

Tessa Storey. *Carnal Commerce in Counter-Reformation Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. XVI, 296 S. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84433-8.

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Mercenary Sex in Rome

In the past two decades, women's history and "history from below" have revised the study of prostitution. Superceding a predominantly top-down history of institutional repression and moralized marginalization, scholarship now sees much more clearly the women themselves as workers, as members of families and communities, and as social and, occasionally, cultural actors. Prostitution thus moves from being a slightly sordid academic sidebar to claim its place in an integrated economic, social, and cultural history. This shift of optic derives largely from reframed questions, but also exploits new sorts of documentation. For early modern Europe, Italian cities, with their rich judicial archives, provide particularly gratifying sites for developing these new perspectives on the sex trades and their workers. In this vein, Tessa Storey's book offers an extended, lively picture of Rome's infamous "carnal commerce" from the point of view not only of government and religious authorities, but also of the women and their customers. While the monograph builds on mostly smaller studies touching Roman prostitution by other international scholars, it incorporates wide-ranging research in additional primary sources and seeks to assess the place of this city's sex trade in the broader range of early modern European practices.

To situate her ample archival investigation, Storey has read widely about European prostitution with an admixture of social and cultural theory. The monograph adopts a patchwork mode of organization that clumps groups of primary and related secondary materials into

a series of small topical discussions, generally thoughtful though sometimes not wholly convincing. These are then arranged more and less snugly into thematic chapters. Overarching the whole and addressed primarily at the book's beginning and end is the question about whether the Counter-Reformation could transform public morality, represented by prostitution, that eye-catching wen on the face of the pope's capital. In the scholarship that Storey reviews, Europe's several religious reformations appear to have varied greatly in their effects for women; in some places prostitutes and their trade suffered sharp rebuke. Yet assessments of Catholic renewal see "missionary" campaigns to remedy the ordinary laity's conduct taking hold only slowly. Storey therefore argues effectively that even on the papal doorstep, in the years from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, prostitution showed more continuity than discernible change.

The study speaks to this Counter-Reformation thesis from diverse and sometimes oblique angles. The first chapter reviews early modern Italian (literally) pornographic texts. Reading these often illustrated, moralized entertainments as descriptive of and addressed to prostitutes as well as to their customers, Storey identifies cultural tropes, such as the manager mother and the absent father, which she later links to behavior reported in Roman judicial narratives. Her focus then narrows to the city of Rome. Following a sketch of "The Social and Cultural Context," two chapters take up government regulation of prostitutes and its enforcement. "Debating Pros-

titution” shows the risks of letting princely decrees—for example, banishing sex workers—stand alone as evidence of past reality. Instead, a re-reading of manuscript *avvisi* (newsletters) alongside a pair of open “letters” on local affairs lets Storey reconstruct for the decades between 1565 and 1595 an intermittent contest that pitted the popes, especially the most ascetic reformers, against more pragmatically minded city fathers, identified here with the *Popolo Romano*. With institutionalized policy on Roman prostitution still incompletely deciphered by historians, the scope and impact of this controversy remain elusive. Nonetheless, Storey’s elaboration usefully nuances any simple tale of Catholic transformation. Next, “Policing Prostitution” describes the thuggish police and, drawing on their arrest records, the erratic regimes of harassment the women faced. In these chapters, as elsewhere, some archival evidence is reported quantitatively. The author is careful not to claim too much for such figures, but overall we need to know more about the numbers’ generation in order to weigh their meaning; a “sample” with unspecified boundaries tells little.

