Gordon, Bonnie. "The Courtesan's Singing Body as Cultural Capital in Seventeenth-Century Italy." In *The Courtesan's Arts Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, 182 -98. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

BONNIE GORDON

CHAPTER 9

The Courtesan's Singing Body as Cultural Capital in Seventeenth-Century Italy

When courtesans trafficked in song, they engaged forces that were not just immaterial but material and that were altogether more potent than sex or money. Itself a form of bodily exchange, song both enthralled and threatened the male admirer and the social fabric that surrounded him. Carrying an ambivalent but almost magical power, the courtesan's singing voice moved from the mouth of the singer to penetrate the ears of the unwitting (but often willing) male victim. Accosting body and soul, song could force submission to any number of threatening temptations, enticing a loss of control and reason that led to a wide variety of salacious activities. Song, like love, could inflame the soul and arouse a violent carnal desire that might come with fever, chills, and other remarkable effects.

This essay provides a musical context for the potentially pernicious effects of courtesans' voices, and in so doing attempts to place the courtesan's song in a larger sonic/sexual world—one constructed by philosophical, social, medical, and literary views of women. These understandings were grounded in the Neoplatonic and Galenic discourses that had been passed down from the ancients and held sway well into the seventeenth century. They were also grounded in the very close convergence of music and love in early modern Italy. As demonstrated in previous essays in this volume, the most famous courtesans of sixteenth-century Venice participated in a variety of musical practices, of which singing was key to the performance of the courtesan's self—an asset in her attempt to present the image of a cultivated lady and a crucial enhancement of her sensual power. Building on the work of my colleagues in this volume, who have made notable strides in reconstructing ephemeral traces of the courtesan's voice, I explore cultural forces that rendered her song potent and argue that contemporary experiences of the bodily mechanics of song, love, and desire coalesced to turn the courtesan's sung voice into a metonym of her sensuality. I also position song as both embodied and symbolic capital; it enhanced the courtesan's value both by increasing her sensuous capacities through its inherent lasciviousness and by demonstrating her skills at an art that, in other contexts, might be socially acceptable because it could improve soul, spirit, and intellect.

The discussions here of the courtesans' fitful access to power through singing and sexual prowess wrestle with her voice as both subject and object of desire. Rather than falling into the trap of those feminist scholars who try to turn historically subordinated populations into fully-fledged subjects, I want to suggest that the very confusion inherent in the courtesan's position within the dynamic of desire challenges the very notion of the early modern subject and some of the ideological tenets about it that early modern thinkers and their modern audiences have held as true.

THE RISK OF LOVE

The erotic forces of the courtesan's song stem from the assimilation of love and music that permeated art, literature, and philosophy in early modern Italy. Both love and music were unruly forces that could push their victims away from reason and into a state dominated by passions of the body, and both opened up spaces where courtesans, even when objects of desire, could assume a bodily agency generally denied to other women of their time. This particular constellation of music and love had its roots in the conventional Neoplatonic descriptions of love that informed the tradition of love treatises known as the *trattati d'amore*. The *trattati* posited love as a vehicle for a divine spiritual fulfillment, but also imagined it as a force that could entice the passions of the body, robbing the mind of reason and eventually threatening larger social orders. In her dialogue on the infinity of love, the Roman courtesan Tullia d'Aragona explained the problem of giving in to passions of the flesh as one of "subordinating reason, which ought to be the queen of the body, to the senses, and thus very quickly turn[ing men] from being rational . . . into being brute animals."[1] The Venetian Moderata Fonte, in her treatise *On the Worth of Women* (composed 1592), which is unique for its inclusion of solely female speakers, writes that "Desire in men is so powerful that their senses overpower their reason."[2] Explaining the risks of love, the satirist Pietro Aretino wrote: "I am truly more sorry for a man suffering from Love than for one dying of hunger or being wrongly hanged . . . the cruelty which assails a man in love is like a murder inflicted by his own faith, solitude, submission, and goodness."[3] Along similar lines Marco Venier writes of his love for Veronica Franco, "my suffering is more bitter than any death."[4] Love is a cruel fate acted upon an unwilling victim.

