

# The Business of Prostitution in Early Renaissance Venice

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*Between 1360 and 1460 the Venetian government established a system of legalized prostitution under the supervision of government officials and confined, in theory, to a limited area of the city. The authorities also attempted to concentrate the management of licit brothels in the hands of women, who thereby emerged as the effective entrepreneurs of the sex trade. This article describes the organization of Venetian prostitution in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and the relations among government officials, brothel-keepers, and prostitutes. It illustrates the mechanisms of debt and credit used in the sex trade, which often kept the prostitutes subservient to the brothel-keepers and to their other creditors. An effort is made to assess the degree to which sex workers might become integrated into local society and to suggest the general trends in Venetian policy toward prostitution into the sixteenth century.*

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## INTRODUCTION

DURING THE PAST few decades, under the stimulus of a growing interest in the history of gender and sexuality, considerable attention has been paid to the history of prostitution.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, a growing body of information is now available regarding the regulation of the sex trade in Europe in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, the restrictions governing the lives of prostitutes, and prostitutes' often successful efforts to evade control. However, this increased knowledge has not led to uniformity of opinion among historians about the place of prostitutes in the society of their day or the effects prostitution had on the lives of the women involved. Rather, scholars seem to share the ambivalence that characterized attitudes toward the sex trade throughout Christian Europe during the medieval and early modern periods. Ecclesiastics from the time of Saint Augustine condemned prostitution as sinful while also insisting it was necessary in order to protect decent women from men's uncontrollable carnal passions and to avoid worse sins such as sodomy, adultery, rape, and incest.<sup>2</sup> From the late Middle Ages into at least the sixteenth century, European

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<sup>1</sup>Monographs on prostitution between the late Middle Ages and the Reformation have been produced by Rossiaud; Otis; Karras, 1996; Mazzi; Storey, 2008a.

<sup>2</sup>On such views, see, for example, Rossiaud, 104–05.

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authorities often applied such ideas by legalizing prostitution even while they hedged it round with spatial and temporal restrictions designed to keep its sinful aspects and baneful influence away from the general public.

Modern historians seem to reflect these conflicting views on prostitution. Some stress that it was regarded as morally reprehensible, and that prostitutes were defined as fallen women who needed to be contained, controlled, and distinguished from respectable women by particular signs.<sup>3</sup> From this point of view, prostitution and its practitioners were stigmatized and marginalized from respectable society. On the other hand, historians have also emphasized that prostitution was generally accepted in late medieval and early modern society, and that it was a widespread phenomenon, pursued sporadically even by women who were not professionals in the field. Sex workers, it is argued, might establish relatively normal relations with those around them, and, even if they defied the controls imposed on them, little action was taken unless they seriously disturbed their neighbors. Therefore, these historians feel, prostitutes were not really marginalized and stigmatized but rather integrated to a surprising degree into the society around them.<sup>4</sup>

In this second interpretation, economic considerations have an important part to play, as prostitution could provide women with a better income than did other forms of work available to them. Their earnings allowed sex workers to hire servants, make purchases, and, potentially, become valued customers of local shopkeepers and artisans. Thus, money could counteract the moral stigma normally attached to the sex trade and allow the more successful prostitutes or courtesans to gain a higher socioeconomic status than that attainable by poor but respectable women.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, then, according to this kind of argument, prostitution might be a good option for women in that it could open the way to a higher income and a better life, despite all the moral strictures surrounding the profession.

This basic question of whether prostitution was a permanent stigma or a work option like any other and a vehicle toward social betterment will underlie the discussion that follows. Here prostitution is examined within one particular context — that of Venice between 1360 and 1460. During that period the sex trade became legalized within the city, although it was in theory limited to

<sup>3</sup>Hughes; Karras, 1996; Ghirardo.

<sup>4</sup>Rossiaud inclines to this point of view. However, it is more often expressed by historians who study prostitutes when they were not confined within special areas: for example, see Henderson, esp. 43–47.

<sup>5</sup>In particular, Storey, 2008a, 15–16, and the general argument of her book. Pol, 61, asserts that prostitution was about the only women's work that could command good pay, but she does not argue from this to social integration. Rather, she is very clear that even the lowest classes regarded prostitution as dishonorable and degrading: *ibid.*, 62–66. E. Cohen, 1998, 394, offers a nuanced picture of an “uneasy but complex integration.”

a single brothel area and conducted under government supervision. This obviously involved some marginalization and considerable control over prostitutes' activities, but it also gave sex workers a legitimate role and place in local society. Moreover, the Venetian system favored women as the official brothel-keepers of the city, enabling them to make money licitly in the sex trade and to become its effective entrepreneurs. It is, therefore, possible to evaluate the consequences of this particular organization of prostitution not just on the prostitutes, but also on the brothel-keepers, or "matrons."<sup>6</sup> Although precise statistics are, as usual, lacking, some sense can be gained of these women's relative poverty or wealth, economic and social integration, and the degree to which they could use their work to construct a life for themselves. To carry out this analysis, first a description will be given of the circumstances in which Venetian prostitution was conducted in the late fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth centuries. Several authors have dealt rather generally with this subject, but more information and greater precision will be offered here to provide the context in which sex workers operated.<sup>7</sup> Then a closer look will be taken at the activities of both matrons and prostitutes during the first century of their legal presence in Venice.

#### PROSTITUTION IN THE FIRST CASTELLETTO, 1360–1460

During the later Middle Ages, Venice followed a pattern similar to many other European towns: urban authorities moved from repressing prostitution, to attempting to contain it spatially, to, finally, setting up municipal brothels where the sex trade could be conducted legally.<sup>8</sup> In Venice, legislation of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries was geared toward outlawing at least the public manifestations of commercialized sex. Venetians were required to expel prostitutes and pimps from their property, and keepers of inns and taverns were prohibited from allowing prostitutes to live or work on their

<sup>6</sup>*Matrone*, or matrons, was the name given to these female brothel-keepers in Venice. The same term was sometimes used elsewhere, at times with different meanings: Brackett, 286.

<sup>7</sup>Crouzet Pavan; Scarabello, 2004 and 2006; and Ruggiero, 1985, have all discussed prostitution in Venice during the Renaissance. There is also, of course, a considerable literature on sixteenth-century Venetian courtesans. However, since these courtesans worked in different circumstances and generally possessed a higher socioeconomic status than ordinary prostitutes, what has been written about them will be cited only as it is relevant to the subject of this article.

<sup>8</sup>This development in policy is traced most clearly by Otis, 7–39, 100–10. See also Canosa and Colonnello, 13–14.

premises.<sup>9</sup> If these regulations by no means eliminated prostitution from the city, they probably ensured that it remained a marginal phenomenon. This policy of repression underwent a major change in 1358, however, when the Venetian government, like authorities elsewhere, decided not only to legalize prostitution, but also to set up a single official brothel area regulated and supervised by public officials.

Various explanations have been offered for this general shift in policy within European towns. Some historians conclude that governments simply realized that they could not eliminate prostitution and were therefore better off controlling it; others argue for an evolution toward greater intervention in private life and more control over sources of public disorder, such as the sexual desires of youth. The Black Death and its demographic effects are sometimes thought to have had an influence, in that they increased concerns about population and about nonreproductive sexual practices such as sodomy.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in a postplague world where not only population, but also revenue declined dramatically, prostitution might offer a way to help fill houses vacated by plague victims and revive the depleted income of inns, taverns, and the town in general.<sup>11</sup>

The year in which prostitution was legalized in Venice — 1358, a decade after the first traumatic visit of the Black Death — suggests some connection with the famous plague. However, the government's motives do not seem to have been directly financial, as the sex trade in Venice was initially not

<sup>9</sup>Laws of 10 October 1266 and 31 August 1314 ordered property owners to expel prostitutes and pimps and forbade using one's own home as a brothel. The former law is mentioned in legislation of 1502 in Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter ASV), Signori di notte al civil, busta 1 (hereafter SN al civil, b. 1), fol. 112; the second is in ASV, Maggior Consiglio, Deliberazioni (hereafter ASV, MC, Delib.), reg. 10, fol. 131<sup>r</sup>. See also *Leggi e memorie*, 30–31, nos. 2 and 4, a work that contains an important collection of documents probably compiled by Giovanbattista Lorenzi, an employee of the Marciana Library. It provides accurate transcriptions as well as the location of the original documents, which have been checked in almost all cases. Prohibitions on prostitutes' presence in inns and taverns are in ASV, Capisestieri, Capitolare, fol. 57, capitoli CXLV–VI, which are probably of January 1340, the date of the regulations preceding and following them. All dates cited in this article are in modern style.

<sup>10</sup>Rossiaud, 73–109, connects changing policies on prostitution not just with preoccupations about population loss, but also with evolving attitudes to sexual sin. More explicitly, Trexler argues that prostitution was legalized in Florence in order to discourage sodomy and increase marriages and the birth rate. While accepting the connection between sodomy and prostitution, Mazzi, 155–81, sees measures against both as part of a wider policy with political as well as moral implications. See also Comba, 567–75.

<sup>11</sup>The financial advantages of permitting prostitution are stressed by Brackett; Ghirardo; Menjot.

taxed.<sup>12</sup> Nor was it intended to stimulate the business of tavern- and innkeepers, as prostitutes were at first prohibited from working in such establishments. Nevertheless, the decision to tolerate prostitution had an economic motivation that needs to be understood within the context of Venetians' experiences during the decade from 1348 to 1358. After the drastic population decline occasioned by the Black Death, Venice witnessed not only the conspiracy of Marin Falier (1354–55), but also crippling wars, first with Genoa (1350–55) and then with the King of Hungary (1356–58).<sup>13</sup> By 1358 the city was so financially exhausted that the Venetian ruling class chose to end the war with Hungary even at the cost of abandoning their territories on the Dalmatian coast and the title Duke of Dalmatia, which the doges had proudly held for centuries. That the legalization of prostitution followed the peace with Hungary by only a few months suggests that it formed part of a program to revitalize the city after a decade of plague, war, heavy taxation, and disruptions in the city's vital international trade.

The legislation of 1358 merely hints at the motivation behind the new policy toward prostitution, as it states that it is “necessary because of the multitude of people entering and leaving our city to find a suitable location in Venice as a dwelling-place for prostitutes.”<sup>14</sup> This “multitude” must refer above all to the numerous foreign merchants who visited Venice for commercial purposes, suggesting that the government viewed prostitution primarily as an incentive to encourage foreign merchants to keep frequenting the city.<sup>15</sup> Since these traders were normally resident for short periods of time, without their families, they looked for diversion in the taverns and among the women who offered company and sexual services for a fee. Making it easier for them to find such entertainment might help boost Venice's commerce after the numerous problems the city had experienced. Such thinking on the part of Venice's patricians would be rather similar to that of the authorities of other commercial cities, such as Bruges, where

<sup>12</sup>Under the date 25 October 1514, Marin Sanudo notes a proposal made three days earlier that prostitutes should be taxed to finance work being done on the Arsenal. He states that the proposal was accepted and taxation of the prostitutes had begun, but he terms it a novelty and it is not clear whether this tax was continued afterward: Sanuto, 1969–70, cols. 165–66; English translation in Sanuto, 2008, 324. There does not seem to be any documentary evidence to support Sanudo's statement.

<sup>13</sup>On these events, see Cessi, 318–20, who also mentions efforts after the peace with Genoa to stimulate the economy by attracting foreign capital.

<sup>14</sup>ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 19, fol. 62<sup>f</sup>, 29 June 1358: “Quia necessario propter multitudinem gentium intransium et exeuntium civitatem nostram expedit providere de dando aliquem locum abilem in Veneciis pro habitatione peccatricum.” Also see *Leggi e memorie*, 31, no. 6.

<sup>15</sup>Similarly, from 1348 the Venetian government encouraged immigration by allowing anyone who came to Venice and pursued a trade to enter the appropriate guild without any charges: Monticolo, 2:352–53; Mueller.

leniency toward the sex trade was connected with a desire to maximize the city's attractiveness to foreign merchants.<sup>16</sup>

That legalizing prostitution was intended primarily to serve the merchant community is also indicated by the government's intention, from the start, to locate the public brothels in the chief commercial area of the city, the Rialto.<sup>17</sup> True, prostitutes had already established themselves there, attracted by the ready money of the businessmen and artisans frequenting the area and aided by the numerous inns and taverns of the district, which lent themselves to the trade, whatever the regulations might be.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, that the Venetian government was prepared to locate a business generally seen as sinful and sordid in its most prestigious commercial zone, where nobles and wealthy foreign merchants regularly gathered, indicates that they had a very clear idea of the role that prostitution was to play.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of legalizing prostitution within the city may nevertheless have created some dissension within the Venetian ruling elite. In the legislation of 1358, the Great Council delegated the duty of finding an appropriate location for the public brothels to the Capisestieri, whose duties involved maintaining order in the six *sestieri* (districts) of the city, and who had been granted jurisdiction over prostitutes and pimps, as well as foreigners, inns, and taverns.<sup>20</sup> However, the Capi seem initially to have hesitated to carry out their task. Two years after legislation had directed them to decide where at the Rialto the

<sup>16</sup>Murray, 326–43, who notes a sizeable increase in the number of brothels in the early 1350s, and attributes it to Bruges's growing importance as a trading centre. Pol, 112–13, suggests that, although prostitution was officially illegal in Protestant Amsterdam, the urban authorities probably saw it as a necessary evil in a commercial city with so many foreigners, travelers, and sailors.

<sup>17</sup>The legislation of 29 June 1358 specifies that the location of the brothel is to be the Rialto: ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 19, fol. 62<sup>r</sup>. Also *Leggi e memorie*, 31, no. 6.

<sup>18</sup>A provision of 28 June 1340 (ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 37<sup>v</sup>) refers to women of dishonest life and pimps living in the Rialto area. Gottardo, 38, 41, 61, 71, gives some examples from the 1340s and 1359 of innkeepers (one a woman) fined for allowing prostitutes to spend the night in their establishments.

<sup>19</sup>Crouzet Pavan, 244–45, suggests that the establishment of the public brothel was not only a result of growing urban regulation and control by the government over private life, but also part of a program to give greater dignity to the Rialto area by limiting the area where prostitution was permissible.

