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Using “Evil” to Combat “Evil”: The Regulation of Prostitution in Renaissance Florence

Over the course of human history, prostitution has faced alternating legalization and prohibition in different regions of the world. Whether in an attempt to generate tax revenue or promote the growth of a society, the legalization of prostitution is often a result of a government’s rationale to “eliminate a worse evil by means of a lesser one” (Brucker). Through the formation of an Office of Decency (known as the Florentine Onestá), the city of Florence distinguished itself from surrounding regions during the Renaissance period, which extended from the fifteenth to seventeenth century, by highlighting its commitment to social order. Though in modern day, many women’s rights advocates encourage the legalization of prostitution to promote gender equality and female empowerment, the regulations created by the Florentine Onestá served to dehumanize the women participating in this profession. The regulations were also reflective of the general attitude towards women at the time, in which the public largely viewed females as less capable than their male counterparts, necessary only to cater to the needs of society. While many argue that the Florentine Onestá was established to preserve the city’s image, the ultimate intention of the ordinances was to use women as tools to promote decency and regulate the behavior of men.

Prostitution remained a fundamental aspect of life during the Medieval period in Florence, with widespread tolerance of the profession due to the belief of its necessity in

Christian society. Defended by St. Augustine and St. Thomas, the legalization of prostitution was thought to preserve ordinary life, as it provided a “legitimate outlet for the libidinous desires of men” (Brackett 276). St. Thomas cited Aristotle to further its defense, adding his concern “to avoid sodomitic sexual practices reportedly common among Spartan soldiers while in the field” (Brackett 276). It was also recognized that poverty drove many women, even those who were married, to prostitution, and as poverty was unable to be eradicated, prostitution would continue to accompany its existence. Though theologians attempted to persuade men to control their sexual urges, prostitution was viewed as necessary for society’s proper functioning. This mindset lengthened the practice of prostitution which remained an accepted profession in Medieval Florentine society — an image that shifted with the initiation of the Renaissance.

The beginning of the Renaissance signaled a time of unrest for Florence, with the continued spread of Protestantism and the end of a devastating plague. Beginning in 1347, the plague, known as the “Black Death” spread quickly throughout Europe, reducing the population of Florence by almost half — from approximately 110 thousand to fifty thousand (Frith). The population decline was especially harmful to the city, where:

the problem was compounded by the fashion for men to marry late or not at all, partly because of the high cost of dowries and weddings, and where, according to contemporary commentators, young men were becoming feminized by virtue of being raised by their mothers or within exclusively female environments.

(Richards 145)

The perceptions of women during this time remained consistent with those of the past, with women viewed as less capable than their male counterparts, necessary only to “replenish this free

city” (Brucker 181). With the Florentine government’s promotion of this idea, a resulting shift occurred in public opinion towards prostitution. Though permitted by law, many Florentine citizens opposed by the practice. In numerous cases, prostitutes were approached by neighbors and offered substance to abandon the profession, as in the case of Angela, wife of Nofri di Francesco, who was “approached by her neighbor, Bartolo Gadini, in the name of many of her neighbors, with an offer to supply her with a basket of bread per week if she would abandon her prostitute’s career and live decently” (Brackett 281). However, due to the relationship of power between the government and citizens, such opposition was ignored for centuries, allowing those in power to further their agenda. As Europe became locked in a contest between Catholicism and Protestantism towards the end of the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century, with each attempting to prove its moral superiority, opposition to prostitution strengthened, with its eventual criminalization in 1680.

The Office of Decency, known as the Florentine Onestá, was established on April 30th, 1403 by the executive bodies of the Florentine government, who claimed its creation was an effort to “avoid vice and imitate virtue” (Brackett 280). The establishment represented prostitution’s municipalization in Florence, with the state holding the power of regulation rather than a religious organization or private citizens. Like other magistracies at the time, the Onestá was composed of a board of eight rotating members. Florentine citizens were forced to serve on the board for six-month terms if chosen, along with a subordinate group of members with supporting positions, including a notary, treasurer, and secretary. Though board members received no salary, they were awarded percentages of the fines and fees collected from registered prostitutes in the city, prompting members to strictly enforce their laws. Allowing its power to

extend past that of traditional criminal courts, the Onestá was given authority to initiate investigations of suspects without the typical procedural protections afforded to citizens, using fines as the common form of punishment for prostitutes. Throughout the Onestá's existence, the severity of punishment was increased, with imprisonment, expulsion, and the death penalty added as possibilities for defiance of the regulations. However, the effectiveness and credibility of these threats was increasingly reduced immediately prior to the dissolution of the Onestá in 1680 (Terpstra). Centered in Florence, the Onestá's power extended to all registered prostitutes living within the city limits, though more than forty percent migrated from nations outside of Italy, recruited by the Florentine government to further the agenda of the Office of Decency (Trexler).