The despair of Venier and Aretino comes from the idea of love as a physical turmoil. Ficino explained that

> It also happens that those who have been trapped by love alternately sigh and rejoice. They sigh because they are losing themselves, because they are destroying themselves, because they are ruining themselves. They rejoice because they are transferring themselves into something better. They are also alternately hot and cold, like those whom a certain fever attacks. They are cold rightly, because they are deserted by their own warmth, and they are also hot, since they are enflamed by the splendors of the celestial ray.[5]

Totally losing themselves, lovers experience a radical confusion with physical and physiological ramifications. Tullia elaborates on the intense confusion caused by love

as it was filtered through the Petrarchan metaphor of the icy fire: "Simultaneously they feel great heat and excessive cold. They want and reject in equal measure, constantly grasping things but retaining nothing in their grip. They see without eyes. They have no ears but can hear. . . . They are alive while dying."[6] She alludes to the physical consequences of a desire that will always remain unrequited and that leaves the lover wanting something that is impossible to have.

The almost violent consequences of love emerged from desire, a physical condition that caused an imbalance of humors. Tullia's "great heat and excessive cold" reflected a physical problem in a world that imagined good health to be dependent on maintaining appropriate body heat. In its pathological form, frustrated desire led to erotomania or love sickness, which incited a variety of unpleasant symptoms—a pale and wan complexion, fever, rapid pulse, facial swelling, decreased appetite, raging thirst, sighing, tears, insomnia, headaches, and madness. Fonte's interlocutor Corinna writes of failed methods to cure the malady by drinking the blood of the love object, but ultimately concludes that "Nothing except death can really cauterize and cure it." Thus when one of Veronica Franco's admirers wrote that "she has delighted the world in such a way that for love of her people burn and waste away," he was suggesting that Franco quite literally made her victims ill.[7]

Courtesans highlighted the practical similitude between the very experiences that Neoplatonists tried so hard to push apart, deliberately enticing both the splendor and the disgrace of desire. Their poetry and entertainments spoke the elevated language of Neoplatonic love but came infused with a tactile and physical component. Moreover, they performed both artistic and sexual services. This in effect corrupted the safe space of decorum and philosophical contemplation that supposedly kept the body under the rational control of the mind.

Expressing the reality of her life in philosophical terms, Tullia offered an alternative to the well-rehearsed dualisms of Neoplatonic love. Her dialogue refused the dichotomy between spiritual and physical love, reversing received oppositions and talking back to Neoplatonic authorities. For her, true love balanced physical and spiritual fulfillment with sex and enhanced the spiritual union of lovers, as "carnal pleasure" could cause love to "grow in intensity."[8] In a particularly pithy passage she writes: "Is anyone ignorant of the fact that the whole body and soul taken together are more noble and more perfect than the soul by itself?"[9] This statement of moral cosmology and physiology troubles the dichotomy between corporeal and spiritual love that her contemporaries worked so hard to uphold, and thus also blurs distinctions between virtuous and vulgar sounds.

Outside of philosophy, courtesans created a particularly perilous situation by purposefully engaging situations in which their intentions and actions could be read as either virtuous or vulgar and in which supposedly pure spiritual love ran head-on into the moral turpitude of sex. They exceeded the boundaries of a society obsessed with maintaining social order through the appearance of rigid class and gender lines. Feeling the threat of the courtesan, the senate decree of February 21, 1542 that regulated the clothing of women and especially "whores" complained that the latter could no longer necessarily be distinguished from the noble ladies they mimicked. Part of the confusion came from the shared costumes, on which Margaret Rosenthal has elaborated here (see chap. 2). They "go about openly in the streets and churches, and

furthermore are so well dressed and adorned that on many occasions our noble and citizen women have been confused with them, the good with the bad, and not only by foreigners but also by those who live here."[10] The address of confused identity in his decree attempted to keep control of who was who, but also highlighted the problem of determining virtue. Pietro Aretino makes the confused identity abundantly clear in referring to Angela Zaffetta, who "more than any other has known how to put the mask of virtue (*onestà*) over the lascivious."[11]

With its power to penetrate body and soul, song, like love, was a sensuous experience that troubled the dichotomy between noble and base by its very nature. As with love, the similarity of sounds classified in both categories rendered sensuous sonorities dangerous, especially in the hands (or, more accurately, the mouths) of women. This potential led, on the one hand, to an understanding of music as an instrument of refinement and on the other to a distrust of music-making that dates back to St. Augustine and the Church Fathers and emerged from the idea that by viscerally stimulating the passions music could stimulate both listeners and performers to wanton emotions and actions.