<sup>20</sup>The Capisestieri had been created in the early fourteenth century. In 1340 their authority was extended to all those of "dishonest life" throughout the city: ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 37<sup>v</sup>. However, the *Signori di notte* (Lords of the Night), who were responsible for violent crime, witchcraft, attacks on property, and "buon costume" ("proper behavior"), had already been dealing with this problem: *ibid.*, fols. 1<sup>r</sup>, 2<sup>r</sup>, 37<sup>v</sup>. The consequent overlapping of authority gave rise to frequent conflicts over jurisdiction between these two offices.

municipal brothels should be established, they had still not found a suitable site; rather, they were continuing to expel the prostitutes. Consequently, in 1360, affirming once again that prostitutes were “absolutely necessary in this town,” the Great Council established a deadline for the magistrates to find an acceptable location, adding that, even if they failed to do so, the brothel area would still be created.<sup>21</sup> Only then did the Capi finally propose an acceptable place to house the prostitutes.<sup>22</sup>

This apparent reluctance on the part of the Capisestieri most probably arose from a concern for public order at the Rialto. One of the permanent objections to prostitution was that it went hand-in-hand not only with drunkenness, gambling, and generally indecent behavior offensive to good citizens, but also with crimes of theft and violence.<sup>23</sup> Such dangers were already evident in the period 1358–60, when prostitutes were being allowed to establish themselves permanently at the Rialto. For example, in May 1360 an investigation was held into the death of a Maffeo Granella, after he had been assaulted in a brothel at the Rialto run by a Franceschina from Murano.<sup>24</sup> Maffeo had quarreled with one of the prostitutes and struck her, whereupon Franceschina and others had intervened. When Maffeo turned against them, there arrived on the scene Franceschina’s “familiar,” Giovanni, who lived in the brothel and evidently acted as its protector. Maffeo then attempted to escape, and an armed struggle ensued in which he was so severely wounded that he later died. One can understand why such incidents would have made the Capi reluctant to accept the presence of prostitution in the heart of the city. In fact, once they had finally agreed to do so, the first measure they took was to appoint six armed custodians to keep order and prevent fights from breaking out.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, the legislation of 1358–60 does not indicate exactly where the brothel area was finally set up, but it must have been mainly in the parish of San

<sup>21</sup>ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 19, fol. 73<sup>r</sup>, 14 June 1360: the prostitutes “omnino sunt necessarie in terra ista.” The Capi and the Lords of the Night were given until 1 August to find a suitable place, and, even if they had not by then, the prostitutes should still not be expelled but a place should quickly be deputed for them. Also *Leggi e memorie*, 32, no. 7.

<sup>22</sup>Legislation of 15 December 1360, ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 19, fol. 75<sup>r</sup>, states that the Capi had found a suitable location. Also, *Leggi e memorie*, 32, no. 8.

<sup>23</sup>On the violence connected with prostitution, see in particular Trexler, 996–1000. Sometimes the prostitutes themselves were incited to violence and were guilty of murder: ASV, Signori di notte al criminal (hereafter ASV, SN al criminal), reg. 13, fols. 12<sup>r</sup>, 28<sup>v</sup>, for two cases of 1376 and 1385. *Ibid.*, fols. 41<sup>v</sup> and 42<sup>v</sup>, contain accusations against two men for having killed prostitutes in 1393 and 1394.

<sup>24</sup>ASV, SN al criminal, reg. 7, fols. 82<sup>v</sup>–84<sup>v</sup>, 19–27 May 1360.

<sup>25</sup>This is stated in a deliberation by the Great Council of 15 December 1360: ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 19, fol. 75<sup>r</sup>. Also *Leggi e memorie*, 32, no. 8. The Capi had requested that these custodians be allowed to bear arms, which was granted.



Matteo, or San Maffeo as the Venetians called it, in the western section of the Rialto area. This parish was home to some of the more infamous inns of the city and was generally of a lower reputation than the adjoining parish of San Giovanni Elemosinario, into which the prostitution district probably extended a little.<sup>26</sup> The public brothels would therefore have been away from the immediate vicinity of the Rialto bridge and from the banks, most of the government offices, and the loggia where Venetian and foreign merchants met to exchange information and settle business deals. It would instead have been closer to the public markets that were frequented by people of every degree. This location was undoubtedly deliberately chosen in order to keep the potentially offensive business of prostitution at one remove from the more dignified commercial area. Indeed, the intention to keep prostitution in a subordinate position was already evident in the legislation of 1360, which, while permitting prostitutes to stay at the Rialto, ordered them to remain in their *callicelli* (side streets or alleyways), and prohibited them from soliciting in one of the major streets leading to the state-owned butcher shops. It also forbade them to wander about the city except on Saturday, which was market day in St. Mark's Square.<sup>27</sup> Such directives demonstrate the permanently ambivalent attitude that characterized urban policies on prostitution; even while the government was stating that prostitutes served a vital function for the city, it continued to regard them as sinners leading an immoral and offensive life that should be hidden as far as possible from the public gaze.

As was also the case in other towns, the Venetians required all prostitutes to live in the designated brothel area, which they tried to close off from the neighboring sections of the city. While it is not clear what steps were taken to achieve enclosure, access was evidently permitted through a single major gate.<sup>28</sup> This arrangement was probably the origin of the name given this district — the Castelletto, or small castle, which was applied to municipal brothels in other

<sup>26</sup>Cessi and Alberti, 56–57, 276–82; Scarabello, 2006, 18. The matrons who ran the brothels of the Castelletto give their parish of residence sometimes as San Matteo/Maffeo and sometimes as San Giovanni di Rialto. From his research into Francesco Foscari, who owned property in the area, Dr. Dieter Girsensohn concluded that the zone of prostitution was on the border between the parishes of San Matteo and San Giovanni Elemosinario: Scarabello, 2006, 168n58. However, the boundaries of the brothel area changed over time. On 16 May 1396, one matron rented from the Garzoni family two shops contiguous to the Castelletto, which had earlier been part of it: Tamba, 158–59.

<sup>27</sup>Such regulations were similar to legislation in other cities, cf. Otis, 81; Ghirardo; Canosa and Colonnello, 18–19, 22. Ghirardo, 418, points out that sites for brothels were chosen in order to ensure accessibility, invisibility, and control.

<sup>28</sup>There is, perhaps, a parallel at Milan and Pavia, where the brothel districts were ordered to be walled in, although breaches were constantly being made in the wall: Canosa and Colonnello, 15–21. In Spain too brothel areas were often enclosed by walls: Lacarra Lanz, 268.



towns as well.<sup>29</sup> The use of a main gate was most probably intended to enhance public security. If a crime was committed during the day, the gate could be locked and a bell rung to alert everyone present to aid in capturing the culprit.<sup>30</sup> At night the main gate was locked, not just to prevent prostitution from expanding to other areas of the city or disturbing residents, but also because allowing the Castelletto to remain open would have increased the risk of brawls, violence, and crime conducted under cover of darkness.<sup>31</sup>

Responsibility for drawing up the initial regulations for the Castelletto was evidently entrusted to the Capisestieri, but, since their archive has almost completely disappeared, the earliest rules regarding the municipal brothels have to be deduced from later references. Initially, those involved in prostitution were supposed to remain permanently within the Castelletto and, apart from Saturdays, were not permitted to leave it without the permission of the Capi.<sup>32</sup> Such strict regulation was impossible to apply, however, and the authorities were constantly presented with the problem of prostitution's spilling out into the rest of the Rialto and beyond.<sup>33</sup> In 1416 the Capi seem to have accepted this reality, as they decreed that prostitutes and their *ruffiane* (female intermediaries) living anywhere in the city had to wear a typical symbol of prostitution — a yellow scarf — when they went about in public.<sup>34</sup> However, according to the Senate, the women used this concession to live and ply their

<sup>29</sup>Scarabello, 2006, 20, discusses possible origins of this name; he suggests that it may also have come from the chivalric idea of the castle of love.

<sup>30</sup>As was done when one prostitute was murdered: ASV, SN al criminal, reg. 12, fols. 18<sup>v</sup>–19<sup>r</sup>, 9 December 1390.

<sup>31</sup>Prostitutes themselves were sometimes victims of nighttime theft. On one occasion, a vagabond used a ladder to get into prostitutes' rooms and steal coins and silver and gilded belts: ASV, SN al criminal, reg. 12, fol. 41<sup>v</sup>, 31 December 1394.

<sup>32</sup>The matrons of the Castelletto stated this in legal cases when there was a conflict over jurisdiction: for example, on 18 February 1418, when a Paduan brought a case against Lucia da Ravenna, matron in the Castelletto: ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 41<sup>r</sup>. Lucia insisted that the Capi had competence in the case because of their jurisdiction over her, proven by her not being allowed to leave the Castelletto without their permission.

<sup>33</sup>During the fifteenth century there are constant references to prostitutes' establishing themselves throughout the city, especially in the parish of San Samuele, and even in the Piazza San Marco: ASV, Senato, Deliberazioni, Misti (hereafter ASV, Sen., Misti), reg. 53, fol. 140<sup>r</sup>, 6 May 1421; Scarabello, 2006, 25–26, 28–33; Crouzet Pavan, 250–55.

<sup>34</sup>This is mentioned in the deliberation of the Senate of 23 May 1421, ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 52, fol. 140<sup>r</sup>; ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 42; *Leggi e memorie*, 35–36, no. 14. It is the first reference to prostitutes' having to wear distinctive dress, which was presumably not necessary if they stayed within the Castelletto. The requirement was later reiterated and eventually extended to pimps: *Leggi e memorie*, 69, no. 58, 20 March 1486; Scarabello, 2006, 37–38.

trade everywhere in the city. Therefore, five years later, the Senators annulled the ruling in an effort once again to limit prostitution to the Castelletto.<sup>35</sup>

This vacillating policy is typical of the approach of the Venetian authorities to the question of prostitution, as various factors made it difficult for them to maintain a consistent line. One problem was that constant interaction between the prostitutes and the officials appointed to deal with them led at times to personal bonds that undermined the officials' willingness to enforce government regulation. The Capi's decision of 1416, just mentioned, to allow the prostitutes to move about Venice practically at will is probably an instance in point. The degree to which patricians who served as Capi might become advocates of prostitutes' interests is demonstrated by a case against Giacomo Davanzago, who acted as Capo for the *sestiere* of Santa Croce in 1398. On that occasion, he intervened in the effort of a patrician, supported by other officials, to expel two prostitutes from a house they were illegally occupying. Although no mention is made of Giacomo's relations with these prostitutes, a real sympathy must have existed for him to intervene on their side, doing, as is stated in the case, exactly the opposite of what his office required. He and his men attacked the proprietor of the house and his companions with a sword, and forcibly gave the keys back to the prostitutes.<sup>36</sup> Such behavior eventually led the Venetian government to try to prevent such relationships from developing by forbidding officials to eat, drink, or sleep with the prostitutes, or even to receive flowers or other gifts from them.<sup>37</sup> The flowers singled out for special mention were roses, which then as now possessed a romantic significance; presumably, the sex workers were deliberately cultivating amorous relations with those responsible for containing them in order to undermine the restrictions on their activities.

<sup>35</sup>Deliberation of the Senate of 23 May 1421: ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 52, fol. 140<sup>r</sup>; ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 42; *Leggi e memorie*, 35–36, no. 14. It is significant that this law had to be proposed three times before being passed. On 24 December 1443, the Capi decided that the prostitutes could leave the Castelletto at other times than Saturday, but with the Capi's permission, with their usual *mantelletis* (short cloaks), and once they had paid for the written authorization: ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 59<sup>v</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 46, no. 28. This is the only recorded reference to prostitutes' wearing *mantelletis*, although it had clearly become customary.

<sup>36</sup>ASV, Avogaria di Comun (hereafter ASV, AC), reg. 3645, fol. 75, 30 May 1398, mentioned also by Scarabello, 2006, 22–23. Davanzago was fined and deprived of the office of *Capostestieri*.

<sup>37</sup>The prohibition on gifts, including roses, is in ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 22, fol. 120<sup>v</sup>, 18 January 1439. Later legislation of 4 September 1460 prohibited officials and servants of officials from eating, drinking, or sleeping with a prostitute in any inn, tavern, bath, or shop: ASV, Collegio, Notatorio (hereafter ASV, CN), reg. 10, fols. 11<sup>v</sup>–12<sup>f</sup> in the new numeration. Gifts of flowers were, perhaps, normally permitted to officials because they were relatively inexpensive and lasted only a short time; even the Venetian doge could receive them: Hurlburt, 20.

In addition to the Capi, more important bodies, such as the Senate, were not always prepared to enforce the legislation on prostitution.<sup>38</sup> From the start, the authorities' approach to prostitution was pragmatic, and their subsequent policies were much influenced by financial considerations.<sup>39</sup> The consequences of this approach are evident in their position on prostitutes' presence in inns and taverns. Initially, prostitutes had been banned from these locales in order to maintain them as decent places where respectable people could go.<sup>40</sup> However, prostitutes' presence in inns and taverns was useful, as it led to more business and increased the income from the tax on retail sales of wine. Since this tax was one of the main sources of revenue for the government, the Senate decided in 1421 to revoke the original rule and permit prostitutes not only to sleep in inns and taverns, but also to gamble in them, up to a limit.<sup>41</sup> In this ruling the Senators explicitly admitted that their motive was to increase the business of the inn- and tavern-keepers at the Rialto, and, thereby, the government's income. Although the authorities realized the deleterious effects of allowing prostitutes to frequent taverns, they chose to set aside moral considerations in favor of fiscal interests. Subsequently, policy shifted repeatedly, depending on what prevailed — a desire to increase the income from the tax on wine sales or concern about the negative effects of permitting prostitution in the city's inns and taverns.<sup>42</sup>

Such vacillation was encouraged by some private Venetian citizens who were happy to benefit financially from prostitution even if this meant contravening the laws. Not only did proprietors constantly rent to prostitutes outside the Castelletto, but in 1467 the nobles who owned two inns at the Rialto lobbied to

<sup>38</sup>Legislation by the Senate of 6 May 1421 complained that prostitutes had invaded areas outside the Rialto, such as San Samuele, and would have required them to return to the Castelletto: ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 53, fol. 134<sup>r</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 35, no. 13. However, it failed to gain a majority of votes. Another proposal of the same date that would have prohibited prostitutes outside the Rialto from having wine in their houses was similarly defeated.

<sup>39</sup>As Crouzet Pavan, 247–48, rightly points out.

<sup>40</sup>The prohibition of January 1340 on prostitutes' presence in inns and taverns states that the intention is for honorable people to use these establishments and to prevent disturbances and fights: ASV, Capisestieri, Capitolare, fol. 57<sup>r</sup>. Also, Calza, 6.

<sup>41</sup>Deliberation by the Senate of 5 May 1421 (ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 53, fol. 132<sup>v</sup>), which states that "for the convenience and profit of the tavern-keepers and innkeepers it is permitted to the said matrons and prostitutes to stay day and night in taverns and inns at their pleasure." Legislation of 15 July 1423 states that the decree of 1421 had also permitted these women to gamble up to ten *lire di piccoli*: ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 47<sup>r</sup>. These measures are reproduced in *Leggi e memorie*, 34, 38, nos. 12, 18.

