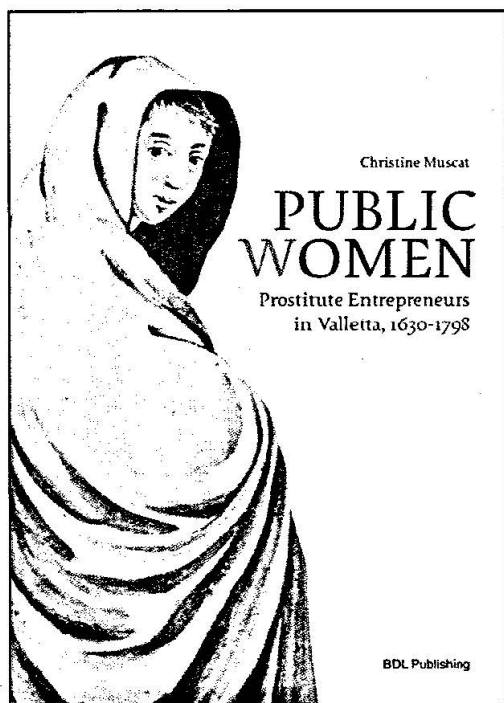




Public Women: Prostitute Entrepreneurs in Valletta, 1630-1798

By Christine Muscat

Published by BDL Publishing, 2018, pp.382,

ISBN: 978-99957-99-53-3

Tighter regulations on prostitution was one of the avowed aims of the Counter-Reformation. In the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth century, successive Popes ratified harsh regulations shaming, banishing, punishing and confining prostitutes to restricted zones away from Rome's elite sociability. Notwithstanding escalating papal commands prostitution in Rome persisted and flourished. Hospitaller Valletta was similar to Rome in being a city largely dominated by a culture of chaste but worldly men. It was likewise perceived to be a 'city of sin'.

On 17 July 1626, Francesco Barberini the cardinal deacon of S. Onorifio, the nephew of Pope Urban VIII, sent a letter to Grand Master Antoine de Paule saying that the Pope perceived 'loose women'

freely living on the main roads of Valletta, close to Auberges, as a truly dishonourable indulgence that was highly offensive to God. The Grand Master and the Council were ordered to remove such women from these areas with immediate effect. This order is likely to have been instigated through a series of letters sent from Malta by Inquisitor Onorato Visconti. Visconti and other apostolic delegates of the Holy See, regularly sent letters reporting the knights' unchaste behaviour to the Pope and the secretariat of the Pontifical State. Five years after this Papal order was issued, in 1631, the Hospitaller's chapter-general decreed that all courtesans were to be banished from the central 'elite' area of the Convent. This is the starting point of Dr Christine Muscat's study of prostitution in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Valletta.

The main focus of this monograph is to assess the entrepreneurial pursuits of women who overtly practised prostitution in Valletta 1630-1798. The value of this book, however, goes well beyond this to explore the agency of prostitutes as persistent and active players in the daily life of early modern Valletta. The book is divided into seven colourful chapters that take us into the lives and minds of women who freely chose to publicly engage in non-marital sexual services for private benefits. All chapters are ushered in by evocative historical verses and vignettes.

The first chapter reconstructs a visual urban experience of the city of Valletta and its harbour. The Order's dynamic military and naval activities, the continuous influx of single foreign men, cosmopolitanism, trading and immigration provided a fertile milieu in which waves of prostitutes rooted. Chapter two 'A Gomorrha Parva' deals with claims made by early modern visitors on rampant prostitution. Moralising discourses and a range of 'loose' terms used to refer to sexually undisciplined women are also explored. Dr Muscat rightfully argues that loose labels, visitors' accounts and panic scripts epitomised sinfulness and corruption and do not qualify as a category of means of quantifying or qualifying prostitutes. Such sources are counterfactual and offer blinkered and prejudiced perceptions of a practice characterised by a variety of forms, possibilities for agency, resistance and negotiation.

Chapter three 'The Promised Land' embarks on a thorough data-mining exercise on *status animarum* records. Quantitative evidence lifted from these records, as well as some succinct qualitative details shed light on realistic numbers of overt prostitutes in the city, the identity of public women in the parish of Porto Salvo and their residential environment. One of the many strengths of this research is the impressive range and body of different source materials drawn upon to give as full and composite a picture of Maltese prostitution as possible. This is to be commended and undoubtedly represents a large amount of rigorous archival research. The waterfront fringes of the city and prostitution provided a stepping-stone for many single young migrant women to the more dignified upper areas of the city. Dr Muscat revealed that some public women were transient women who were nonetheless well-integrated into mainstream culture.

Chapter four entitled 'Divided Lives' is a core chapter in the book. It discusses the complex and sophisticated strategies female prostitutes employed to negotiate a variety of judicial, religious and social contexts. In chapter five 'Courtesans and Courtesanship' Dr Muscat takes on the challenge of digging up information about closed-door relationships between courtesans and their patrons. Such relationships in a small convent city were top secret and will possibly remain secret for a very long time. The wealth, power, investments in churches and charities as well as the intricacies and drama of these 'elite' prostitutes and their elaborate, complex last wills and testaments leaves readers wanting for even more. Chapter six opens up the doors of houses and closets belonging to some of Valletta's early modern prostitutes. Prevailing patterns, trends and aptitudes indicate significant achievements. Prostitutes did not only harbour distinct tastes in fashion and furnishing homes but also developed shrewd skills in investing their capital wisely. The next chapter 'Deviants and Troublemakers' takes to task the numerous laws and strategies adopted by kin, the State and the Church to control female sexual indiscipline. Regulations changed through time but were persistently resisted, defied and circumvented in diverse, creative and innovative ways. The authorities,

on the other hand, often responded positively to petitions by offering clemency, reduced punishments and/or pardons. The concluding chapter draws out the threads about change across the monograph. Female prostitutes in Valletta were not always 'disorderly women', 'lost women' or 'outsiders'. They could be extremely well-integrated into neighbourhoods and communities in a variety of ways and could draw on networks and knowledge of the workings of religious, political, legal and social groups to negotiate and manipulate situations to their advantage and be entrepreneurial. Dr Christine Muscat's scholarly journey is the first socio-historical study on the sex trade in early modern Valletta, a significantly important and gratifying contribution to Maltese history.

University of Malta

Frans Ciappara.