Descriptions of courtesans' voices tend to portray their music as fearsome because seductive. Song allowed courtesans to take control of their listener/admirers by enticing them to lascivious thoughts and actions and forcing them to abandon reason. As Garzoni wrote, "Where do you think such songs, dances, jokes, parties, and so on come from but from the desire to seduce with angelic soprano voice and attract with divine sounds of harpsichord and lute."[12] For Garzoni, music leads men to suffer the destructive pangs of love. Making the seductive potential of music even clearer, the story by Giovanni Battista Giraldi of Tullia bemusedly seducing older men into dancing to her lute (cited in chap. 4 above) dramatizes her ability to make men lose control of themselves and all things female.

More generally, courtesans' voices, capable of ensnaring men, were frequently associated with sirens, recalling the mythological half-bird/half-woman creatures whose irresistible chants offered erotic pleasure by bewitching mortal men and forever detaching them from reason.[13] The anonymous text of a madrigal set by Willaert, *Amor, da che tu vuoi pur ch'io m'arrischi*, describes two courtesans thus:

> Love, since you wish me to risk
> Hearing and seeing
> Sirens and basilisks,
> Do me the favor,
> If the brilliance of two serene eyes
> Should melt me and I should fall prey
> To clever speech,
> Of having she who is to blame for this believe,
> By seeing and hearing, that I am dead.
> Noble and excellent pair,
> He who sees and hears you
> Just once
> And does not die of pleasure
> Can boldly go
> To hear and see
> The sirens of love and the basilisks.[14]

Willaert's text refers to two real women known as La Sirena and La Basilisca, who were popular sixteenth-century courtesans.[15] Their names stand for two deadly mythological creatures. Sirens, half bird and half woman, with their voices drew men to their enchanted island, where they were shipwrecked and died. In the *Odyssey* Circe says "the Sirens will sing his mind away on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones of dead men rotting in a pile beside them and flayed skins shrivel around the spot."[16] The Basilisk, king of the snakes, conquered all other serpents with its hiss and could kill with both its look and breath. According to Pliny's *Natural History*,

> the Basilisci Serpentis (Basilisk serpent) also has the same power [to kill the Catoblepas by sight alone]. It is a native of the province of Cyrenaica, not more than 12 inches long, and adorned with a bright white marking on the head like a sort of diadem. It routs all snakes with its hiss, and does not move its body forward in manifold coils like other snakes but advances with its middle raised high. It kills bushes not only by its touch but also by its breath, scorches up grass and bursts rocks. Its effect on other animals is disastrous.[17]

The poet's use of the metaphor "to die," signifying both orgasm and death, suggests that their sounds provoked an utterly irresistible life-sucking pleasure and that for males to listen to and look at these ladies was profoundly exciting and dangerous.

Making a mockery of these conventional anxieties and associations, Aretino shows music falling definitively on the wrong side of the virtuous/vulgar dichotomy. His dialogues feature friars chanting in the process of seduction and famous, or, rather, infamous, courtesans like Angela Zaffetta serenading their lovers.[18] At one point, the midwife explains how courtesans of her day used singing to enhance her capital and to snare her victims.[19] "Songs were indeed much used, and those women who didn't know a bunch of the most beautiful and newest ones would have been ashamed."[20] Writing generations after Aretino, the Venetian Ferrante Pallavicino made this all very clear in *La rettorica delle puttane* (1673), a rhetorical textbook for prostitutes that positioned singing as a key tool for "whores" to use in seduction. Finding the ear an especially vulnerable orifice, he makes song into the ideal means for restoring a languishing lover with fresh vigor and new spirits.[21]