<sup>42</sup>On these shifting policies, see *Leggi e memorie*, 42–43, nos. 22–24 with deliberations of 1436–38. Also, ASV, Consiglio di Dieci, Deliberazioni, Miste (hereafter ASV, Dieci, Miste), reg. 12, fol. 167<sup>v</sup>, 18 November 1444; and *ibid.*, reg. 15, fol. 158<sup>v</sup>, 23 August 1458.

have prostitutes be allowed to work in them, arguing that, without the prostitutes' presence, they would not be able to obtain the rents necessary to pay the high taxes imposed on their properties.<sup>43</sup> Significantly, the government accepted this argument, even while insisting that prostitutes not sit at the door or outside the taverns to attract business. Evidently, the Venetian authorities were most concerned about public manifestations of immoral or obscene behavior and the effects these might have; rather hypocritically, they were happy to benefit financially from what they attempted to hide away.<sup>44</sup> Such contradictory attitudes and policies must have contributed to undermining the limitations placed on prostitution and to ensuring that the goal of containing it was never really achieved.<sup>45</sup>

By 1423, problems regarding the enforcement (or lack of it) of the regulations surrounding prostitution led the principal Venetian judicial body, the *Quarantia* (Council of Forty), to issue what amounted to a new code on the subject. This legislation constitutes the first extant summary of the rules governing prostitution in Venice and provides an idea of how the trade was being conducted in the early fifteenth century.<sup>46</sup> The new regulations included some relaxations of earlier rulings, which must have proved unenforceable. For example, while the prostitutes were still required to live in the Castelletto, they were now allowed to spend the day "alle volte de Rialto" — in other words, in certain vaults or warehouses in the Rialto area.<sup>47</sup> The legislation specified which vaults these were and clarified that they had "always" been used by prostitutes. The authorities were therefore recognizing that prostitution had in fact never really been successfully contained within the Castelletto. Now they were prepared to accept a limited extension, possibly because the vaults used by the prostitutes were in obscure places, for example, behind some of the local inns. By specifying these premises, the authorities probably hoped to limit the further spread of prostitution beyond this customary area, which proved, as usual, impossible to achieve.

<sup>43</sup>ASV, CN, reg. 11, fol. 6<sup>r</sup>, 21 July 1467; *Leggi e memorie*, 64, no. 50. The inns in question were the Snake and the Crown.

<sup>44</sup>Ghirardo, 424, points out that authorities were often less concerned about prostitution itself than about prostitutes' visibility in public spaces.

<sup>45</sup>Similarly, Lacarra Lanz argues that the regulation of prostitution in late medieval Spain failed primarily because of collusion among prostitutes, pimps, clients, and the authorities in charge of enforcing the law.

<sup>46</sup>ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fols. 30<sup>r</sup>–32<sup>v</sup>, 15 July 1423, repeated, in another section of the same volume, fols. 46<sup>r</sup>–48<sup>r</sup>. Also *Leggi e memorie*, 37–40, nos. 16–19; Calza, 11–14.

<sup>47</sup>*Volte* were vaulted structures, often used for storage or to show goods. There were many of these at the Rialto, and they were often rented out, sometimes at high prices, given the demand for space there.

These new regulations of 1423 also extended the opening hours of the Castelletto and granted the prostitutes a liberty they had probably already been enjoying — they could spend the night outside the Castelletto if they wished to sleep with a client. On the other hand, some concessions previously made to prostitutes, such as permission to sleep and gamble in inns and taverns, were revoked, and other customs that had crept in contrary to the laws were also prohibited. These included prostitutes' or their pimps' keeping houses outside the Rialto area and using these not only to live but to work in, thereby annoying the good citizens who wanted to “live honestly.” Similarly, it was forbidden for anyone to marry a prostitute and have her continue working in the Castelletto. Marriage with a prostitute was traditionally advocated by the Church as a way to rescue these women and was not supposed to lead to effective pimping.

The regulations of 1423 refer not just to the prostitutes, but also to the matrons, or the women who organized prostitution in the brothel zone. As has been seen in the case of Franceschina da Murano, such women were already operating at the Rialto prior to the creation of the Castelletto. Subsequently, the Venetian government accepted and confirmed their role; in fact, the rules of 1423 prohibited keeping prostitutes in any other way than that followed by the matrons of the Castelletto. This is not to say that male pimps disappeared from Venice. On the contrary, they are frequently mentioned, but they were not officially tolerated; increasingly severe legislation was issued against them during the fifteenth century, and they were occasionally banished temporarily from the city.<sup>48</sup>

In concentrating the management of official prostitution in the hands of women, Venice differed from other Italian towns, where men did at times direct public brothels.<sup>49</sup> The Venetians' position is, therefore, somewhat unusual and may be related to assumptions about proper male behavior. For example, in 1423, when the *Quarantia* revoked permission for prostitutes to gamble and sleep in inns and taverns, it justified this decision on the grounds that the presence of prostitutes in these locales was “a very bad and wicked thing, because, as is clear to everyone, it has made many become not only useless but even thieves, for, having consumed their own wealth illicitly lazing about with the prostitutes and gambling, they now want to live from others' work” rather

<sup>48</sup>The legislation of 15 July 1423 prescribed a fine, a month in prison, and a year's exile outside the Rialto for pimps. In 1460, the penalty of exile was increased to two years outside Venice and its district: ASV, CN, reg. 10, fol. 12<sup>v</sup>. Regulations of 20 March 1486 required pimps to wear the yellow scarf, and those of 13, 15, and 30 June 1492 reimposed exile outside Venice and its district: *Leggi e memorie*, 69–70, 75–76, 78, nos. 58, 68, 69, 71.

<sup>49</sup>See Canosa and Colonnello, 24–25 (Turin), 40 (Palermo). Trexler, 992–93, demonstrates that men ran brothels in Florence; as does Mazzi, 260, 263–68.

than by the sweat of their own brow.<sup>50</sup> Evidently, then, the Venetian elite subscribed to a kind of mercantile ethic according to which men were expected to work hard, be disciplined, and make money to sustain their family and their city. Laziness and self-indulgence meant consuming rather than producing wealth and incited men toward parasitism and crimes such as theft. Relying on the earnings of prostitutes also inverted the normal gender relations, by which men should support women and not vice versa. It led to pimps' threatening and even beating the prostitutes, which the Venetian authorities condemned; proper social order required that men should control but also protect women.<sup>51</sup> Pimping by men must therefore have seemed to Venetian authorities an inversion of acceptable male attitudes and potentially threatening to the very fabric of society.

In contrast to this vision of male pimps as parasitic wastrels, the attitudes of the Venetian elite toward the prostitutes were much more nuanced. It is sometimes stated that, prior to the Reformation, only neutral terms were used to describe prostitutes, but this could hardly be the case, given the attitudes to sex propagated by Christian authorities.<sup>52</sup> Rather, the terminology used to describe prostitutes reflected the traditional ambivalence referred to above. A sense of the immorality of the trade is evident in the term *sinner*, which was regularly applied to sex workers in Venetian legislation. However, at the same time, the Venetian elite manifested considerable sympathy and pity for the misery and poverty of prostitutes' lives. In Venetian legislation prostitutes were repeatedly called "poor," "wretched," even "poor little prostitutes"; significant is the term *mamola*

<sup>50</sup>ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 47<sup>r</sup>: "cossa e pessima et iniqua perho che chomo a tuti e manifesto le sta caxon de aver fatto deventar assaissimi non solamente inuteli ma anchora laronzelli perho che avendo consunta la sua fachulta inlichidi [illicitamente] nel star a poltronizar con quelle meretrice et al zuogo se mette a voler viver de le altrui fadige." Also, *ibid.*, fol. 31<sup>r</sup>: "And because many incorrect youths, not wanting to live by their own sweat, daily follow the said prostitutes, living from their poverty." Both extracts come from the legislation of 15 July 1423. Traditionally, Christian theologians had been much harsher on procurers than prostitutes, and urban authorities often followed suit: see Brundage, 392, 463.

<sup>51</sup>The same legislation of 15 July 1423 stated that the "incorrect youths take money and other goods [from the prostitutes] and threaten them and often beat them when they don't want to give them their money": ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 31<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>52</sup>Crouzet Pavan, 265, suggests that neutral terms were used to describe prostitutes in this period, but the word *puttana* (whore) that she cites is hardly neutral. The term *sinner*s was frequently used in Venetian legislation, for example that of 1358: ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 19, fol. 62<sup>v</sup>; also in ASV, Cancelleria inferiore, Notai (hereafter ASV, CI, Notai, with bundle number and name of relevant notary in parentheses), b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), 3 February 1401. Scarabello, 2006, 36, discusses various names used for prostitutes in this period, although, in the documentation consulted here, the terms regularly employed are *peccatrix*, *meretrix*, and *mamola*.

by which they were generally known.<sup>53</sup> Originally signifying a type of violet, *mamola* came by extension to denote a young woman, immature and inexperienced.<sup>54</sup> Its application to prostitutes suggests that, despite their involvement in what was considered immoral work, they were viewed as young and defenseless, vulnerable to the ruses and manipulation of those around them. Repeatedly, in fact, the government stepped in to protect them from exploitation and violence.

Perhaps the Venetians' limitation of brothel-keeping to women was regarded in part as a means of protecting the prostitutes, as male brothel-keepers were sometimes seen as more exploitative and violent.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the Venetian authorities may have felt that matrons would more easily accept a system of government control that was intended to provide justice to all concerned, including the prostitutes. According to the rules imposed by the government, both matrons and *mamole* were required to register with the Capisestieri. As of 1410, the Capi exercised some control over brothels' finances to ensure not only that the establishments' creditors received their due, but also that the prostitutes were not cheated. The rules stipulated that the money they made was to be deposited in a locked box kept in each brothel and opened once a month in the office and in the presence of the Capi.<sup>56</sup> These officials could then ensure that the creditors of the brothels were paid, starting with the owners of the premises and the custodians of the Castelletto, after which the other creditors would receive a part of the debt due them, pro rata. Further, the Capi kept an account for every prostitute, in which both debts and credits were registered. Each could see her financial situation when she wanted. She could thus be relatively certain that the account was kept correctly and that, through her work, she would eventually be

<sup>53</sup>Prostitutes are called "meschine" in legislation of 21 December 1438, and "poverete" in that of 18 January 1439: ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 22, fol. 120. On 28 July 1432, the Senate spoke of the "paupercularum meretricum" who would never be able to liberate themselves from "tanta miseria": ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 58, fol. 134<sup>v</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 41–42, no. 21. Rossiaud, 65, discusses similar ambivalent attitudes toward prostitutes; as does E. Cohen, 1991. Pol, 169, points out that brothels were often viewed as a kind of family, and the terminology matron/*mamola* may have had resonances of this sort.

<sup>54</sup>Battaglia provides a number of connotations, including, besides those mentioned in the text, virgin and a timid and modest young woman: S. Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario della lingua italiana*, s.v. "mamola."

<sup>55</sup>Otis, 60–62, discusses the question of male versus female brothel keepers, and indicates that men were seen as more exploitative. Pol, 24–25, suggests that, in Amsterdam, women were usually the brothel-keepers not only because prostitution was women's work and involved supervising women, but also because women were less susceptible to prostitutes' wiles.

<sup>56</sup>See the deliberation by the Senate of 28 July 1432, which says that, on 24 October 1410, the Capi had ordered the boxes of the matrons of the Castelletto, in which the prostitutes' earnings were placed, to be brought to them at the beginning of each month to be opened: ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 58, fol. 134<sup>v</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 41–42, no. 21.



able to pay off her debts completely and become again a free woman — a goal the Venetian government evidently had at heart.<sup>57</sup>

### THE MATRONS OF THE CASTELLETTO

After this sketch of Venetian regulations on prostitution, closer attention can be given to the role of women in the trade, particularly the matrons who acted as its entrepreneurs. Especially useful in this regard are the records of two notaries who drew up many acts for matrons and prostitutes at the Rialto. About one of these, Bernardo de Rodulfis, there is little information beyond that his office was at the Rialto and that he died in 1400.<sup>58</sup> The second, Cecchino Alberti, is better known, as he was a grammar teacher as well as a notary and became a considerable literary figure. He wrote poetry in both Latin and Italian and belonged to various literary circles, as is clear from his exchange of verses with other writers and humanists.<sup>59</sup> As was typical of notaries of the day, both Bernardo and Cecchino sought government posts as a source of income, and both acted as notary of the *Capisestieri*. Rodulfis did so for several years in the 1390s, managing to keep his job even when the *Capi* tried to fire him in 1397.<sup>60</sup> Subsequently, for a period at the beginning of the fifteenth century, Cecchino acted as notary for the same officials. It is because of their connection with the *Capi* that both notaries drew up a relatively large number of private documents for matrons and prostitutes, sometimes doing so within the magistrates' office.

Even with this notarial documentation, however, the matrons of the Castelletto remain rather shadowy figures, as there is little information on their origins and careers before they emerge as managers of brothels. As far as it is possible to ascertain, they were normally unmarried, almost always foreign, and possessed very limited financial resources.<sup>61</sup> Thus they resembled their

<sup>57</sup>See the regulation of 15 December 1413, ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 39<sup>r</sup>, where the prostitutes are said to “free themselves” by paying off their debt. The Senate’s deliberation of 28 July 1432 outlawed some sharp practices by the matrons so that the poor prostitutes could “free themselves” from their “misery”: ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 58, fol. 134<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>58</sup>As pointed out by Tamba, vii–xvi, in the preface to his edition of a register of the acts of Rodulfis.

<sup>59</sup>On Cecchino Alberti, see in particular Comboni, 74–92, where some of his poetry is reproduced. Also, Bertanza and Dalla Santa, 223, 224, 229, 233, 270, 271, 286, 301n2.

<sup>60</sup>Bernardo is mentioned as notary of the *Capi* on 22 June 1395, ASV, AC, reg. 3645, fol. 36<sup>v</sup>. The effort by the *Capi* to fire him is mentioned in *ibid.*, fol. 63, 2 April 1397.

<sup>61</sup>There were rare cases of local matrons and prostitutes: for example, Franceschina from Murano (although Murano was not technically Venice). Lucia, called Nigra, daughter of Marco Ziane or Zane, may have been Venetian. On Lucia, see Tamba, 72–74, nos. 65 and 66, and 142–44, nos. 141 and 143. Matrons might sometimes be married, as was the case of Magdalena “Fornaria” from Padua.

prostitutes who, in Venice as elsewhere in this period, usually came from outside the city and were often initially destitute.<sup>62</sup> In fact, the matrons were probably prostitutes who had reached the age when they needed to think about alternative ways of making a living.<sup>63</sup> If their whole experience had been in the sex trade and they did not have enough income to support themselves in any other way, their best solution was probably moving into the managerial side of the business.

