, "Prostitution, Youth, and Society in the Towns of Southeastern France in the Fifteenth Century," reveals that municipal authorities established and maintained brothels and that the townspeople approved the patronage of the brothels by unmarried men. Rossiaud argues that municipal support for prostitution had its foundation in the demographic situation of the towns, in particular the demographic pattern relating to age at marriage for males. Males married late, at age 24-25. Hence, during the roughly ten years between puberty and marriage, young, unattached males posed a threat to respectable women. Brothels were the solution.[4] Richard Trexler has examined Florentine prostitution during the same period in his article, "La prostitution florentine au XVe siècle, patrongages et clientèles." Trexler found a similar situation at Florence but a different reason for it. Florentine authorities likewise established and supported brothels. Florentine male society had a similar demographic pattern to that of towns in southeastern France—a late age at marriage. Unlike southeastern France, however, authorities in Florence did not support prostitution as a result of an expressed desire to protect respectable women; they did so because of their fear that young Florentine males were turning to homosexuality.[5]

The sixteenth century produced a reaction to the widespread acceptance of prostitution that existed in medieval society. Throughout Europe authorities closed brothels, drove prostitutes from towns, and increased the penalties for prostitution. As documented by Robert Kingdon in his article on "The Control of Morals in Calvin's Geneva," Genevan authorities expelled prostitutes in March 1536, several months before Jean Calvin arrived in the city.[6] London closed its brothels in 1546, Paris in 1560.[7] The reaction is evident in the towns of southeastern France; between 1520 and 1570 Jacques Rossiaud observed "a progressive rejection of prostitution on the part of the urban community." Many of the municipal brothels disappeared, and in 1580 the edict of Amboise closed most of the remaining.[8] In many places throughout Europe prostitution became a capital offense.[9]

Historians have cited several reasons to explain these developments. At the top of this list of reasons is syphilis, which assumed epidemic proportions in the sixteenth century.[10] Another reason is the movement for religious reform, a movement that placed increasing emphasis on

morality. This movement was complex and does not yield to simple characterisation. Historians have traditionally linked moral austerity to Jean Calvin and Puritanism or to the Protestant reform movement as a whole, but more recently historians have noted the same tendencies towards "puritanism" in the Catholic reform movement and in developments that predated both Reformations, the Protestant and the Catholic. Hence, while Steven Ozment examines the German Protestant assault on prostitution in this book, *When Fathers Ruled, Family Life in Reformation Europe*,[11] Robert Kingdon shows that in Geneva the impetus towards moral reformation was not a consequence of religious reformation but that the two were different manifestations of the same development in Genevan society.[12] Guido Ruggiero in *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* finds evidence of a new morality as early as 1450, when Venetian authorities began promoting "holy matrimony."[13] Still yet a different perspective on these changes comes from the works of Peter Burke and Robert Muchembled, who connect the rising tide of morality to the efforts of the educated elites of Europe to reform popular culture, efforts that Burke terms "The Combat between Carnival and Lent."[14]

The situation at Rome was similar in some respects and different in others. Rome shared late medieval society's acceptance of prostitution, and, when the sixteenth century began, the Holy City had a well deserved reputation for the quality and the quantity of its prostitutes, an unsurprising situation given the fact that the notorious Alexander VI sat on the papal throne. As for the quantity, precise figures are difficult to obtain, partly because of the gross exaggeration of contemporary estimates. The chonicler Stefano Infessura estimated that in 1490 Rome had 6,800 prostitutes, an impossibly high number.[15] Contemporary practice divided the prostitutes according to quality; "the honest courtesans" read and composed poetry, played musical instruments, engaged in polite conversation, and thereby catered for Rome's elite, while "the courtesans of the candle" had no cultural pretensions and in consequence had a lower-class clientele.[16] At mid-century, in 1549, an official census revealed 484 honest courtesans, but this number is meaningless in itself and requires points of comparison. Figures available from the end of the century permit such comparison. In 1599 the official census revealed 801 prostitutes from a total population of 88,525, of which 35,174 were female. In other words, twenty-three of every one thousand female inhabitants of Rome were prostitutes. This high ratio seems higher yet when other factors receive consideration. First, the typical work span of prostitutes was from the age of fourteen to thirty; hence, for this age group perhaps as many as one in ten was a prostitute. Second, the figure of 801 denotes officially registered prostitutes who were listed in parish registers as *meretrici*. Other women, and it would be impossible to say how many, worked as prostitutes without official registration.[17]