The sexual connotations of singing and its dangers can be traced to early modern understandings of vocal mechanics. When courtesans sang they made skilled use of mouths, tongues, and throats, all body parts that were used in sexual activity. Pallavicino makes the sexual connotations of singing perfectly clear when he merges his discussion of singing seamlessly into a discourse on the proper use of the tongue and lips in kissing, reminding readers of the erotics of body parts that make sound and serve as metonymic symbols of female sexuality. These understandings emerged from the still-reigning discourses of Galenic and humoral medicine that had been passed down from the ancient world and dominated medical practice and cultural understandings of the body well into the seventeenth century.[22] As I have argued elsewhere, the body parts used for speaking and singing directly affected those used for sex and reproduction. Early modern assimilations of voice and reproductive body parts linked the throat to the neck of the uterus, the mouth to female genitals, and the diaphragm to the womb. Singing required the rapid opening and closing of the glottis, which paralleled the motion of the uterus imagined to accompany orgasm.[23]

That what happened at one end of the body implicated the other end is made abundantly clear by the favorite Hippocratic method of testing fertility: having a woman sit over a head of garlic and checking her mouth for the pungent odor.[24] The French doctor/philosopher Jacques Ferand, writing in 1624, made a similar association when he claimed that chapped and dry lips indicated a "dry womb."[25] Intercourse was imagined to deepen a women's voice by enlarging her neck, "which responds in sympathy with the stretching of her lower neck." One could literally hear a woman's loss of virginity in her less pure, deflowered voice.[26]

This connection between orifices led to a state of anxiety about the woman's mouth. Since it was linked to the sexual organ and projected the sounds that caused carnality, the mouth itself became the locus of female sexuality.[27] The shared ability of mouths and sexual organs to swallow and consume made them analogous to one another: the vagina led to the womb and the mouth to the stomach. Both cavities could hold onto and process matter; the womb turned seed into a baby, which it then expelled, while the stomach turned food into the humoral materials that permeated the body and were expelled in the form of blood, breath, saliva, and other matter, *including voice*. The vagina consumed sexually and the mouth consumed gastrically. Yet the womb took the primary blame for producing the extra fluids that rendered women, with their leaky bodies, incontinent, excessive, and dangerous.[28] As they menstruated, lactated, and wept, women signified their inability to control their own bodies, their tendency to talk and desire too much.

Of the various leaky processes, menstruation caused the most anxiety, in keeping with writings that date back as far as the ancients and the Bible. Describing a menstruating woman, the Bible says that "Anyone who touches her will be unclean until evening. Anything she lies on in this polluted state will be unclean; anything she sits on will be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed must wash clothing and body and will be unclean until evening. Anyone who touches anything she has sat on must wash clothing and body and will be unclean until evening" (Leviticus 15:19–25). In the early sixteenth century Henry Cornelius Agrippa wrote that menstrual blood "makes dogs go mad if they taste it, and if they, in their madness, bite anyone the wound cannot be cured."[29] The Milanese doctor/philosopher Girolamo Cardano wrote: "From contact with this blood, fruits fail to germinate, wine goes sour, plants die, trees lose their fruit, metal is corroded with rust, and bronze objects go black. Any dogs which consume it contact rabies. The glue of bitumen, which resists both metal and water, dissolves spontaneously when polluted with that blood."[30] Given the similarity of mouth and womb and given that all fluids continually transformed into one another, early modern fears of menstrual blood suggest that the corruptive forces oozing out of the womb also affected the song that escaped women's mouths. The ancient gynecologist Soranus made this connection explicit by positing that "singing teachers" had less menstrual flow than other women and claiming that some women failed to menstruate because they were "barren singers or athletes in whom nothing is left over for menstruation, everything being consumed by the exercise."[28]

CHALLENGING CHASTITY

The participation of courtesans in musical life at once enhanced their sexual capital and the erotic connotations of song. Put a different way, that the public performance of writing, speaking, and singing caused problems for women who had no involvement in the sex trade only served to increase the erotic capital of those who did. The fact of courtesans' compromised chastity allowed them the freedom to participate in activities that would have damaged the ever-fallible reputations of more "noble" ladies.