Nevertheless, an occasional matron does seem to have a somewhat higher standing than the norm. One of the leading brothel-keepers in Venice in the late fourteenth century was Jacoba, daughter of Muzolo de' Baladori from Monteveglio.<sup>64</sup> Although her nickname, Florentina, suggests a connection with Florence, her home town of Monteveglio was close to Bologna; she may have been the daughter of a dyer from Bologna who became well enough established in his adopted city to gain citizenship in 1351.<sup>65</sup> Her claim to Venetian citizenship and her use of a surname as well as her family's place of origin suggests that she aspired to a higher social status than the typical prostitute. As further support for this possibility, her child, Marco Baffo, bore a patrician surname and may therefore have been fathered by a Venetian nobleman.<sup>66</sup> That the boy took his father's name attests to a fairly serious and long-term relationship between the father and Jacoba, who was able to be relatively generous to her son. In the early 1390s she gave him a house and 400 ducats, a considerable gift for a person in her position.<sup>67</sup> Possibly she had received these assets from Marco's father, and was passing them on to him as a kind

<sup>62</sup>Trexler, 985–88, provides an analysis of the origins of prostitutes and protectors in Florence. Rossiaud, 45–48, 146, points out that, in the Rhone area, casual prostitutes were of local origin, but those in the municipal brothels tended to be foreigners. On prostitutes and matrons as foreigners and poor, see also Ghirardo, 405; Otis, 63–64; Roper, 1985, 8.

<sup>63</sup>In some cases, women are described as both prostitutes and matrons at the same time, for example Lucia from Rimini (ASV, SN al criminal, reg. 9, fol. 102<sup>v</sup>), and Anna from Verona (ASV, AC, reg. 3645, fol. 6<sup>v</sup>).

<sup>64</sup>Her full name is given in Tamba, 44–45, no. 34, 24 July 1393. She is always identified by her father's name and no husband, living or dead, is ever mentioned. Monteveglio is a small town just west of Bologna.

<sup>65</sup>Jacobina claimed to be a Venetian citizen: *ibid.* The database of grants of Venetian citizenship created by Reinhold Mueller and his students (available online at [www.civesveneciarum.net](http://www.civesveneciarum.net)) cites a Muzolo quondam Cechi as a dyer from Bologna who gained Venetian citizenship *de extra* on 10 April 1351, after a residence of twenty-five years.

<sup>66</sup>There was a patrician family called Baffo, but since the same name might be used by patricians and commoners, this cannot be taken as proof of status.

<sup>67</sup>On 16 March 1394 Marco Baffo gave quittance to Jacoba, his beloved mother, for a house and 400 ducats she had promised to give him and that he had now received: Tamba, 78, no. 72. Jacoba's promise was redacted by Marco Rafanelli, 2 August 1392, but does not survive among that notary's papers. Around 1409, a Marco Baffo was acting as factor in Crete for members of the patrician Balbi family: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 170 (Marco Rafanelli), 18 June 1409.

of inheritance. Jacoba's experience thus seems rather similar to that of a sixteenth-century courtesan like Veronica Franco, who came from a citizen family and whose relationships included at least one patrician, who fathered a child with her.<sup>68</sup> Jacoba, too, may initially have been a superior-level prostitute, who, however, ended her career as the matron of a public brothel.

As Giovanni Scarabello has pointed out, the organization of prostitution in Venice was characterized, like so much of the city's economy, by a mixture of public and private enterprise, with the state drawing up the general terms within which private initiatives were undertaken.<sup>69</sup> As demonstrated above, the government established the basic rules of prostitution, but it was left to the matrons to organize the day-to-day operation of the trade. Setting up a brothel required a fairly large expenditure, and the matrons, who had little capital, relied constantly on credit. However, dealing on credit was normal in commercial operations of the day, and in Venice it was relatively easy to obtain financing for a potentially profitable venture. Since prostitution clearly generated a lot of money, the matrons seem to have had little difficulty in acquiring credit not just from the shopkeepers and artisans at the Rialto, but also from the patrician elite. As will be illustrated below, their reliance on credit drew the matrons into the very active business world of the city centered at the Rialto, while it also located them within a system of debt and obligation that enabled others to profit from the sex trade as well.

The matrons' first necessity in establishing their business was to acquire suitable premises. They did this by renting housing from Venetian patricians or other wealthy families who owned property at the Rialto.<sup>70</sup> The buildings might consist of single-floor houses or shops, or of large structures, with at least two floors and, possibly, with smaller houses or shops attached.<sup>71</sup> As elsewhere, there was often a fairly large reception room possibly with bedrooms off it and certainly on the floor above.<sup>72</sup> When the Castelletto was open, there might be a large number of people congregated in the

<sup>68</sup>Rosenthal, 66.

<sup>69</sup>Scarabello, 2006, 19.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 25. A complaint from the owners of property used by prostitutes shows that the patrician Venier and Morosini families possessed much of it: legislation passed between 24 December 1443 and 13 October 1444, ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 60<sup>r</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 46–47, no. 29.

<sup>71</sup>See the testimony in the inquiry into the death of Francesca from Bologna, a prostitute in the brothel of Caterina from Bologna: ASV, SN al criminal, reg. 11, fol. 3<sup>r</sup>, 11 January 1394. Francesca emerged from a bedroom on the upper floor and descended to the lower floor with her attacker behind her.

<sup>72</sup>Otis, 51–54, and Rossiaud, 9, give similar descriptions of French brothels. Ghirardo, 418, points out that prostitutes in Ferrara also rented shops, into which they enticed their clients.

reception area,<sup>73</sup> and, while some of the clientele consisted of foreign merchants,<sup>74</sup> perhaps more came from the artisan and worker population of the city.<sup>75</sup> Venetian patricians seem rarely to have frequented the Castelletto, perhaps because they had access to servants, slaves, and lower-class but respectable women for their sexual adventures.<sup>76</sup>

Although there is little evidence of how the matrons furnished their brothels, they evidently recognized the importance of creating an impression of luxury and elegance. They might, for example, add a touch of class by draping the benches in their reception area with decorative covers called *bancali*; these cloths were often made of costly fabrics like tapestry or velvet, and were sometimes embroidered.<sup>77</sup> Also potentially expensive were beds, the most important furnishings the matrons had to supply. Even if the matrons limited themselves to the simpler forms of beds rather than the large and complex ones with headboards and attached chests, these items, with their mattresses, cushions, sheets, and bed-coverings, would have represented a considerable capital outlay if bought.<sup>78</sup> It is indicative of the matrons' limited funds that they

<sup>73</sup>In the inquiry into the death of Francesca from Bologna, mentioned above, one witness stated that many people were present when Francesca came downstairs.

<sup>74</sup>The inquest into the death of Lucia, who lived in the brothel of Jacoba Baladori, shows that Tuscans were present, as one of the witnesses recognized their accent: ASV, SN al criminal, reg. 11, fol. 4<sup>v</sup>, 11 January 1394. See also the inquest into the murder of Zanino from Florenzuola by a group of Germans who had been interested in Rosa from Marchia, a prostitute in the Castelletto; she had turned them down to go and sleep with Zanino, but they followed her and attacked her lover, killing him: *ibid.*, reg. 10, fol. 98<sup>r</sup>, 23 December 1373. Trexler, 993–95, analyzes the clientele of the Florentine brothels, pointing out that the majority was non-Florentine.

<sup>75</sup>See, for example, the cases involving prostitutes in ASV, SN al criminal, reg. 13, fols. 12<sup>r</sup>, 28<sup>v</sup>, 42<sup>v</sup>: the men involved are a butcher, a tailor (working for another tailor), and a servant. In Venice, there were no regulations prohibiting married men or priests from frequenting the Castelletto, although Jews were excluded, as was usual.

<sup>76</sup>One of the few men with a patrician surname mentioned in connection with violence in the Castelletto was Pietro Gritti, who was sentenced to decapitation for having killed a prostitute: ASV, SN al criminal, reg. 12, fols. 18<sup>v</sup>–19<sup>r</sup>, 9 December 1390. However, as Piasentini, 110n60, points out, that Gritti was described as a sailor and official (doorkeeper) in the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* means that he could not have been a patrician. On Venetian patricians' sexual involvement with lower-class women, see Ruggiero, 1980, 70–72; Ruggiero, 1985, 60–61. In Florence, too, patricians seem rarely to have frequented the public brothels: see Trexler, 994–95, although he suggests that this might be an illusion resulting from officials' reluctance to mention them.

<sup>77</sup>On *bancali*, see Schiaparelli, 195, 218–22; Thornton, 173–74, clarifies that, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, seating still consisted mainly of benches and stools rather than chairs.

<sup>78</sup>Thornton, 111–67, provides a discussion of the various sorts of beds and their furnishings. Documents involving matrons refer to *letti*, which were probably simple beds, as opposed to the massive *lettiera*.

often chose not to purchase these goods, but, rather, rented the furniture and decorative articles they needed from the numerous *strazzaroli*, or secondhand dealers, at the Rialto, some of whom, including the occasional woman, specialized in renting household goods.<sup>79</sup>

Apart from renting and furnishing their premises, the major expense of the matrons lay in clothing their prostitutes, who certainly did not possess the funds to acquire the elaborate garments considered necessary for their job. The matrons went to considerable expense to obtain elegant clothes for their *mamole*, undoubtedly hoping to enhance their desirability by creating around them an atmosphere of beauty and luxury. Descriptions of these clothes show how impressive they could be, as they included outfits in silk, velvet, or even in gold brocade, with pearl buttons. Belts of silver or of silk with silver fittings were as popular with prostitutes as with the rest of the Venetian population.<sup>80</sup> Furs were an important item, as were shoes, whose beauty might call forth the erotic associations connected with the sight of women's usually hidden feet.<sup>81</sup> Such

<sup>79</sup>Tamba, 253–54, no. 274, 3 October 1398: Caterina da Bologna, matron in the Castelletto, confesses a debt to a *strazzarolo* of over seventy-six ducats for the rest owed for the rent of beds, a *bancale*, and a *bariloto* of crimson velvet lined with squirrel. A *bariloto* was a rather full outer garment. A woman, Veronese “a lectis” (“of the beds”), who had business affairs with several matrons, was probably renting or selling them beds. On 7 March 1399 the executors of Veronese remitted the debts owed her by Caterina da Bologna and by Anna da Verona: *ibid.*, 272, nos. 300–01. Renting objects is mentioned as a specialty in the capitulary of the used-goods dealers: Biblioteca del Museo Correr di Venezia, *Mariegoles*, 195, 156–57, 10 June 1584. There is a growing literature on the market for secondhand goods. On Venice, see in particular Allerston, which mentions prostitutes on 51–52. Storey, 2008a, 173–75, 193–94; and Storey, 2008b, points out that Roman prostitutes acquired clothes and furnishings from secondhand dealers.

<sup>80</sup>On 11 October 1398, Jacoba Baladori received back some pawns she had given as security for a debt: Tamba, 256–57, no. 277. These consisted of a *pellanda* (an outer garment with sleeves) of black velvet with pearl buttons, another of blue silk “ad modum damaschinum” (with arabesque patterns, presumably), a silver belt worked with designs including the rays of the sun, on a crimson fabric dyed with expensive grain. Anna da Verona, another matron, owed 213 ducats to a used-clothes dealer for clothes of silk, velvet, and gold, and for woolen clothes for women, all of which she had bought from him: *ibid.*, 163–65, no. 165, 9 June 1396. The same Anna paid twenty-four ducats for a woman's robe of gold brocade: *ibid.*, 169, no. 170, 4 August 1396.

<sup>81</sup>ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), fols. 31<sup>v</sup>–32<sup>r</sup>, 4 July 1408: Margherita from Florence, living in the Castelletto, listed the money and goods that had been retained by her former matron, Margarita from Bologna, when she left the latter's brothel in Padua. These include a fur coat, a silver belt, and a pair of shoes with ten silver buttons. Vianello, 634–35, points out that for women, covered feet and closed shoes signified chastity; therefore prostitutes were often depicted showing their feet and shoes. See, for example, the image of the Venetian courtesan in Vecellio, 198–99, 137–38.

glamorous clothes were an attraction to the young women involved, who otherwise would never have been able to gain access to such finery, and who may have enjoyed the fantasy of imagining themselves members of wealthier social groups. The garments must have also enhanced the brothel experience for the customers, as artisans and workers did not normally have the opportunity to consort with such well-dressed women. While they probably did not mistake the prostitutes of the brothel for gentlewomen (an illusion deliberately fostered by procuresses in other circumstances), the visual and tactile impression created by these expensive clothes must have heightened the sensual pleasure provided in the Castelletto.<sup>82</sup>

The matrons sometimes acquired the expensive garments they supplied their prostitutes (or the cloth to make them) from artisans.<sup>83</sup> More typically, they bought the clothes secondhand, from the used-clothes dealers of the Rialto.<sup>84</sup> In this way, they probably succeeded in gaining elegant and good-quality clothing for only a fraction of its original cost. Whether buying from artisans or *strazzaroli*, the matrons frequently, as stated above, made their purchases on credit, and, when doing so, used techniques typical of the local money market. These included precise schedules for repayment, penalties for noncompliance, and, if the seller wanted additional security, a guarantor.<sup>85</sup> Usually a man, the

<sup>82</sup>On the importance of expensive clothing to create an illusion of prostitute as gentlewoman, see Varholy. In sixteenth-century Venice, too, procuresses sometimes passed off a prostitute as a gentlewoman by dressing her appropriately: Vecellio, 195. While prostitution was theoretically limited to the Castelletto, there were evidently no restrictions on prostitutes' clothes and furnishings. However, in the sixteenth century, silk, pearls, tapestries, *banicali*, etc., were forbidden to prostitutes: ASV, Senato, Deliberazioni, Terra (hereafter ASV, Sen., Terra), reg. 32, fol. 147, 21 February 1543; *Leggi e memorie*, 108, no. 105; Calza, 36.

<sup>83</sup>A tailor of Padua demanded fifty ducats from Caterina from Bologna, matron in the Venetian Castelletto, for two velvet *pellande* (robes) he had sold her: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), 12 November 1400. On 15 April 1399 Anna from Verona promised to pay the silk producer Marco Ridolfi thirty-five ducats (in installments) for silk cloth she had bought from him: Tamba, 278, no. 309.

<sup>84</sup>On 13 August 1393, Jacoba Baladori stated that she had settled accounts with a secondhand dealer for the money he had lent her and for the clothes and other things received from him "for my *mamole*," and that she remained his debtor for over 314 ducats: Tamba, 50–51, no. 40.

<sup>85</sup>For example, on 15 April 1399, the matron Anna from Verona reached agreement on the payment of the thirty-five ducats she still owed the silk merchant Marco Ridolfi for silk cloth, promising to reimburse one-third by the end of May and the rest in two payments after eight and sixteen months: Tamba, 278, no. 309. When Caterina from Bologna promised to repay Michele da Bergamo the over seventy-six ducats she owed him, she agreed to pay three ducats per month and gave as guarantor Bartolomeo d'Andrea "a marchis": *ibid.*, 253–54, no. 274, 3 October 1398.

guarantor would become legally responsible if the matron defaulted on the debt, as occasionally occurred.<sup>86</sup>

All these financial operations by which the matrons furnished and ran their brothels meant that they became involved in the world of petty commerce that flowed around them. They sometimes built up long-term relations with particular *strazzaroli*, other shopkeepers and managers of inns and taverns that they frequented or from whom they regularly bought goods. The use of credit, often long-term, led to repeated encounters, and sometimes to additional business affairs connected or not with the repayment of their debts. Sales on credit evidently extended quite easily to shopkeepers' lending the matrons cash as well; matrons frequently admitted to debts for money as well as clothes or other goods received. As a result, matrons might accumulate large debts with the shopkeepers with whom they regularly did business.