Unlike the rest of Europe, prostitution experienced no sudden decline and no outright abolition in Rome during the sixteenth century, and this situation would continue into the seventeenth, for in 1650 Rome had 1148 prostitutes.[18] Jean Delumeau, in his *Vie économique et social de Rome dans la seconde moitié du XVIe siécle*, presents a demographic explanation for the large number of prostitutes. Rome was a city that was numerically dominated by males; for every 40 females in the population there were 60 males. In Delumeau's words, "The very large number of clergy hence favoured prostitution."[19] Despite the clerical patronage and the large population of prostitutes, Rome was not immune to the movement against prostitution that was occurring throughout the rest of Europe in the sixteenth century. Ludwig von Pastor, in his *History of the Popes*, assiduously documents the different ways and means employed by different popes and reformers to combat prostitution in Rome.[20] None of these ways and means were particularly unique to Rome, but what was somewhat unique was the long term failure of the attempts. The success of such attempts in other European cities only makes their failure at Rome harder to explain. One possible explanation derives from Trexler's description of Florentine fears of homosexuality; since popes periodically enacted statutes against sodomy, perhaps they regarded prositution as the less of two evils.[21].

Another explanation for the persistence of prostitution at Rome is economic, as best illustrated by the attempts of Pope Pius V to expel prostitutes in 1566. On 22 July Pius V ordered all the more notorious prostitutes to leave Rome within six days. The order provoked an uproar; tradesmen complained that they would suffer on account of uncollected debts, customs authorities insisted on a reduction in their tax, and the city council sent a deputation to the pope to voice its objections. Eventually, Pius V revoked his order and settled for restricting prostitutes to a small area of Rome.[22] Throughout the rest of the century popes periodically renewed this order, but the difficulties experienced by papal administrators reveal that even this modest goal was almost impossible to achieve.[23]

In addition to the demographic and economic reasons for the persistence of prostitution in Rome, the reaction to Pius V's attempt to expel prostitutes produced a religious justification for their continued presence in Rome. One of the appeals sent to Pius V claimed that if the pope drove the prostitutes from the city, they would be lost forever; if he permitted them to stay, he would be able to convert them![24] The author of this appeal was grasping at straws, but it at least illustrates the possibility of other approaches to the problem of prostitution. One other approach that had a venerable tradition in Rome was the provision of dowries to poor girls to enable them to marry. In 1581 the cost of a dowry for a girl from a modest family was 35 *scudi*, a considerable amount of money and equal

to the salary earned by a building mason in 140 days of work.[25] Hence, the charitable provision of dowries for poor girls could permit them to marry and supposedly keep them from prostitution.

Similarly Rome witnessed many attempts to convert prostitutes through religion, attempts that had varying degrees of success. For example, on 26 March 1556 the celebrated preacher Friar Franceschino da Ferrara converted 257 prostitutes. Come 17 April, that is, three weeks later, only twenty of these persevered in their good intentions, and eventually even these twenty return to their trade.[26] Many years before, in 1520, a monastery had been established for prostitutes who wanted to embrace religion and live as nuns for the rest of their lives. This was the Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalen, named after the biblical prostitute who left her profession to follow Christ. In 1543, when Ignatius Loyola established the Monastery of Saint Martha, the Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalen had eighty nuns.[27] In that case the obvious question is why did Loyola establish another one?

The Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalen had several restrictions on membership that hindered its ability to help women who wanted to leave the profession. A woman could enter only if she agreed to spend the rest of her life as a nun. Married women could not enter, nor could a woman judged too old or too ugly to make a living as a prostitute. The purpose of the latter regulation was to prevent the monastery from becoming a retirement home for prostitutes past their prime. Loyola's Monastery of Saint Martha was something quite different; it was a refuge or shelter. Any woman could reside there, married or single, whether she intended to become a nun, to return to her husband, or to find a husband.[28] Some of these women eventually became nuns; in 1545, two years after its foundation, thirty-seven or thirty-eight women were so living at the monastery. More had resided there temporarily; according to Loyola's secretary, Juan Polanco, by 1552 the monastery had reformed three hundred women.[29]

That means that three hundred women would have answered that set of questions, and the secretary was supposed to write the answers in his book. According to Pietro Tacchi-Ventura, the documents in his appendix came from the archives of the Monastery of Saint Martha. Due to complex causes, in 1573 the monastery became a convent of normal nuns and continued as such until the nineteenth century, when in 1874 it became part of the Monastery of Santa Prisca. The archives of Saint Martha in consequence moved to the Monastery of Santa Prisca.[30] I resolved to try to locate them when I went to Rome on my study leave in 1984; I hoped to find the secretary's book.

Before going to Rome, I happened to examine the second edition of Tacchi-Ventura's book; it stated that the archives, under the title of

Monastero di S. Marta, were now in the Vatican Library.[31] I therefore wrote to Charles J. Ermatinger, the Vatican Microfilm Librarian at the Pius XII Memorial Library in St. Louis, Missouri, requesting information on the collection. Mr. Ermatinger replied, "I must admit that we have not heard here of a collection, Monastero di S. Marta, in the Vatican Library." Disappointed but undeterred, I examined Ludwig von Pastor's forty-volume *History of the Popes* to determine if he had a reference to the collection. I found nothing. I next looked at Jean Delumeau's two-volume history of the economic and social life of Rome in the second half of the sixteenth century. In this section on "Les courtisanes" he mentions Loyola's reforming efforts, but not the Monastery of Saint Martha and not the book of the secretary.[32] Delumeau does, however, use the archives of the Monastery of Saint Martha; he uses them to show the rise in the cost of living at Rome, and on page 950 of volume two he states the Fondo di Santa Marta is in the Vatican Archives, not the Vatican Library.

When I arrived in Rome in May 1984 I went to the Vatican Archives in search of the secretary's book. I went first to the catalogue room to find a catalogue for the Fondo di Santa Marta. I found none. Upon asking at the circulation desk, I learned that the Fondo di Santa Marta had no catalogue but I could order three volumes a day. The Fondo had a total of 233 volumes. After my initial despair, I thought that, if the 233 volumes were arranged in chonological order, I needed to order only the first ten or twenty volumes to find the book of the secretary. I accordingly ordered the first three. Volume 1 was an account book and receipts for the years 1546-1590, Volume 2 was the same for 1590-1594, and Volume 3 was the same again for 1594-1599. That was my quota of three for that day. On the next day I inquired if it would be possible to order volumes not by number but by date. I explained that I was looking for one book from 1543-1573 and asked if the clerks could merely bring me the volumes (three a day!) that covered those years. The answer was no. I was surprised by what happened next; the clerk asked me if I would like to go into the stacks and look through the collection myself. As far as I knew, the only lay scholar to receive permission to enter the stacks at the Vatican Archives was Ludwig von Pastor!

On the next day a clerk took me into the stacks to the Fondo di Santa Marta and gave me ten minutes to look at 233 volumes. They were huge and took nearly one hundred feet of shelf space. It was an impossible task, but I did the best that I could, and at the same time I chatted up the clerk in the hope of gaining more time. I got fifteen minutes. On the next morning the same clerk asked me if I would like to return to the stacks. This time I got another twenty minutes. I managed to have a quick look at most of the volumes and made a list of others that I would like to examine further.