In early modern Italy chastity was widely regarded as a woman's most valuable asset—one protected and owned first by her father and later by her husband. Lodovico Dolce's *Gli istitutioni delle donne*, first published in 1545 and one of the most popular tracts on noble women, reminds his readers that loss of virginity in the ancient world was punishable by death, a penalty he seems wholeheartedly to endorse.[32] Likewise, he made adultery tantamount to treason. Virginity was especially important in Venice, where the patrician class placed an extreme value on maintaining hereditary purity. A crucial asset in the preservation of the family line, it stood as a commodity to be bought by husbands and sold by fathers.

Chastity, or *castità*, a physical and moral category, depended on remaining completely untouched by intercourse, desire, or all manners of pollution from sex to dancing, eating spicy food, and reading lascivious books. Because of the vulnerability of women's virtue, most conduct books of the day required women to avoid overstimulating activities and limit reading and singing to things of a decidedly sacred nature. Fasting, cleanliness, regulated sleep, and avoiding luxurious clothing were seen as producers and signs of chastity— enjoying excess in any of these categories obviously meant the opposite. Explaining this intense vulnerability, Dolce made the unmarried girl's body analogous to a ship "floating in a sea of many dangers, all the orifices of which have to be closed so that these dangers cannot penetrate into the inner parts."[33]

The precariousness and value of a young lady's virtue prompted writings that ranged from prescriptive literature that restricted the activities of reading, writing, and education to carefully scripted texts that were usually moral or scriptural. If chastity reflected a woman's totally uncorrupted mind, excessive skills, desires, and displays could threaten virtue or raise her sexual capital. By using their sexuality to make themselves more attractive courtesans enacted a reversal of the normative notions of sexual capital. They turned their lack of chastity into an asset— manipulating and owning the value of their own bodies.

Singing served as a primary axis around which chastity and the lack thereof rotated. The accompanied song of courtesans required a complex set of skills, each of which could detract from virtue and enhance sexual capital (as Feldman and Davies show above, in chapters 4 and 7), doubtless involving considerable use of ornamentation in some instances. Making this kind of music required singing, reading, and writing, skills that exceeded the dabbling deemed appropriate for noble ladies, especially among those courtesans who wrote the words they sang—words that certainly did not fall within the narrowly virtuous confines dictated by the likes of Dolce.

The fifteenth-century controversy that emerged out of the writings of the Ver-

onese Nogarola sisters suggests some of the ways in which skills that exceeded the boundaries of what was deemed pure enough for women took on decidedly sexual implications. Exceptionally well-educated, the sisters came under fire in an anonymous pamphlet detailing the vices of Veronese women. Responding to Isotta Nogarola's public display of her humanist education in a tract aimed at women in general, the author makes her out as an instrument of vanity, promiscuity, and general immorality by reading her supposedly grotesque intellectual display as a sign of excessive sexuality:

> I have believed the saying of numerous very wise men, "the woman of fluent speech is never chaste" . . . let me explain that before she made her body generally available for uninterrupted intercourse, she had first submitted to, and indeed earnestly desired, that the seal of her virginity should be broken by none other than her brother, to make yet tighter her relationship with him. By God! . . . [What inversions will the world tolerate] when that woman, whose most filthy lust knows no bounds, dares to boast of her abilities in the finest literary studies.[34]

Here the charge of incest effectively enhanced the charge of overabundant sexuality. The deviance of her excessive skills implies a sexual deviance and her learned nature makes it impossible for her to maintain chastity.

Speaking, and by extension singing, also caused trouble for women because it meant access to their bodies, as we know from conduct books like Castiglione's *Il Cortigiano*, in which female silence equaled chastity. In his 1555 treatise on wifely duties, Francesco Barbaro similarly wrote that "the speech of a noble woman can be no less dangerous than the nakedness of her limbs."[35] Explaining some of the problems in more detail, the early fifteenth-century writer Leonardo Bruni warned that "if a woman throws her arms around while speaking, or if she increases the volume of her speech with greater forcefulness, she will appear threateningly insane and requiring restraint."[36]