Probably typical was the relationship established by the matron Helena from Florence with a druggist, Redolfo Mazuchi, who had a shop at the Rialto in the first years of the fifteenth century. Helena had probably already transacted business of various sorts with him by 1404, when his shop was the site where she and an ex-partner drew up a settlement.<sup>87</sup> Gradually, Helena must have been accumulating debts with Redolfo; the fact that in 1407, in his shop, she nominated a proctor to collect what she was owed in Florence, Bologna, Ferrara, Padua, and Verona (presumably the range of her business operations) may have been motivated by a need to repay him at least part of what was due. Nevertheless, it comes as something of a shock to see her, a year later, admitting that she owed him the huge sum of 1,054 ducats, equivalent at the time to the price of a large house.<sup>88</sup> While this represents the cost of things she had purchased from him, it also included cash advanced to her and, possibly, interest charged on the growing debt.

That Redolfo was prepared to let Helena accumulate such a debt without requiring more security than a personal promise to repay testifies not only to the frequency of commercial transactions between them, but also to his assessment of her potential income. He must have seen Helena and her business as a useful investment: by selling and lending to her he was creating a long-term debtor with good credit, from whom he could expect to make considerable profit.<sup>89</sup> It was presumably for this

<sup>86</sup>For example, a used-goods dealer, Antonio Velluti from Florence, had to take Helena from Florence to court to have her sentenced to pay him thirty-seven ducats: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 227 (Angeleto di Andreuccio), fol. 94<sup>r</sup>, 23 December 1413.

<sup>87</sup>ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), fol. 12, 5 November 1404.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, fol. 32, 25 July 1408. By this time, Redolfo's shop was in San Cassian, his parish of residence.

<sup>89</sup>However, in the end, Redolfo had to take legal action to obtain repayment from Helena, and she was desperate enough to bribe one of the Capi to help her reach an accord with him: ASV, AC, reg. 3646, fols. 33<sup>v</sup>–34<sup>r</sup>, 17 July 1413.



reason that he cultivated relations with Helena and other prostitutes by allowing them to use his shop as a place to conduct their business.<sup>90</sup> Other shopkeepers at the Rialto must have felt the same way, seeing in the constant need of the matrons and *mamole* for cash and credit a windfall for themselves. For example, the *strazzarolo* Michele from Bergamo, who worked and eventually lived in the parish of San Giovanni Elemosinario, did business with various matrons. He rented beds, bench-covers, and clothes to Caterina from Bologna, while he also had dealings with Jacoba Baladori.<sup>91</sup> In 1393, when he and Jacoba brought their accounts up to date, Jacoba agreed she owed Michele 314 ducats for clothes and other things she had purchased for her *mamole* and for money he had lent her.<sup>92</sup> This too was a relatively large sum, and it is, perhaps, indicative of Jacoba's difficulties in paying it that she almost immediately created Michele as her proctor to collect debts owed to her.<sup>93</sup> Thereby, he could reimburse himself directly without having to rely, or put pressure, on Jacoba herself. Thus the stores of traders like Redolfo Mazuchi and Michele from Bergamo must have become regular haunts of women involved in the sex trade.<sup>94</sup>

The matrons' involvement in the world of financial exchange further encouraged them to become businesswomen, as it accustomed them to commercial methods and alerted them to opportunities offered by the market around them. Some ventured into business operations beyond those strictly necessary for running their brothel. For example, Jacopa Baladori bought a whole collection of furnishings from beds to chests to kitchen goods from a Florentine immigrant, and sold them, together with other household goods, to the keeper of the Angel Inn at the Rialto.<sup>95</sup> Perhaps she had been intending to use some of these in her brothel, but had decided instead to sell them, possibly to settle a debt.<sup>96</sup> Matrons dealt in other items as well. Helena from Florence bought a considerable quantity of cotton thread, which she may have been trading or, possibly, giving to her *mamole* so that they could employ their spare time in

<sup>90</sup>On 26 July 1406, in Redolfo's shop, Checha quondam Giovanni from Firenze, then living in the public brothel, confessed a debt to another prostitute: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), fol. 24.

<sup>91</sup>Tamba, 50–51, no. 40, 13 August 1393, and 253–54, no. 274, 3 October 1398.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 50–51, no. 40, 13 August 1393.

<sup>93</sup>The next day, 14 August 1393: *ibid.*, 51, no. 41. Jacoba instructed the notary to issue this letter of attorney as often as Michele wanted and with all the powers he requested, except selling.

<sup>94</sup>Prostitutes also frequented other shops at the Rialto, such as those of jewelers: ASV, SN al criminal, reg. 12, fol. 76<sup>r</sup>, 2 September 1401.

<sup>95</sup>Who was, at the time, a Florentine, Piero di Giovanni: Tamba, 74–75, no. 68, 9 February 1394. The Angel Inn was in the parish of San Maffeo and was one of those involved with prostitution: Cessi and Alberti, 286. In Rome, too, prostitutes seem to have been active in the trade in secondhand goods: Storey, 2008b.

<sup>96</sup>On this occasion Jacoba also gave Piero a quittance for other sums he might owe her, while he issued the same sort of quittance to her: Tamba, 75–76, no. 69.

handwork.<sup>97</sup> Such commercial operations must have provided the matrons with considerable business expertise, and allowed them to gain the confidence of the men with whom they dealt. For example, Castellano di Sigismondo, who for a while operated a tavern at the Rialto, had dealings with the matron Helena from Florence and with Helena's successor, Maddalena, called Fornaria, from Padua.<sup>98</sup> Maddalena was the wife of Castellano's brother Giovanni and operated an inn at the Rialto together with her husband.<sup>99</sup> In 1419, Castellano and his brother Giovanni named Maddalena their proctor not only to collect debts, but also to sell Giovanni's hemp and to deal in all his business affairs.<sup>100</sup> While it was by no means unusual in Venice for men to name their wives as proctors, the brothers' action shows they felt that Maddalena's commercial experience had made her capable of negotiating successfully in a mercantile world dominated by men.<sup>101</sup>

The matrons' business affairs involved them not only with shop- and innkeepers of the area, but also with Venetian patricians, from whom they borrowed money fairly frequently. The matrons could have encountered these nobles as *Capisestieri*, as proprietors of the premises they rented, as suppliers of goods, or even, possibly, as clients. They seem to have established similar relations of trust with the patricians as they did with shopkeepers. For if the matrons occasionally offered pawns as security, at other times they furnished their noble creditors with merely a personal promise to repay, sometimes with a schedule of repayment, but sometimes without any deadline at all.<sup>102</sup> Once

<sup>97</sup>She bought 100 ducats worth from a member of the Garzoni family: *ibid.*, 182–83, no. 185, 5 April 1397. This quantity of thread is much more than would be used in normal sewing operations to adjust or rework used clothing. In some localities prostitutes could pay off part of their debts to the matrons through their handwork: Roper, 1985, 6.

<sup>98</sup>By 5 June 1411 Helena had accumulated a debt of 110 ducats with Castellano di Sigismondo, for part of which she had supplied pawns: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 36 (Giovani Campio). On 26 March 1415 she transferred to Castellano a debt owed her by another person: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 193 (Francesco de Soris), fol. 82<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>99</sup>ASV, AC, reg. 3647, fol. 20, 24 September 1417.

<sup>100</sup>ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), 16 August 1419.

<sup>101</sup>Apart from the matrons, there were some other women in Venice who were active in business and in credit operations. The subject will be further discussed in my forthcoming book on women, work, and business in Renaissance Venice.

<sup>102</sup>For example, on 13 July 1406, Caterina da Bologna confessed a debt of 100 ducats received from Girolamo and Andrea Zorzi, to be repaid at ten ducats per month: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti). She also received 200 ducats from Cristoforo Dandolo, as in two documents dated 10 July 1408: *ibid.* On 24 July 1393, Jacoba Baladori borrowed forty ducats from Antonio di Marco Coppo: Tamba, 44–45, no. 34. She promised to repay it in two installments by the end of the coming November. On 11 October 1398, Jacoba received from Bernardo Giustinian, executor of Lorenzo Giustinian, the pawns she had given the latter to guarantee a loan of forty ducats he had given her: *ibid.*, 256–57, no. 277. She had repaid the loan.

again, such dealings drew the matrons into the wider business networks of their creditors. Jacoba Baladori acted as guarantor for Nicoletto Barbado, presumably because she owed him money; in consequence, she had to promise to pay over 300 ducats to his creditors.<sup>103</sup> Such transactions must have introduced her to more complex financial operations. For example, one of the sums she promised to pay for Nicoletto bore interest according to the yield on letters of exchange drawn on Bruges. This was a normal method of deciding an interest rate, chosen in part because fluctuations in the exchange rates meant that the return was not fixed and, therefore, not technically usurious. However, it was a technique that a woman would usually not have occasion to encounter, much less employ.

That the matrons became accustomed to local business methods is further indicated by the manner in which they formed companies to carry on their brothel business. Anna from Verona, in particular, seems to have used such associations; possibly, she had little capital or credit, and needed the contribution of a partner.<sup>104</sup> By 1392 she was operating together with Lucia “Nigra” Ziane, but the company ended in 1395, when Lucia evidently withdrew from the business.<sup>105</sup> The quittance that Lucia issued to Anna on this occasion gives a sense of the nature of their partnership, as it refers to their company as one of *mamole* whom they kept at profit and loss, and to their common interest in bedrooms, beds, other furnishings, and the rent of houses. Subsequently, Anna went on to form an association with Helena from Florence, which lasted until around 1398. The two matrons then formally gave each other quittance for all the claims that might arise from their business affairs and, specifically, from their company of *mamole*.<sup>106</sup> They also asserted that they had gone over and calculated their accounts together; therefore, it is possible that they were sufficiently literate and familiar with numbers to have kept their own accounts.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>103</sup>Tamba, 81, no. 75, 18 March 1394.

<sup>104</sup>From mid-1393 she may also have been permanently disfigured. After she gave evidence regarding a murder probably perpetrated by Giovanni de Artusio, Giovanni’s brother attacked her on the street, striking a number of blows to her face that did considerable harm: ASV, AC, reg. 3645, fol. 6<sup>v</sup>, 20 June 1393. It was, of course, normal for an attacker to try to destroy a prostitute’s looks.

<sup>105</sup>The company was mentioned on 3 April 1392 in ASV, AC, reg. 3644, fol. 91. On 28 August 1395 Lucia gave Anna a quittance for everything Anna might owe her “by reason of the company of *mamole* of the Castelletto whom we had together at profit and loss”: Tamba, 142–43, no. 141. Lucia then created a priest in San Maffeo her procurator to collect debts owed to her: *ibid.*, 143–44, no. 142, 1 September 1395.

<sup>106</sup>Tamba, 262–63, no. 287, 29 November 1398.

<sup>107</sup>They may, however, have used a system of signs comprehensible even to the illiterate, as was done in the Venetian gold-spinning industry, and which Pol, 172, mentions was used by brothel-keepers in Amsterdam.

Usually such companies were formed within Venice, but occasionally the matrons' business associations extended further afield. For example, for an unspecified period Helena from Florence had an association with a Lancilotto de Belavitis de Taleto.<sup>108</sup> The company must have operated at least between Venice and Treviso, as, when it was liquidated in 1404, Lancilotto agreed to transfer to Helena some prostitutes whom they had jointly kept in the latter town. The business had clearly had its ups and downs, for the partners had pawned some of their goods, including clothes and silver objects, with the moneylenders of Mestre. Perhaps Lancilotto had provided most of the capital for the enterprise and Helena had done much of the work, for the liquidation agreement left Helena debtor for some 733 ducats. That she could promise to pay this sum by installments over some fourteen months suggests that she was anticipating a relatively high regular income from her brothel.

While it seems clear, then, that matrons could make money from their brothels, it is frustratingly difficult to ascertain how they did so, especially in light of the financial control exercised by the government. In the case of the clients, there is no indication that the matrons charged for access to the brothel and its inmates, as sometimes occurred elsewhere.<sup>109</sup> However, clients may have given them informal tips. It would seem likely that the matrons sold food and especially drink to their customers, which was a major source of income for brothel-keepers in some localities.<sup>110</sup> There are, in fact, references to matrons and prostitutes selling wine to their lovers or pimps, and the matrons undoubtedly attempted to do the same for their clients.<sup>111</sup> However, the Venetian government was very careful about retail sales of wine, as has been illustrated. Selling wine was limited to tavern-keepers, and the government prohibited informal sales, such as by prostitutes, where tax was not paid; similarly, the government insisted that prostitutes drink only wine supplied by

<sup>108</sup>See the detailed documentation in ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), fols. 11<sup>v</sup>–12<sup>v</sup>, 23 October and 5 November 1404.

<sup>109</sup>On payments made to brothel-keepers, see Otis, 82. The regulations of 1460 that established a new Castelletto in Venice reproduced some of the earlier regulations, but no mention is made of a fee paid by clients.

<sup>110</sup>Such as Amsterdam: see Pol, 195–99, who points out that excessive prices were charged and that clients might be robbed and cheated in various ways.

<sup>111</sup>The deliberation by the Senate of 5 May 1421 states that matrons and prostitutes rented houses and “voltas” outside the Castelletto and sold wine there to their “bertonis,” or lovers/pimps: ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 53, fol. 132<sup>v</sup>; ASV SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 42<sup>v</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 34, no. 12; Calza, 8–9. The difference in wealth between the matrons and prostitutes is indicated by the difference in the fine established for this misdemeanor: twenty-five lire for matrons and ten for prostitutes. Roper, 1985, 5, also mentions that brothel-keepers in Germany made money on food and drink.

the taverns.<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, people did drink in the brothels, and alcohol probably added to the level of violence there.<sup>113</sup>

It is somewhat clearer how matrons made money from their *mamole*. Since the prostitutes usually lived in the brothel, at least in the early years of the Castelletto, their food and drink were probably supplied by the matron, and they must have paid for it.<sup>114</sup> The same was true for lodging. Legislation of 1460, which established a new Castelletto, mentioned the custom in the earlier institution for the prostitutes to pay the reasonable sum of six lire per month for a room in a brothel or three lire per month if they lived outside the Castelletto, in the nearby shops or *volte*.<sup>115</sup> The matrons also must have passed on to the prostitutes the various expenses they undertook for their brothel, including their highest expenditure — the cost of the expensive clothing they purchased or rented for their *mamole*. The matrons may, in fact, have obtained more than they paid, as they sometimes presented these clothes to the Capisestieri for an assessment of their value. By implication, the prostitutes would be required to pay the estimated price as opposed to what the matron might actually have spent.<sup>116</sup>

All this meant that the prostitutes might find themselves in considerable debt to the matrons.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, whatever a prostitute earned (and there is little indication as to what this was<sup>118</sup>), much of it must have gone to repay such sums,

<sup>112</sup>This is stated in the legislation of 5 May 1421: ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 53, fol. 132<sup>v</sup>; ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 42<sup>v</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 34, no. 12; Calza, 8–9.