What did I find? The first eighty-three volumes were books of accounts and receipts. Most of the other volumes dealt with litigation over bequests, money, and property. From this I concluded that a small monastery of nuns could provide employment for an army of accountants and lawyers. Volume 128 contained the statutes and the original list of questions. but not the answers to the questions – not the secretary's book. The best prospects were volumes 200-212, thirteen volumes entitled *Scritture d'interessi diversi*. Each of these was huge—some were one foot thick—and contained bundles of documents tied together. I ordered them—three a day—and looked at others as well.

I did not find the book. It might be there among the 233 volumes, but I did not find it. However, I take consolation in knowing that my reputation as a scholar has now been thoroughly established. From now on, whenever I attend conferences, people will nudge each other and say, "See that man over there. That's Lynn Martin."

"You don't say! Not the one who got into the stacks of the Vatican Archives!"

FOOTNOTES

1. (Rome: Dante Alighieri, 1910), 1:646-651.
2. *Ibid.*, 651-652, emphasis mine.
3. Cf. Vern Bullough's 419-page *Bibliography of Prostitution* (New York: Garland, 1976), which contains over 6000 items.
4. Pp. 1-46 in Robert Forster and Orest Ranum, eds., *Deviants and the Abandoned in French Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978). I have not yet had the opportunity to examine Leah L. Otis' book, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago: University Press, 1985).
5. *Annales, E.S.C.*, 36 (1981):983-1015.
6. In Lawrence P. Buck and Jonathan W. Sophy, eds., *The Social History of the Reformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 6.
7. Vern L. Bullough, *The History of Prostitution* (New Hyde Park: University Books, 1964), 131.
8. Rossiaud, "Prostitution," 30.
9. Cf., for example, Master Franz Schmidt, *A Hangman's Diary* (London: Allan, 1928). Schmidt was the public executioner at Nuremberg between 1563 and 1617.
10. Vern L. Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 425-430.
11. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 55-56.
12. Kingdon, "Control of Morals," 5-6.
13. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 16-44.
14. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), esp. 207-243; Robert Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne (XVe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), 287-340.
15. Cited by Ludwig von Pastor, *History of the Popes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 5:128.

16. Jean Delumeau, *Vie économique et social de Rome dans la seconde moitié du XVIe siécle* (Paris: Editions de Boccard, 1957-1959), 1:418-419.

17. The figures come from Delumeau, 1:420-422, but his computations are wrong. He states that 17 of every 1000 (or one in fifty-nine) women were prositutes, but the correct calculation of 23 of 1000 (or one in forty-four).

18. Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution, European Society and Economy, 1000-1700* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 86, citing Schiavoni, *Demographia di Rome.*

19. Delumeau, 1:422.

20. During the pontificate of Paul III (1534-1549), 11:348-349n., 12:41-44; Julius III (1550-1555), 13:425-426; Paul IV (1555-1559), 14:238-239; Pius IV (1559-1565), 16:83; Pius V (1566-1572), 17:89-92; Gregory XIII (1572-1585), 19:48; Sixtus V (1585-1590), 21:94-95; Clement VIII (1592-1605), 24:428-429.

21. *Ibid.*, 14:238;24:429n.

22. *Ibid.*, 17:90-91.

23. Cf. the references in note 20.

24. Pastor, *History of the Popes,* 17:91n.

25. Delumeau, *Vie économique,* 1:430-432.

26. Tacchi-Ventura, *Storia della Compagnia,* vol. 2, part 2, 161 (the second edition published at Rome in 1951 by Edizioni "La Civiltá Cattolica").

27. *Ibid.*, 162.

28. *Ibid.*, 162-163.

29. *Ibid.*, 173.

30. *Ibid.*, 1:642 (the first edition cited in note 1).

31. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, part 2, 163, note 3.

32. Delumeau, *Vie économique,* 1:429.