Singing was even more problematic than speaking for it necessarily involved hurling the voice with great force and other physical gestures, and had explicit sexual implications for women's chastity. Women who excelled in music-making were often assumed to be courtesans. These assumptions lingered well into the seventeenth century, as assaults on the virtue of Barbara Strozzi, singer and composer of eight volumes of vocal music published in Venice between 1644 and 1664, demonstrate. As Ellen Rosand has argued, a series of manuscript satires devoted to impugning Strozzi's Accademia degli Unisoni aims directly at its hostess's reputation. Describing Barbara's distribution of flowers to the academists, the satirist writes: "it is a fine thing to distribute the flowers after having already surrendered the fruit."[37] Even Anna Renzi, an opera singer whose chastity was frequently praised, was identified as a courtesan in an avid operagoer's program.[38]

Considering the lengths to which female singers who were not courtesans and their male patrons and families went to guard their virtue suggests that singing enhanced a courtesan's erotic, as well as artistic, capital. Patrons and families of professional singers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries worked to regulate the appearance, education, and morality of their charges, thus effectively containing their sexuality. Considering the lengths to which female singers who were not cour-

tesans and their male patrons and families went to guard their virtue suggests that singing enhanced a courtesan's erotic, as well as artistic, capital. Patrons and families of professional singers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries worked to regulate the appearance, education, and morality of their charges, thus effectively containing their sexuality. Even in the case of "non-professional" musicians, women went to extreme lengths to keep their skills something of a secret. Fonte writes of a collective of noblewomen in which a woman with musical skills could sing, "taking up her lute or tempering her sweet voice with the sounds of a well-tuned harpsichord," only when she is certain that she is safe from the eyes and ears of anyone else.[39] In an extreme case, the Duke of Mantua did not allow the thirteen-year-old *virtuosa* Caterina Martinelli to sing at his court until she had undergone a virginity test.[40] On a more subtle level, women with intact virtue who wished to acquire a musical education almost always did so in their parent's homes, thus avoiding the unseemly implications of studying singing with a male teacher.

Until the 1580s few women actually sang in public for money, in large part due to associations with courtesans.[41] The creation of the Ferrarese *concerto delle donne* by the duke Alfonso d'Este in the 1580s began to change things, but these changes occurred in a framework that sheds light on the condition of courtesan singers. What differentiated the three original *donne*, Laura Peverara, Anna Guarini, and Livia d'Arco, from courtesans was a very specific performance context created by a constellation of social, economic, and musical forces. These women took part in the very same kind of music-making that heightened the sensuousness of a courtesan. Moving back almost forty years, we find Antonfrancesco Doni's *Dialogo della musica* (Venice, 1544) giving a representative description of an evening's entertainment like those in which the *concerto delle donne* participated, in which dialogues and civil conversation were often punctuated with musical entertainment.[42] The female interlocutor Selvaggia (evidently Doni's mistress Isabetta Guasca) generally initiates singing, reminding readers of the associations between women and music. In addition to the luxuriant virtuosic style for which they became famous, the women of the *concerto delle donne* often performed the *arie* or formulas for reciting poetry that courtesans made use of. Moreover, Tarquinia Molza, also one of the original singing ladies, received a classical education and was known, like many courtesans, primarily as a poet.[43] Her artistic skills thus paralleled those of Veronica Franco and Tullia d'Aragona, but, unlike courtesans, she and other members of the *concerto* seem almost always to have performed with book in hand, suggesting that their minds did not wander and that they did not themselves write the words or music or take inspiration from the setting by further ornamenting or otherwise elaborating it. Accounts of these women, admittedly carefully scripted, always remark that their musical gestures were invariably made to serve texts, not to enhance pleasure.[44]

The duke was committed to acquiring women whose reputations were beyond reproach and who had already established themselves as gentlewomen— women of at least an almost noble class. He took control of their sexuality by providing them with carefully chosen, nobly born husbands, a dowry, and a place to live within the palace. These fringe benefits rendered their salaries almost irrelevant and effectively assuaged the sexual implications of being paid to sing. Singers at court often had other jobs too. The singer Angela Zanibelli, for example, daughter and niece of court

singers at Ferrara, served the marquis Enzo Bentivoglio's household as a weaver.[45] The difference in status between courtesans and the *concerto delle donne*, and the respective reception of their musics, also suggest that the performance of music and the women who performed it became mutually constitutive: virtuous women sang virtuous songs made by others whereas a woman already associated with sexual performance produced lascivious sounds that she herself had often created. While courtesans controlled their own voices and bodies (often in their own homes), exchanging their capital with listeners, the singing ladies used their voices to enhance the duke's status at his court.