The requirements on prostitutes' attire and residence established by the Florentine Onestá serve as clear indicators of the desire to use women regulate male behavior, by preventing men from defiling women thought to be "virtuous." With the comparison often made in Florentine culture between "women and the Virgin Mary—and the connection between the control of women's visibility and the preservation of virtue" (Weddle 64), the protection of such women required that prostitutes were identifiable and available. This idea is evidenced by the creation of limitations on prostitutes locations of residence and work. Described in an ordinance passed in 1415, the Onestá required that brothels:

are to be located in suitable places or in places where the exercise of such scandalous activity can best be concealed, for the honor of the city and of those who live in the neighborhood in which these prostitutes must stay to hire their bodies for lucre, as other prostitutes stay in the other brothel. (Bartlett 146)

By forcing prostitutes to inhabit certain locations in Florence and limiting their movement throughout the city, the Onestá sought to provide men with a clear differentiation between prostitutes and their “virginal” female counterparts. Prostitution was limited to “eighteen streets where prostitutes could register to live and work,” with some “identified by street name...and others by a set of landmarks” (Terpstra 6). These regions were located primarily within poorer working-class areas of the city, surrounded by foreign workers, soldiers, artisans, and merchants. Additionally, in 1377, “prostitutes were legally prevented from being within a specified distance of the Palazzo della Signoria and also proscribed from being within approximately fifty meters of the church of San Barnaba” (Crum 323). Through the isolation of prostitutes from the areas of Florence where “honorable” women typically resided, the Onestá prevented any confusion between the two groups of women. To ensure that prostitutes remained in their designated areas, the office permitted that “honorable, upper-class women to appear on the streets to chase away prostitutes who had ventured out of their assigned areas” (Crum 323). Accompanied by similar restrictive measures, this ordinance helped to regulate male behavior by protecting the “virginal” women in Florentine society and labelling the women considered acceptable to satisfy the sexual desires of men.

In accordance with the relegation of women to certain areas of Florence, restrictions of dress forced a greater divide between prostitutes and women considered virtuous. The Onestá reintroduced sumptuary regulations on prostitutes’ attire, stating:

First, all women and girls, whether married or not, whether betrothed or not, of whatever age, rank, and condition...who wear—or who wear in future—any gold, silver, pearls, precious stones, bells, ribbons of gold or silver, or cloth of silk

brocade on their bodies of heads...for the ornamentation of their bodies...will be required to pay each year...the sum of 50 florins...to the treasurer. (Brucker 180)

Though initially required to pay a fine for such attire, the Onestá later prohibited these articles, adding that prostitutes must wear “an identifying piece yellow ribbon” (Brackett 296). John K. Brackett, a professor of history at the University of Cincinnati, highlights the purpose of such regulations, stating that “labelling techniques represented a liberalization in the treatment of prostitutes, but the intent was to expose their immorality against the background of supposedly decent women” (Brackett 279). As prostitutes had previously been known to disguise themselves as “respectable” women to exploit wealthy foreigners, regulations in attire prohibited women from obtaining such sources of income.

Vecellio, a sixteenth-century author of *Habiti Antichi E Moderni Di Tutto Il Mondo*, explained the previous tactics of prostitutes, stating:

Courtesans who wish to get ahead in the world by feigning respectability go around dressed as widows or married women...when a foreigner expresses the desire to enjoy the favors of a highborn lady, a procuress dolls up some common prostitute, then leads her and him to a secret meeting place with so much ceremony that he is taken in and believes she's a noblewoman. (Brackett 279)

As this resulted in men turning “their sexual desires on decent women,” the Onestá's regulations allowed for the protection of “virtuous” women by clearly identifying prostitutes to the public, ensuring that men would not be tempted to defile those outside of the profession. This desire for male censorship through prostitution extended past regulations on attire, adding that prostitutes “were not allowed to ride in coaches during the daytime, or within the city walls, but must enter

and exit them at the city gates. Prostitutes were not to exist dressed as men or masked to facilitate their appearance at taverns after dark” (Brackett 296). As these regulations worked to clarify the divide between prostitutes and the remainder of the citizenry, they ensured that men recognized the virtuous women of Florence, offering prostitutes as available outlets for their sexual desires.