<sup>113</sup>For example, a man who was kept away from the prostitute he wanted in the brothel of Lucia Ziane and Anna da Verona took revenge by setting fire to the beds of their premises. He had been drinking before he committed the deed: ASV, AC, reg. 3644, fol. 91, 3 April 1392.

<sup>114</sup>On 1 March 1418, Lucia from Ravenna, matron in the Castelletto, was sentenced to pay a debt of twenty-seven ducats for meat she had purchased: ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 41<sup>r</sup>. This is a large sum and suggests that she was feeding numerous people.

<sup>115</sup>These regulations of 4 September 1460 are in ASV, CN, reg. 10, fols. 11<sup>v</sup>–12<sup>v</sup> in the new numbering; *Leggi e memorie*, 56–59, no. 43; Calza, 17. There is also an abbreviated English translation in Chambers and Pullan, 120–23. A comparison can be made to the twenty-four soldi or 1.2 lire that a master carpenter would make in a day: see Lane, 177, 179.

<sup>116</sup>The regulations of 15 July 1423 decreed that, when the matrons presented clothes to the Capi for an estimation of their value, these officials had to consult three experts before determining the value: ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 48<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>117</sup>For example, one prostitute transferred to the matron Helena from Florence had a debt of 130 ducats: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), fol. 26<sup>r</sup>, 24 December 1406. This sum represents a little more than two years' salary of a master carpenter working full time (calculated as 250 days per year).

<sup>118</sup>Perhaps an idea can be gained from the rate at which prostitutes promised to repay loans. The ten ducats per month promised by Benassuta from Treviso (ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 [Cecchino Alberti], fol. 13) implies an income of well over 120 ducats per year, or more than twice the 62.5 ducats a master carpenter might expect to make annually.

and they were forced to work for long periods simply to meet their obligations.<sup>119</sup> The prostitutes thus became caught up in a financial system that profoundly conditioned their lives, as it forced them to continue in the sex trade, whether they liked it or not, in order to pay off their debts. Moreover, their position of dependency left them open to pressure from the matrons to disobey or circumvent the government's rules. Matrons might cajole their *mamole* into giving them the money they earned rather than putting it into the common chest.<sup>120</sup> Matrons also seem to have persuaded their sex workers to borrow the money they owed them from a male friend, thereby acquiring their money without liberating the prostitute from her debt.<sup>121</sup> The behavior of the matrons was to a degree understandable, as they undertook many personal obligations in running their brothel, and must at times have found it hard to meet these, especially with the Capi controlling the brothel's income. On the other hand, from the prostitute's perspective, the matron's actions could lead to yet deeper obligations or a longer period working to pay off her debt.

The dangers of this system were recognized by the Venetian government, which stepped in to try and protect the *mamole*. From the point of view of the Venetian authorities, the problem was that prostitutes might accumulate so much debt that they would never be able to free themselves from a life of sexual slavery. Consequently, the *Quarantia* limited the amount of debt a prostitute could accumulate with a matron to sixty ducats — still a sizeable sum, although it would have covered the cost of only a couple of the expensive dresses they wore.<sup>122</sup> The authorities were also aware that many other people besides the matrons tried to make money from the prostitutes. Since tavern- and innkeepers overcharged the *mamole*, the Great Council fixed the amount of credit a

<sup>119</sup>On 1 March 1390 the presbyter Marco Cortisano promised the prostitute Jacoba from Padua that he would act as her guarantor for a debt she had contracted with the matron Lucia Ziane in 1378, twelve years earlier: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 22 (Marco Boccassino), fol. 9<sup>r</sup>. A similar system of debt existed in the brothels of Ferrara, of late medieval Spain, and of early modern Amsterdam: Ghirardo, 410; Lacarra Lanz, 269, 271–72; Pol, 171–76.

<sup>120</sup>As stated in the Senate's deliberation of 28 July 1432, where it is also asserted that the Capi had been breaking the rules by distributing the money as they saw fit: ASV, Sen., Misti, reg. 58, fol. 134<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>121</sup>For example, on 3 June 1404 Caterina from Udine, prostitute in the Castelletto, promised to repay Andrea from Modrussa the forty-two ducats he had paid in her name to the matron Helena from Florence: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), fol. 9<sup>v</sup>. On 1 December 1404 Benassuta from Treviso, prostitute in the Castelletto, promised to repay the *strazzarolo* Lotto quondam Jacobi from Florence the 100 ducats plus change he had paid "for love" in her name to content Caterina from Bologna: *ibid.*, fol. 13. Prostitutes in Amsterdam also tried to get men to pay their debts: Pol, 175.

<sup>122</sup>This limit was set in the regulations of 15 July 1423: ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fols. 30<sup>r</sup>–32<sup>v</sup>, 46<sup>r</sup>–48<sup>r</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 37–40, nos. 16–19; Calza, 11–14.

prostitute could build up with them.<sup>123</sup> Even the scribes of the Capi tended to blackmail the prostitutes by demanding fees every time they showed them their accounts. The government therefore decreed that a *mamola* should not be forced to offer the scribes more than a voluntary tip; only on the final occasion that she reviewed her account, after she had paid off her debt, did she have to pay a fixed fee, presumably as payment for their administrative services.<sup>124</sup>

The Venetian government further realized that prostitutes might be exploited by men claiming to be acting in their interests, who, by paying off a debt to a matron, supposedly liberated the *mamola*.<sup>125</sup> However, the real purpose behind their action was to force the prostitute to work for the liberator in order to pay back not only the original debt, but even interest on it. If the prostitute complained, the new creditor could threaten to have her thrown into prison for debt, which would have prevented her from working and led to destitution. Consequently, the prostitutes put up with the injustice and ended up being more exploited than before. The Venetian authorities attempted to stop this practice, although as a commercial elite who held financial obligations sacrosanct, they would not consider canceling a debt, even if contracted in such circumstances. Rather, they prohibited charging interest in such cases, and stipulated that the Capisestieri, as the competent body, should determine a monthly rate proportional to the prostitute's income by which she would repay the loan.<sup>126</sup> This decision suggests again the government's problems in dealing with male pimps, for it indirectly recognized their existence and their right to recover an outlay made on a prostitute, despite the legislation against such informal pimping.

#### RELATIONS BETWEEN MATRONS AND *MAMOLE*

The generalized sense that prostitution could be exploited for personal gain raises the question of the relations that developed between the matrons and the young women who worked for them. What has been said so far suggests that these relationships must have been rather complex. On the one hand, merely from a financial perspective, the *mamole* were valuable to the brothel-keepers and therefore merited care and attention. That the matrons had probably themselves been prostitutes should also have encouraged them to understand and feel

<sup>123</sup>The maximum was five *lire di piccoli*: ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 22, fol. 120<sup>v</sup>, 18 January 1439. Also *Leggi e memorie*, 44, no. 26; Calza, 15–16.

<sup>124</sup>This payment had to be at least twenty soldi: ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fol. 39<sup>r</sup>, 15 December 1413.

<sup>125</sup>Stated in the regulations of 15 July 1423: *ibid.*, fols. 46<sup>v</sup>–47<sup>r</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 37–38, no. 17; Calza, 12–13.

<sup>126</sup>Legislation of 15 July 1423: ASV, SN al civil, b. 1, fols. 30<sup>r</sup>–32<sup>v</sup> and 46<sup>r</sup>–48<sup>r</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 37–40, nos. 16–19; Calza, 11–14.



sympathy for the difficulties of the *mamole's* lives. On the other hand, the matrons were making an investment in their sex workers, and there was a strong incentive to regard them in a less humane fashion, as moneymaking assets.

It seems that these conflicting interests induced rather ambivalent attitudes in the matrons. At one level they were certainly anxious to protect their *mamole* from jealous and potentially violent clients, and did so even when it entailed reprisals against themselves.<sup>127</sup> Further, if a prostitute really intended to leave the trade, a matron might be persuaded to cancel her debt and liberate her.<sup>128</sup> On the other hand, there are many indications that the matrons conceived of their prostitutes above all in financial terms, almost as commodities to be bought and sold. For example, if a client/lover ran off with a prostitute, he was expected to pay off her debt to the matron, effectively buying her from her former mistress.<sup>129</sup> Matrons might even buy women from people who had deceived or seduced them and wanted to make some money by selling or pawning them to a brothel-keeper. Jacoba Baladori gave ten ducats to a man who had persuaded a woman to follow him to Venice, and, on another occasion, thirty ducats to a widow who had managed to corrupt even nuns in order to pawn them in brothels.<sup>130</sup> In these cases, the money given was treated as a loan, with the woman serving as guarantee for its repayment, but, in practice, she would have had to work in the brothel in order to pay it off.

A similarly mercenary point of view on the part of the matrons is evident in the techniques used to transfer prostitutes from one locality to another. Although some *mamole* might spend considerable time in one city and develop a personal clientele,

<sup>127</sup>Anna from Verona and Lucia Ziane refused to allow an ex-custodian of the Castelletto to continue his relation with one of their prostitutes. In revenge, he set fire to some of the beds of the brothel, hoping to burn it down: ASV, AC, reg. 3644, fol. 91, 3 April 1392.

<sup>128</sup>On 25 September 1403 Helena from Florence, matron in the Castelletto, agreed never to ask Domenica "Zizoleta" from Ferrara for the twenty-one ducats she still owed her, as Domenica had promised to abandon the brothel and never stay in another: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), fol. 6. If Domenica failed to keep her promise, she had to pay Helena the twenty-one ducats.

<sup>129</sup>ASV, CI, Notai, b. 193 (Francesco de Soris), fols. 82<sup>v</sup>–83<sup>r</sup>, 26 March 1415: a man from Murano confessed a debt of forty-four ducats (the rest of fifty-nine ducats) he owed Helena from Florence for having gone off from Venice with one of her prostitutes. The regulations of 4 September 1460 prohibited anyone from taking a prostitute from Venice who owed money to a property-owner or innkeeper, on pain of paying all her debts: ASV, CN, reg. 10, fols. 11<sup>v</sup>–12<sup>r</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 56–59, no. 43, Calza, 17.

<sup>130</sup>ASV, AC, reg. 3645, fols. 4<sup>r</sup> and 13<sup>v</sup> of the second section of the volume. Scarabello, 2006, 39–40, cites the former case and another of 3 October 1397, which involved two men pawning women in brothels in Treviso. Also see Ruggiero, 1985, 41–42. Maddalena "Fornaria" from Padua was convicted of conspiring with a husband to try and force his wife into prostitution. Since Maddalena gave clothes to both husband and wife, the case was treated as pawning of a woman: ASV, AC, reg. 3647, fol. 20, 24 September 1417.

moving prostitutes around was a common practice among brothel-keepers looking for new faces to keep alive the interest of their regular customers. Such practices help to account for the large proportion of foreign prostitutes found in municipal brothels of the day. In Venice, there seems to have been a lively commerce of this sort with other towns in Northern Italy, especially Treviso, and it is striking how many of these transfers involved Germans. German men and women must have acted as pimps, bringing German girls across the Alps and starting them on a peripatetic career through the Italian peninsula.<sup>131</sup> That many of them spent time in Venice can be explained, perhaps, not only on the basis of geography, but because Venice could offer an especially large clientele of German speakers who frequented or worked in the German commercial house, the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*.

The methods used by matrons and other brothel-keepers to transfer their *mamole* are illustrated in the acts of the notary Cecchino Alberti. One of these documents recounts how the matron Helena from Florence acquired three German prostitutes from a German woman called Anne Spanga, who lived in Treviso and presumably ran a brothel there.<sup>132</sup> The exchange was essentially monetary, and was based on the system of debts described above — one that was evidently widespread throughout the world of international prostitution. Having paid 50 ducats of the debt of 200 ducats the prostitutes owed Anne, Helena declared that she still owed Anne the remaining 150 ducats. In turn, Anne ceded the *mamole* to Helena with all the rights pertaining to them. The exchange comes close to a purchase and the language is very similar to property transactions.<sup>133</sup> Only incidentally is it mentioned that the prostitutes themselves consented to this exchange.

On other occasions not even this consent was mentioned. For instance, late in 1406, the same Helena paid 30 ducats and pledged herself to pay another 100 ducats to Anastasia from Venice, who had moved to Pavia and undertaken management of the public brothel there.<sup>134</sup> Helena was acquiring a *mamola* called Caterina, nicknamed Florina, who had been a debtor of, and “subject to,” Anastasia in Pavia. Anastasia must have returned to Venice with Caterina, intending to exchange her for someone new. Once again, the agreement was

<sup>131</sup>Trexler, 986–87, mentions the number of German and Flemish girls in Florentine brothels in the early fifteenth century, though the number fell thereafter. The term *German* was, of course, a broad one that included people of the Netherlands and of various countries of Eastern Europe.

<sup>132</sup>ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), fol. 2, 28 April 1403.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid.: “which prostitutes the said Anne has given and ceded to the same Helena with all related rights.”

<sup>134</sup>Ibid., fol. 26<sup>r</sup>, 24 December 1406. Helena’s guarantor was the druggist Redolfo Mazuchi, who undertook to become a principal debtor together with Helena. On Anastasia, see Canosa and Colonnello, 21.

purely financial: Helena assumed Caterina's remaining debt to Anastasia, paying a part, providing a notarized obligation to pay the rest, and presenting a suitable guarantor. In turn, Anastasia handed Caterina over to Helena, with all related rights.

Although the brothel managers transferred the prostitute's debt from one to the other, the prostitute, of course, remained ultimately responsible for its payment. This is evident in an exchange from Venice to Treviso in which the manager of a public brothel in Treviso, another German called Armanno son of Delman, acquired a prostitute from Caterina from Bologna, matron in the Venetian Castelletto.<sup>135</sup> He paid part of the debt that the prostitute owed Caterina and obligated himself to pay the rest within three months. However, on the same day, the prostitute declared that she owed Armanno the full sum he had paid and would pay to her ex-matron.<sup>136</sup> That these transactions were conducted in the office of the Capisestieri, with employees of the government acting as notary and witnesses, indicates that they were a normal part of the financial system of Venetian prostitution and that government officials had no difficulty in accepting and promoting this kind of trade in human beings.