At the core of the book are five colorful chapters that depict the commerce of prostitution as experienced by the traders and their customers. Harvesting the fruits of Rome’s judicial records, these chapters portray strikingly the complicated, but still real economic and social agency exercised by many of these women. Among studies of Roman prostitution, Storey’s inquiry attends distinctively to the “business” end and to the women not only as sellers of their commodified “bodies,” but also as consumers and brokers of material culture. It is especially in these settings that the author locates her vision of the prostitutes’ identities of autonomy. A selection of lively, sometimes chronologically scattered examples also highlights the social relations of prostitutes with their families and their clients. These episodes speak to the question of the women’s segregation from or integration with respectable society, a subject broached as a spatial matter in chapter 3. Among other themes, Storey emphasizes friendship as a Renaissance social mode; she sees its ideals constructing the relations between prostitutes and their *amici fermi* (regular clients), as well as framing a masculinity-enhancing practice where several men shared a single courtesan. Discounting a bias toward agonism in judicial records, the author recognizes that conflicts and rivalries occurred, but generally plays down their role in shaping the distinctly personal relationships characteristic of Rome’s sex trade.

The study deserves praise for undertaking to examine prostitutes and courtesans of varying prestige and

wealth. It is to note nevertheless that this compass largely excludes the celebrated “honest courtesans” who flourished under the Renaissance papacy. Here, based in local regulations, the term has quite another meaning—ordinary prostitutes operating publicly, as distinct from part-time or more discreet sex workers officially deemed “illicit.” Labelling and category difficulties of this sort have long plagued scholars, and remain a problem here. The book sketches working distinctions between prostitutes of high, middling, and low status based on access to economic and social capital. But it does not deploy the categories systematically, so that it is often hard to gauge the scope of general claims.

While the book reads engagingly, weakness in the fine structure of its crafting subverts its full success. Its varied sources require dexterity with paleography, alertness to literary forms and legal procedures, and sensitivity to early modern linguistic practices. For those interested in the details, let me use one type of document familiar to me—trial records (*processi*) from the governor’s court—and one instance of their use, to represent sometimes problematic strategies of selection and of reading that recur elsewhere in this study. Among the many trial records for the period where prostitutes figure prominently, the book chooses just seven and those for unclear reasons. One trial is thus mostly about Orvieto, not Rome. As for interpretation, trials must be read not in bits and pieces as straightforward snapshots of experience, but as multilayered documents having their own textual trajectories. Using them, as the book does, mostly in small segments often obscures crucial contextual framing.

Take, for example, the argument for potentially strong affective ties between prostitutes and clients. One of two cases Storey discusses on this point features Delia Romana, a prostitute patronized by a police captain on trial for murder and other abuses of his power (pp. 225–226). To explain why she sought news when she heard of the captain’s arrest, Delia testified, as translated, “it was my right to know how Captain Valerio was, because I loved him (*lo amavo*) and was fond of him (*gli volevo bene*).” It is an exceptionally forthright emotional pronouncement, as Storey says, but its meaning is not self-evident. How do we know, in context, what these two similar but distinct expressions convey? This vocabulary of “love,” particularly challenging for modern translators, was not clear to the magistrates either. Prodded to explain herself, the prostitute then said, as translated, “I loved him because we had known one another as lovers (*concubinatione*) and had spent time together.” Storey’s

version of this statement raises other problems. In fact, Delia's word in the manuscript is *conversatione*, not *concubinatione*, and suggests something more neutral, like "because I had socialized with him." A sexual link is possible in this phrasing but, for this witness, not yet explicit. That comes next, when the official asks what sort of "conversation" and how long. In an emotion-laden response that Storey does not report, Delia gets teary, as the trial transcript notes, and then, hesitatingly, admits to knowing the captain since last Carnival, when he had sex with her and claimed her virginity. The book's interpretation overlooks this discursive sequence of the trial. It also fails to contextualize Delia's unusual declarations more broadly in her youth, age fifteen, and her special

vulnerability to a powerful man who had taken her virginity. With this additional information, might we understand Delia's proclamation of "love" for her client differently? Storey, instead, leaves this girl's two sentences to stand, almost alone, as representing prostitutes' potential sentiments and turns to discuss clients' feelings.

All in all, this book offers a feast of interesting material. Its general contentions about prostitutes as persistent and active players in the daily life of Counter-Reformation Rome ring true. In the middle range of argument and in detail, however, the delivery is uneven. Deeper analytical consistency and a fuller sense of the many contexts into which the discussion ventures would strengthen an ambitious project.

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