In contrast to the performances of courtesans, those of the *concerto delle donne* were of "musica segreta," a quasi-public kind of music controlled by the duke and attended only by Este family members and their diplomatic and social guests. The existence of the *concerto delle donne* as the duke's artistic commodity allowed them to sing for distinguished listeners but still protected them from the "public" venues that courtesans frequented. Performing in a glorified private setting, controlled by the duke within the court itself and often in the duchess's chambers, confined their talents within the large extended family of the court. Their virtue was protected by their existence as part of the duke's capital and his control of their bodies and assets.

In another instance of controlled music-making by women, early modern Italy saw the cultivation of singing traditions within convent walls. As Robert Kendrick and Craig Monson have shown, nuns, especially in Milan and Bologna, sang from behind closed walls for very specific audiences. But while the tight structures of the courts allowed various dukes to control the sound their women made, the Catholic Church—as sound seeped out from grilled walls—never achieved that kind of success.[46] The carefully controlled performance situations of the nuns suggest what Monson has called an alternate "musica segreta," and yet nuns' performances also might be fruitfully interpreted alongside courtesans' performances as extreme versions of one another. Like courtesans, nuns were trained to sing and, like courtesans, singing added to their worth. Though entering an important convent required a substantial dowry, those who could sing could often do so with a very small dowry, or even none at all. While nuns trafficked in their virginity, courtesans trafficked in precisely the opposite. The spiritual ecstasy of nuns' singing and the sexual ecstasy of courtesans' songs rubbed up against one another especially in Venice, a city that imagined itself in terms of the seemingly contradictory images of the virginal body of Mary and the sensuous inviting body of Venus. If courtesans were symbols of Venice's luxury and beauty, nuns were symbols of its innate nobility.

SEXUAL PERFORMANCES AND CURRENCIES

By singing, courtesans such as Veronica Franco enacted desire viscerally, thus challenging—much as they did in writing—social mandates dictating that women act only as objects of desire, not subjects of it. Yet it is important to remember that courtesanship also demanded involuntary performances as part of selling, or at least

marketing, the body. I do not want to forget that courtesans trafficked in their own bodies. Despite Franco's independent access to people, places, and activities, her letters contain traces of the kind of physical servitude that went with her trade. Her vehement letter to a mother who is considering making her daughter a courtesan scolds her for not protecting the young girl's virginity. "I've begged and warned you to protect her virginity."[47] Not unlike Dolce, Franco wants the mother to guard her daughter's most valuable possession—her chastity—by placing her in the Casa delle Zitelle, a charitable institution created as a refuge for poor unmarried girls to protect their chastity and thus prevent the loss of marriage potential. After dressing her daughter most chastely, Franco complains, her mother "let her show up with curls dangling around her brow and down her neck, with bare breasts spilling out of her dress, with a high uncovered forehead, and every other embellishment people use to make their merchandise measure up to the competition."[48] Franco's use of the word "merchandise" reminds us that courtesans functioned as objects of commerce, as she gestures toward the body as an icon of sexual capital. Further on she insists: "Don't allow the flesh of your wretched daughter not only to be cut into pieces and sold but you yourself to become her butcher,"[49] and remarks on the horrors of having to submit one's own body to occupation and ownership by others:

> It's a most wretched thing, contrary to human reason, to subject one's body and labor to a slavery terrifying even to think of. To make oneself prey to so many men, at the risk of being stripped, robbed, even killed, so that one man, one day, may snatch away from you everything you've acquired from many over such a long time, along with so many other dangers of injury and dreadful contagious diseases; to eat with another's mouth, sleep with another's eyes, move according to another's will, obviously rushing toward the shipwreck of your mind and your body—what greater misery? . . . Believe me, among all the world's calamities, this is the worst.[50]

Franco's critique highlights the courtesan's body as an object of contention and alienation: in eating with another's mouth and sleeping with another's eyes, the body is essentially removed from the subject.