Apart from essentially buying and selling young women, the matrons shared a widespread practice of using their prostitutes as guarantees or pawns. This article has already discussed men and women pawning women to matrons for even small sums of money, and the same was done by some corrupt officials who used their position as *Capo* for financial gain.<sup>137</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that the matrons themselves tended to use their rights over the prostitutes and their work as guarantees in their own commercial transactions. For example, when Jacoba Baladori acted as guarantor for a purchase of spun cotton by Helena from Florence, she required Helena to provide surety that Jacoba would not end up having to pay the sum herself. Consequently, Helena promised Jacoba that she would refund whatever Jacoba might be required to pay, and offered as guarantee all her *mamole* or her rights over them so that Jacoba could have recourse to them to recover her money.<sup>138</sup> In such agreements, the prostitutes were being treated not as human beings but as income-producing objects with

<sup>135</sup>ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cechino Alberti), fol. 5<sup>v</sup>, 31 July 1403.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., fol. 5<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>137</sup>On 17 July 1413, Nicolò Corner was punished for his behavior while *Capo*: ASV, AC, reg. 3646, fol. 33<sup>v</sup>. He had taken a prostitute from a matron with the excuse that he wanted her with him while he was in Padua, and had forced the matron to accept as compensation fifty ducats rather than the sixty-two ducats the prostitute actually owed her. However, Nicolò then pawned the girl to another matron for sixty-five ducats. He had also bought gowns from *strazzaroli* and at auction, and sold them to matrons and prostitutes for much higher prices.

<sup>138</sup>Tamba, 182–83, no. 185, 5 April 1397: “in addition obligating all my *mamole* or every right over them which I have or can have or can have in future such that you can, and have the power to, have recourse to the said *mamole*.”

a monetary value negotiable in the Venetian financial market. That they were used in this way, whereas other workers evidently were not, indicates the low value placed on sex workers in the social hierarchy of the day.

The system of prostitution applied in the Venetian Castelletto would seem, then, to have been based on a multifaceted exploitation of the prostitutes. It enveloped them in a web of financial obligation that tied them to the trade; they were also reified by being used as pawns, forced to sell their bodies to provide money for someone to whom they were not directly obligated. Such techniques seem to have been common in medieval and early modern prostitution: they were known in fourteenth-century Florence as in sixteenth-century Augsburg and seventeenth-century Amsterdam.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, the idea of treating people as objects and in ways that forced them into sexual slavery did offend the moral or humanitarian sense of many people, and some urban governments attempted to do away with such a system. Already in 1325 the Florentines had dealt with the issue in a number of provisions intended not only to prevent humans from being used as pawns for debt, but, in particular, to protect women from being sold into prostitution.<sup>140</sup> These regulations prohibited buying a woman or otherwise obligating her to stay in a brothel for sinful purposes. Also prohibited would have been the kind of relationship between matron and *mamole* that existed in Venice, as it was forbidden to use obligations stemming from loans of money or from the provision of clothes or merchandise to force a woman to prostitute herself. The situation in Florence seems, in theory, also to have been more liberal in that if a prostitute wanted to leave the business, all her financial obligations were annulled. As has been shown, this might occur in Venice in practice, but exceptionally, on an ad hoc basis rather than by government decree.

By comparison to the Florentines, the position of the Venetian patriciate on such issues was more complex and nuanced. As indicated above, the Venetian authorities were unwilling to undermine the fundamental principle of repayment of a debt that an individual had contracted. However, they did object to other related practices, such as charging interest on loans made to liberate prostitutes from their matrons. In 1438 the Venetian government also decided to outlaw the pawning of women in such a way as would force them into prostitution or keep them in the trade. The motives behind this decision were multiple. On the one hand, the Venetians, who prided themselves on their piety,

<sup>139</sup>For Augsburg, see Roper, 1989, 96; Roper, 1985, 6–7. Pol, 173–76, points out that a similar system of debt was used to transfer and pawn prostitutes in early modern Amsterdam.

<sup>140</sup>This legislation is in Caggese, 2:100, 271–73. See also Canosa and Colonnello, 27–34. Similar legislation to prevent pawning women and forcing them into prostitution through debt existed in Seville: Perry, 149. However, it is questionable how effective such legislation was, as Mazzi, 341–46, shows prostitutes in Florence being manipulated by debt and rights over them being transferred even in the fifteenth century.

were concerned about the religious implications of compelling women to remain in a permanent state of sin. In fact, the legislation condemned the use of prostitutes as pawns because it prevented them from leaving the trade when they wanted to, which was defined as an injury to God as well as shameful for such a religious city as Venice.<sup>141</sup>

The law further stated that such forced prostitution went contrary to Venice's much vaunted traditions of liberty. It is well known that Venetians were proud of their city's freedom and that liberty played an important role in the myth of Venice as an ideal city-state. However, Venetian liberty is usually associated with the claim that the city was never conquered and with its self-government along republican lines. It is, therefore, surprising to find Venetians connecting the concept of liberty with what might now be called human rights. Nevertheless, this legislation of 1438 moves in that direction, as it makes a clear correlation between the ideal of freedom and the right of women, as well as men, to choose a morally decent life. The law states that "our city has the fame of being free, and what principally accords with true liberty is that everyone, when they want to, be able to live well."<sup>142</sup> Liberty is thus clearly connected with the possibility of exercising moral choice and deciding to abandon sin for a virtuous life. Since pawning prostitutes prevents such a choice, it is said to constitute "the highest iniquity," and the legislation consequently prohibits using any woman as a pawn in such a way as would force her to sell her body. Rather, from now on, it is proudly declared, such women should be free.

This legislation is interesting in that it suggests that the concept of liberty in Venice possessed ethical-religious as well as political implications. However, not too much should be made of it. Despite its high moral tone, the law was aimed only at women who had been unfortunate enough to have been used as pawns. It did not begin to undermine the wider system of personal debt that kept so many prostitutes committed to the brothel for many years, even when they too may have wanted to leave. One has to conclude that the Venetian sense of injustice was rather limited and was aroused to action only by extreme or particular types of exploitation.

## MARGINALIZATION VERSUS INTEGRATION

After this discussion of the practices of Venetian prostitution and contemporary attitudes to it, an effort can be made to assess the effects of this commercial

<sup>141</sup>ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 22, fol. 120<sup>r</sup>, 21 December 1438; *Leggi e memorie*, 43–44, no. 25; Calza, 15. On the use of such rhetoric, see Ruggiero, 1985, 16–22, 45–49, 70–75.

<sup>142</sup>ASV, MC, Delib., reg. 22, fol. 120<sup>r</sup>: "questa nostra citta habia fama de esser libera et alla vera liberta principalmente se convegna che tutti quando i vol possi viver bene, in che sta el vero nome de liberta." Pol, 174, shows that similar treatment of prostitutes in Amsterdam was likened to slavery and criticized as objectionable in a free country.

system of prostitution on women's lives and on their relations with the society around them. First, as regards the prostitutes, the position of the *mamole* seems similar to the rather ambiguous mixture of acceptance and disdain, marginalization and integration noted by Elizabeth Cohen as typical of prostitutes in early modern Rome.<sup>143</sup> On the one hand, the Venetian authorities were relatively liberal in that they tried to establish reasonable and fair conditions for the prostitutes, and ensure that they received justice and protection in their work. Moreover, official regulations granted the *mamole* some freedom, in that they could, to a degree, choose their lovers and develop special relations with clients. The legislation also guaranteed sex workers a legitimate place in Venetian life and in the constructed space of the city. Prostitutes were legally permitted to ply their trade during the day in the Castelletto and in certain areas around it; in practice, they seem to have been able to solicit almost anywhere at the Rialto — at the market, near shops, and in open spaces. Because of government policy, their presence had to be accepted by all who frequented the zone, and prostitution must have come to be seen by many as a normal part of local life.

Thus the legalization of prostitution, at one level, won the *mamole* some integration into local society. As illustrated above, some shop- and innkeepers welcomed their presence, and were happy to do business with them. Other groups active at the Rialto seem to have reacted similarly. Clergy attached to the local churches by no means scorned prostitutes; rather, some acted on their behalf or assisted them financially. Notaries at the Rialto drew up documents for *mamole* just as they did for merchants and for nuns.<sup>144</sup> If some government officials abused their powers and exploited sex workers, others became their friends and supporters, reflecting the rather benevolent attitude of the authorities as well as the personal contacts that grew out of frequent interaction. Further, the connections the prostitutes could set up with powerful individuals such as the Capisestieri brought them agency and influence, which they could use to reduce or avoid the limitations officially imposed on their activities.

On the other hand, the Venetian government's legalization of prostitution by no means canceled the stigma connected with sex work. The authorities themselves ensured that this was so by acting constantly on the assumption that prostitution was an immoral, sinful activity, to be hidden as far as possible from the sight and the knowledge of decent people. Such assumptions must have influenced the way in which others not only regarded, but also reacted to sex workers. Surviving criminal records reveal in striking terms the degree to which

<sup>143</sup>E. Cohen, 1998.

<sup>144</sup>Acts notarized by Cechino Alberti (ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6) include documents for merchants (for example, fol. 9<sup>r</sup>, 1 May 1404, redacted in the "square where merchants gather"). He also drew up acts for various nuns.

prostitutes were physically ill treated, suggesting once again that they were viewed as possessing little value or status.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, prostitutes might be treated practically as objects, while exploiting the *mamole* seems to have been regarded as normal and was done by many of those around them, including the matrons themselves. Even the apparent acceptance of sex workers by shop- and innkeepers at the Rialto was undoubtedly based in part on a rather cynical calculation of the profit to be made from them. For the *mamole*, the results seem often to have been poverty and relative isolation, as might be expected for young women who were so often foreigners.<sup>146</sup>

That prostitution in Venice continued to be regarded as a degrading activity is further suggested by the apparent general assumption that the best solution for a prostitute was to abandon the trade. Government legislation was directed toward providing a means for the *mamole* to do this by paying off their debts and liberating themselves. Ordinary Venetians saw freeing a prostitute from sex work as a meritorious charitable act; occasionally, a bequest was left to enable a prostitute to pay off her debts, find a husband, and lead a God-fearing life.<sup>147</sup> As for the *mamole* themselves, their attitudes are rarely recorded, but some certainly sought an avenue of escape. As previously discussed, this might be achieved through a personal decision — the reform so often preached by ecclesiastics — that might lead to an elimination of debt and the possibility of a new start in life. A few houses for repentant prostitutes existed in Venice in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, although entering them probably implied a quasimonastic style of life.<sup>148</sup> Other, less formal means might also be found to escape from sex

<sup>145</sup>Their low status is also indicated by the regularity with which whipping was included in the penalties imposed on them. The brutality of prostitutes' lives with male pimps in Florence is discussed by Mazzi, esp. 330–40. She also comments on the way physical violence against public women was taken to be almost normal: *ibid.*, 375–79.

<sup>146</sup>The will of the prostitute Agnes from Ljubljana — 23 July 1405, ASV, Notarile, Testamenti (hereafter ASV, NT, with bundle number and name of relevant notary in parentheses), b. 570 (Bernardo Panza) — suggests relative social isolation as well as poverty, as the only legatees are Agnes's fellow prostitute, or *socia* (companion), Margherita from Zadar, and an official at the Rialto, to whom she left a silver belt and ten ducats for his daughter's dowry. These gifts constituted the bulk of her wealth.

<sup>147</sup>In her will of 7 September 1415, Cristina, wife of the dyer Gratosio da Montalbano, left twenty-five ducats to help liberate a "sinner" who, because of misfortune, was in the "public house" and wanted to leave it for a better life in divine matrimony: ASV, NT, b. 336 (Antonio Dalmario), no. 2. Bequests of this sort were frequently made elsewhere, as in Ferrara: Ghirardo, 410.

<sup>148</sup>One refuge for ex-prostitutes, in San Margherita, was founded by the Giovanni Contarini who also founded the hospital of San Giobbe: see his will of 28 January 1403 (changed to 30 August 1407), ASV, NT, b. 571 (Giorgio di Gibilino), no. 137; Ellero, 57; Gardani. For much more frequent efforts to create refuges for ex-prostitutes in the sixteenth century, see S. Cohen, and, for Venice, Pullan, 257–58, 376–94.



work. These often utilized relationships with men — finding someone willing either to pay off one's debt (without imposing a worse servitude) or to provide an alternative existence that, if not actually marriage, might be close to it.

An interesting example of this last possibility is provided by the agreement made in 1400 between one of Jacoba Baladori's *mamole*, Margarita, called Gretola, and an immigrant from Rimini, Micheletto di Nanni.<sup>149</sup> Micheletto was prepared to furnish Margarita with a loan of 100 ducats, at least part of which was probably intended to repay what she owed her matron Jacoba. This loan came with binding, if fairly generous, conditions, as Micheletto had evidently established a close relationship with Margarita that he wanted to turn into something more permanent. He promised not to ask for the money back provided that Margarita came to live with him, serving and obeying him and looking after his property. Only if she failed to do this or if she left him without his consent would she be required to repay the loan. At one level, he was, like others, using financial bonds to manipulate Margarita. At another, however, he was providing her with an incentive to establish a relationship resembling that of an informal marriage; his specifications of how Margarita was to behave depict her as a wife in practice if not in title. Of course, the agreement would not necessarily be permanent, and Margarita might be left with nothing if it fell apart. On the other hand, it would allow her to abandon prostitution and set up a potentially long-term relationship with someone to whom she was probably emotionally attached. Such an arrangement would, in fact, not be so different from informal unions often entered into by lower-class couples who lived together, had children, and behaved as though they were married even if they had not performed the due ceremonies.<sup>150</sup>

Another alternative for the prostitute who wanted, or was compelled, to change her style of life, was, of course, that of becoming a matron. In certain ways, this does not seem a bad option, for running a brothel could permit a woman to become an entrepreneur handling large sums of money and realizing sometimes substantial profits. Even if most of this money was reinvested in her business or went to pay her many creditors, a matron could achieve a sufficiently high income for a comfortable, if not a luxurious, style of life. Such an assessment is supported by the wills of two matrons, drawn up while they were still operating in the Castelletto — Jacoba Baladori and Helena from Florence.<sup>151</sup> Both women could afford to employ servants or even to purchase

<sup>149</sup>ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), 18 September 1400.

<sup>150</sup>Ruggiero, 1985, 30, 153, mentions such unions among Venetians. See also Karras, 2012, 185–208. Ferrante, 212–16, describes similar agreements between masters and servant-concubines, and Romano, 105, offers an interesting example.