The ordinances of the Florentine *Onestá* also served to control the behavior of men engaging in homosexual acts, by using prostitutes to encourage the heterosexuality of men considered “deviant” in society. Richard C. Trexler, a noted historian and professor of history at Binghamton University, State University of New York, describes that legalized prostitution was used to combat the perceived evil of “male homosexuality—whose practice was thought to obscure the difference between the sexes and his all difference and decorum” (Trexler 374). By providing opportunity for men to engage in legal heterosexual sexual activity, prostitutes were expected to help preserve the political and social order in society. After the Florentine clergy published writings and performed sermons attacking homosexuality, the *Onestá* immediately responded by establishing the formation of new brothels within the city — hoping to promote heterosexual activity in such areas. Trexler further explains this use of prostitution, stating, “only in this sixteenth century, when the population and increased and Florentine women were becoming nuns and whores at an unprecedented rate, would another generation suggest that Graziosa’s carnality rivaled Sodom’s in its wickedness” (375). Though utilized when Florence’s population was low and homosexual acts were common, prostitution was condemned once these perceived problems had been corrected. The desire to reduce the population of unmarried homosexual men was widespread in Florence, with regulations established to restrict the rights of

bachelors over the age of thirty and incentives created to promote marriage by limiting material spending of wives, which was thought to be a deterrent for men. As many believed that the presence of homosexuality resulted in the insufficient population growth of the city, these ordinances were paired with the efforts of the Office of Decency to promote heterosexual relations throughout Florence (Richards).

With a widespread view of sodomy as an “unmentionable sin” in society, the Onestá attempted to eradicate the act by the public acceptance of male heterosexual activity. The first words of the law establishing the Onestá address this purposeful decision, stating “Abhorring the filth of the nefarious unnatural evil and enormous crime which is the vice of sodomy, and wanting to extirpate this crime...” (Trexler 376). As homosexual relationships were common within Florence, the government viewed prostitutes as a necessity, providing them with protection over pimps. Although populations of pimps as a whole were occasionally banished from the city due to concern about the the spread of disease, “not once in the history of republican Florence were prostitutes as a group given out” (Trexler 377) due to their perceived value in preventing homosexuality. Although this protection appears to be solely beneficial to the well-being of prostitutes, these women were merely used as tools to control the behavior of men engaging in actions considered unacceptable in Florentine society.

Furthermore, the regulation of prostitution through the establishment of the Florentine Onestá was in accordance with the creation of numerous governmental institutions seeking to control male behavior. Between 1420 and 1432, the Conservatori dell’Onestá dei Monasteri, the Otto di Guardia, the Conservatori de Leggy, the Ufficiali di Notte, and the Office of the Night were formed to punish “official corruption, gaming, violations of sumptuary legislation,

blasphemy, crimes occurring at night, and gambling” (Brackett 283), substantiating the idea that the Office of Decency’s purpose was to regulate male behavior through the use of prostitutes as it existed alongside offices established for similar purposes. In addition, William J. Connell, professor of Italian Studies at Seton Hall University, asserts that the relegation of prostitutes to specific areas of Florence also helped to hide the gambling of men (viewed as a criminal act), stating, “the homes of prostitutes often sated the gaming spirit of the poor” (Connell 311). Though such offices were created to assist in the restriction of male behavior, they did not “obviate the need for the office of Onestá, which continued to foster and regulate prostitution in Florence far into modern times” (Trexler 377), displaying the Florentine government’s reliance on prostitution to ensure sexual compliance by men to societal norms.

Though ultimately unsuccessful, the regulation of prostitution by the Office of Decency in Florence stemmed from the societal desire to assist in the preservation of accepted male action by utilizing women as tools to complete this task. With restrictions on prostitutes’ inhabitation and apparel, meant to prevent men from “defiling virtuous women,” as well as encouragement for men to abandon homosexuality and other acts perceived as unacceptable, the Onestá’s regulations dehumanized the women it sought to control. However, while legalized prostitution was considered a tool to eliminate the “unnatural evils” of Florentine society during the Renaissance, public opinion quickly changed as population returned to normal growth and prostitutes were incentivized to refrain from registering with the Onestá. As this occurred, prostitutes began to receive blame for the problems of society, and were targeted for the problems of Florence rather than utilized as solutions. The view of prostitutes following this dramatic shift in public opinion has persisted into modern day. Legal in only one state within the

United States of America and few nations in Europe, public institutions continue to denounce prostitution, with the majority of citizens viewing the profession as an unacceptable practice in society. Though opinions on homosexuality have progressed towards acceptance, traditional views on sex as a sacred practice reserved for marriage have endured, prompting a negative image of prostitution. Furthermore, prostitutes tend to receive the vast majority of punishment, with their clients and pimps often escaping any form of persecution (Nichols) — mirroring the imbalance of power present in Florence during the Renaissance.

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