<sup>151</sup>Helena's will of 27 July 1411 is in ASV, NT, b. 1233 (Francesco de Soris), no. 196. Jacoba's was redacted by Cecchino Alberti: *ibid.*, b. 54, no. 5, 16 December 1400.

slaves — an important investment when the matron was responsible for the cleanliness and maintenance of a large establishment.<sup>152</sup> Jacoba also employed a woman to carry out business for her.<sup>153</sup> Both Jacoba and Helena could afford to be generous to those close to them. The former left bequests ranging from fifteen to fifty ducats to various male friends, including the notaries who had drawn up acts for her and to one of the scribes at the office of the Capisestieri.<sup>154</sup> Helena bequeathed 100 ducats to create a dowry for the daughter of her executor. Although neither woman mentions property, which could have provided them with a permanent income, matrons were able to gain enough economic security to eventually retire from brothel life. Lucia “Nigra” Ziane seems to have done so, as did Helena herself, who, around 1416, turned over her brothel to an aspiring matron, Magdalena “Fornaria” from Padua, and moved to the nearby parish of San Cassian.<sup>155</sup>

As has been shown, the matrons’ business operations entailed interaction with patricians and merchants as well as with used-clothes dealers, innkeepers, and artisans. They were thus accepted as business partners by people of every social level; they seem to have found credit easily and must therefore have enjoyed the trust of many around them, despite what was felt to be the rather immoral nature of their activities. They seem, then, to have enjoyed a high degree of social integration. That this could extend even to devotional groups is indicated by the will of Helena from Florence, which refers to a religious confraternity, that of the Holy Apostles, with which she had formed an association.<sup>156</sup> Located in the eponymous church in the *sestiere* of Cannaregio, the confraternity was one of the largest in Venice that accepted female members, although it charged higher fees to those who resided outside the parish of the Santi Apostoli. Helena did not actually assert in her will that she was a member of this group, but she was close enough to it to expect that its members would attend her funeral, or might be persuaded to do so. She left them the rather large sum of ten ducats on the

<sup>152</sup>Caterina da Bologna purchased a black female slave, but she sold her six months later, reducing the price from thirty-five to thirty-four ducats: ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cechino Alberti), 19 June and 17 December 1406.

<sup>153</sup>Jacoba refers to an Agata “who does my business,” and to whom she leaves her own bed, a slave (for four years), and financial support for the rest of her life.

<sup>154</sup>Jacoba’s male beneficiaries included the notary Cecchino Alberti, a scribe in the office of the Capisestieri, and another man who had assisted her with many documents. Presumably her special male friend was her “familiar,” Bartolo, to whom she left twenty-five ducats.

<sup>155</sup>ASV, CI, Notai, b. 193 (Francesco de Soris), fol. 147<sup>r</sup>, 21 July 1416: Helena, “once matron in the brothel,” now of the parish of San Cassian, gives quittance to Magdalena “Fornaria” from Padua “at present matron in that brothel” for all she owed, including some obligations she had made to Helena in the office of the Capisestieri and that she was paying through that office.

<sup>156</sup>On this confraternity, see Ortalli, esp. 122–23, 132–33.

condition they accompanied her funeral procession and prayed to God for her soul. The sum involved, and the fact that the bequest to the confraternity was the first one listed in her will, suggests that she set considerable store by her relationship with this pious group. Presumably she saw her connection with the devotional and charitable activities of a confraternity as a way to compensate, at least in part, for a life spent engaging in or promoting activities for which she might be punished in the afterlife. In addition, she may have felt that the presence of a respected religious sodality at her funeral would supply a degree of social respectability that she might otherwise have lacked. As for the members of the confraternity, it is striking that they were prepared to accept at some level a woman who was openly running a brothel in the Castelletto and therefore directly contradicted the high standards of behavior normally demanded by devotional groups. Money may have been a factor here, as Helena could use her cash income to make significant donations to the confraternity's activities and thereby mitigate the disdain that might have been aroused by her occupation. She may have been merely a token member or benevolent supporter of the confraternity, offering donations without participating directly in the group's activities. Nevertheless, her bequest suggests that, perhaps through her financial resources, it was possible even for a matron of the Castelletto to benefit from the city's confraternal life.

However, while these considerations suggest a relatively high degree of social acceptance, a look at other bequests in these matrons' wills calls for a more nuanced view. Neither Helena nor Jacoba seems, for example, to have developed very extensive social bonds. As might be expected, neither possessed much of a family. Jacoba left a slave to her beloved son, presumably Marco Baffo, but otherwise, she, like Helena, named only their adopted sons as relatives.<sup>157</sup> Apart from a servant and this child, the only people to whom Helena was close were the family of Castellano di Sigismondo — the innkeeper with whom she had had business dealings. He was named as her sole executor and the beneficiary of what was left of her goods after the other bequests had been paid. Moreover, the largest sum that Helena left was to Castellano's daughter for her marriage. Both she and Jacoba seem, notably, to have been without the network of female associates that older women normally accumulated. Presumably, then, their careers had tended not only to dissolve family bonds, but also to isolate them personally from the social world around them, despite the business network in which they functioned.

<sup>157</sup>Helena left hers only fifty ducats once he reached the age of twenty, and that on condition that he behaved well. Jacoba stipulated that her adopted son was to be raised by her estate and that 400 lire (about eighty-nine ducats) were to be invested for him until he reached his majority.

Similar conclusions arise from events surrounding the execution of the will of Jacoba Baladori, who died soon after it was drawn up. She had left seventy-five ducats (fifteen each) to the five men she nominated as her executors: two were officially resident in Bologna, another (of Lucchese origin) resided in Treviso, another was the parish priest of San Cancian, and the last the used-goods dealer, Michele from Bergamo. Although the bequest was conditional on their agreeing to handle her estate, none of them seemed eager to do so. In a series of notarized deeds, they repeatedly passed their responsibilities as executor from one to another, until a person extraneous to the group was finally named to act for the estate.<sup>158</sup> While it is possible that some of the five were busy or outside Venice and therefore did not feel they could deal with the duties involved, it may well have been that they did not want to appear repeatedly in public as a representative for a woman well known as a matron in the Castelletto, or to perform such tasks as pursuing the debts owed her by her *mamole*.

Thus, it would seem that the financial aspects of the system of prostitution established in the first Venetian Castelletto had differing effects on women's lives. For the prostitutes, it meant relative poverty, exploitation, and, often, brutality. If they gained sufficient integration to be able to work and function in local society, they remained marginalized, spatially to a degree, but above all morally, as prostitution continued to be seen as a sinful activity that reduced the status and value of the workers involved. At best, becoming a *mamola* was a means of survival that could lead to a more respectable place in society, although even such a solution might not always be available or secure. For the matrons, their role in the Castelletto could have attractive economic consequences, in that they might handle large sums of money, become businesswomen of a sort, and achieve a relatively comfortable style of life. They might further use their income to gain a degree of social respectability. However, it would seem that they too remained tainted by the profession they pursued, and that real social integration was difficult if not impossible for someone with continued involvement in the sex trade.

## CONCLUSION

The system of prostitution discussed here lasted, in theory, for a century, from 1360 to 1460. The Venetian authorities then decided to replace the first Castelletto with a new area of public brothels at the Rialto and at the same time

<sup>158</sup>ASV, CI, Notai, b. 6 (Cecchino Alberti), 2 January to 1 September 1401. On 18 July, three of the executors delegated their powers to a farrier from Bologna, Bartolomeo quondam Giovanni, who presumably accepted the duties. Among the powers transferred was that of collecting the late Jacoba's debts from three of her *mamole*.

they revised the regulations governing prostitution.<sup>159</sup> The new legislation repeated some of the earlier rules, but it also introduced changes representing a liberalization of policy, generally in favor of the prostitutes. On the one hand, the *mamole* were still required to live in the Rialto area, register with the Capisestieri, and submit to their jurisdiction. They were not permitted to go outside the island of the Rialto except on Saturday morning and then had to wear their appropriate “sign.” However, the new Castelletto does not seem to have been an enclosed site as the previous one had been; rather, it was an open street, and no mention is made of a gate to separate the area from the surrounding property.<sup>160</sup> In addition, prostitutes were allowed to live outside the Castelletto proper, not only in the traditional vaults but even in taverns, inns, and bathhouses, although they could not work in these establishments during the day or engage in gambling.<sup>161</sup>

The regulations also suggest that one of the authorities’ greatest concerns by 1460 was to protect the *mamole* from exploitation. Apart from the prohibition on pawning women and renewed penalties against pimps, several clauses were designed to avoid the constant danger that prostitutes would have to sell themselves merely in order to repay their debts. Credit was identified as the crucial problem here, and limitations were imposed on the practice of selling goods of all sorts to the prostitutes on credit. Innkeepers and others were forbidden to extend credit to the prostitutes at all, and no one was allowed to give them anything on credit without the permission of the Capi. Although it is nowhere stated, these restrictions in practice outlawed the methods used by the matrons of the first Castelletto, who had provided clothes and other goods on credit, and recouped their outlay through the prostitutes’ work. In fact, the legislation of 1460 omits the clause requiring prostitutes to be kept only in the manner used by the matrons; it makes no mention of the matrons at all. These women, once essential in brothel organization, had evidently lost their place in the legalized sex trade.<sup>162</sup>

<sup>159</sup>The legislation of 4 September 1460 is in ASV, CN, reg. 10, fols. 11<sup>v</sup>–12<sup>v</sup>; *Leggi e memorie*, 56–59, no. 43.

<sup>160</sup>The new Castelletto is referred to as a street (“cale” or “ruga”). Prostitutes had to stop working at two hours after sunset, and custodians were to be present during the last two hours to protect them. However, there is no mention of closing the Castelletto.

<sup>161</sup>Although it is not actually stated that prostitutes could live in taverns, inns, and bathhouses, limits are set on how much the proprietors of these establishments could charge prostitutes per month for room and board or for a room and use of a kitchen. Since prostitutes were not allowed to work in these public houses during the day, they must have been spending the night in them.

<sup>162</sup>Of course, this does not mean that women stopped providing poor girls with clothes and forcing them to work as prostitutes to repay the costs. However, this practice was condemned as “diabolical” in Venetian legislation of 27 July 1542 and blamed for increasing the incidence of prostitution. It was, therefore, outlawed: ASV, Provveditori e Sopraprovveditori alla Sanità, reg. 729, fol. 7; *Leggi e memorie*, 105, no. 101.

The creation of the second Castelletto suggests, then, that a change had occurred in the attitudes of Venetian authorities toward prostitution. By 1460 Venetians had, perhaps, become used to the presence of prostitutes in the city and were a little less anxious to enclose and restrict them. That patricians were becoming more tolerant of the sex trade is supported by the fact that a Venetian patrician not only came forward to offer his property for the new Castelletto, but also agreed to maintain it and construct more accommodation for prostitutes if necessary.<sup>163</sup> In addition, concerns about the exploitation of the prostitutes were resulting in their gaining greater independence, in that, in theory, they were no longer under the control of a matron, while restrictions on the use of credit should have reduced their indebtedness to local artisans, shopkeepers, and innkeepers. They might, therefore, be better off, as they could keep more of their income, while they could also make more of their own decisions about the organization of their work.

In the years after 1460, this more liberal attitude toward prostitution seems to have prevailed. Although government bodies intervened to correct dangerous or scandalous situations, they did little to enforce the laws regulating prostitution. At times, in deference to the interests of property owners, they even permitted prostitutes to live in areas of the city that should have been off-limits to them.<sup>164</sup> The authorities took more vigorous action against pimps, but in such a way as helped liberate the prostitutes from the control of their supposed protectors.<sup>165</sup> This relative toleration undoubtedly contributed to the spread of prostitution throughout the city, and to the emergence of the famous courtesans. More affluent than the ordinary prostitutes, courtesans also offered more elegant surroundings and more refined entertainment. They numbered Venetian patricians among their clients and could call on the support of their high-placed friends in order to evade the regulations imposed on them. In fact, although the government tried repeatedly from the late fifteenth century to force prostitutes back to the Rialto and to limit the luxuriousness of their dress and furnishings, its efforts

<sup>163</sup>The patrician in question was Priamo Malipiero.

<sup>164</sup>In 1468 a scandal was created by the behavior of the clients of prostitutes living in the parish of San Samuele. Instead of completely evicting the prostitutes, the Council of Ten ordered the proprietors to wall up the doors and the lower part of windows giving onto the main street. In 1480 the Collegio allowed two proprietors to rent houses to prostitutes in Carampani, an area in the parish of San Cassian that had traditionally been used by prostitutes: *Leggi e memorie*, 65, no. 52 and 69, no. 56. Even nuns might rent their property in Carampani to prostitutes: ASV, Quattro Ministeriali, Stride e Clamori, reg. 78, fol. 99<sup>r</sup>, 3 February 1497.

<sup>165</sup>Legislation of 13 and 15 June 1492, which expelled pimps from the city, allowed prostitutes who had received clothes and other things from pimps to keep these if they denounced the men: *Leggi e memorie*, 75–76, nos. 68, 69.

encountered considerable resistance.<sup>166</sup> At one point in 1543 the authorities explicitly lamented that recent legislation against prostitutes could not be implemented because of the favor that nobles and citizens were extending to these people of “base and detestable” condition.<sup>167</sup>

Thus, in the period from the legalization of prostitution in 1358 to the sixteenth century, government policy in general tended toward an increasing, if often unofficial, toleration. Initially the authorities had expected to be able to contain the sex trade and use it for their own purposes, but too many interests, whether financial or emotional, became wrapped up with prostitution for control to be effective. In addition, the concern of the elite to secure justice for the prostitutes and to eliminate exploitation led them to permit greater freedom to sex workers — a tendency that ultimately proved difficult, indeed impossible, to reverse. The result was an expansion of the sex trade in ways that the authorities did not want but were unable to prevent. In the end, then, despite concerns about immorality and disease, sixteenth-century Venice became noted for the relative freedom it granted its sex workers, and visitors regarded its famed courtesans as one of the most noteworthy sights of the city.

<sup>166</sup>Decrees ordering all prostitutes to return to the Castelletto were issued in 1486, 1490, 1495, and 1502: *Leggi e memorie*, 69, no. 57; 72–73, no. 63; 81, nos. 75, 76; 90–91, no. 86. On 21 February 1543 the Senate asserted that prostitutes were so well dressed that even Venetians could not distinguish them from noblewomen. Restrictions were therefore imposed on prostitutes’ clothes and furnishings: ASV, Sen., Terra, reg. 32, fol. 147; *Leggi e memorie*, 108–09, no. 105. Extracts from this legislation are transcribed and translated in Rosenthal, 59–60, 67.

<sup>167</sup>ASV, Consiglio di Dieci, Deliberazioni, Comuni, reg. 15, fols. 141<sup>v</sup>–42<sup>r</sup>, 12 April 1543: the *Provveditori sopra la Sanità* are having difficulties imposing recent legislation against prostitutes, courtesans, and other infamous people because of the “*tanti favori che hano simel persone di male et pessima conditione.*” Therefore, no Venetian noble or anyone else may intercede in any way for any infamous person summoned before the *Provveditori*. An extract from this legislation is given, with translation, in Rosenthal, 67.



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