While we must take seriously Franco's blunt analysis of her situation, it is important to remember that in some metaphorical way Venetians bought and sold young women's bodies every day. With its very tight marriage market, nobles exchanged their daughters for political clout and understood dowries as the financial make or break of the bride's pure, noble body. Such devil's bargains were also made on a regular basis with the church. Patricians unable to afford a high enough dowry to buy themselves a reputable son-in-law often forced their daughters into convents. Jutta Sperling estimates that by 1581 over 54 percent of Venice's noble women lived in convents, and usually not by choice.[51] What differentiates courtesans from nuns and wives, then, is that they sold themselves.

Hinting at this agency, Franco's published poetry articulates the courtesan's erotic power. Though her letter cited above dramatizes physical servitude and degradation, her poety highlights the courtesan's traffic in the more ephemeral currencies of poetry and ideas. Her writings demonstrate that she had access to poetic and other artistic means of projecting her own ability to manipulate her male lover. She could use her body to control her lovers in ways that other women could not:

I will make you taste the delights of love
When they have been expertly learned,
And doing this, I could give you such pleasure
That you could say you were fully content and at once fall more
deeply in love,
So sweet and delicious do I become
When I am in bed with a man
Who, I sense, loves and enjoys me
That the pleasure I bring excels all delight.[52]

Franco's poem is remarkable for its time because she uses words to demonstrate her erotic prowess. That she wrote these lines explicitly for publication suggests that she intended to market herself as both a poet and a lover, the very opposite of the chaste images that noble ladies cultivated. Using the gift of language to express forbidden pleasure, she claims sexual power by giving and, presumably, withholding pleasure at will, even as she herself remains an object of desire. Her body brings her lover to a place where he will completely lose himself in desire—exactly what the Neoplatonists most feared. And she uses sexual pleasure as an instrument of power with the men who enjoyed her.

These considerations of the bodily activity of singing, the materiality of the voice, and differences of gender suggest that singing enacted an assertive sexual performance, one that exceeded even Franco's strikingly sexual prose. By singing, courtesans assumed a bodily and sexual agency that complicated the relation between active subject and passive object, proving it false. Received medical notions of the time distinguished men from women based on correlations between body temperature and social traits: women were colder and thus weaker, more lascivious, and less controlled than their superior and hotter counterparts.[53] Voice was directly related to temperament; hot breath produced deeper stronger voices and cold breath produced higher weaker voices. The deeper male voice, then, marked a noble character whereas the high voice reflected the imperfections of a vessel that was too cold, too weak, and too moist. Because singing required a naturally hotter body, the fact that women sang at all already threatened the precarious male/female continuum. Avicenna, an Arab medical writer who was widely read in early modern Italy, asserted that people with hot temperaments were "more fluent in speech and have a flair for music."[54] But hotter temperaments in women suggested excessive desire; young women were supposed to consume bland diets and engage in fasting, whose chilling effects regulated body temperature and effectively regulated sexual agency.

While normal breathing kept body heat consistent, singing, which required more heat and more air, set the precious balance off kilter by causing an unseemly rise in women's body temperature.[55] Moreover, the extra circulation of air and breath mimicked the excessive blood flow of sexual activity. Soranus, still read and followed in early modern Italy, wrote: "as the performance of the vocal function stimulates to an increased excretion the saliva which by nature accompanies the passage of the breath, in the same way during intercourse the associated movement around the female genitals relaxes the whole body."[56]

According to humoral doctrines, both vocal and sexual production depended on a rise in body temperature. Conception involved the use of erotic friction that heated both male and female participants up to their boiling points—ejaculation and orgasm. The sixteenth-century French doctor Ambrose Paré's much-quoted instructions for husbands on arousing frigid wives tells them to raise the furnace temperature with wanton words and caresses.[53] Paré, like the Neoplatonist and Petrarchan thinkers who dominated Italian philosophy, assumes that the wife sits still and silent while the husband entices her. She is not a creature of desire but instead exists as a means to propagation, which was not thought possible without orgasm. Courtesans did precisely the opposite, expressing and manipulating desire in ways that had nothing to do with reproduction and marriage. Their vocal exploits mirrored the frank sexuality that Franco, for instance, illustrated in her lyrics, and their sexual actions heated up their male lovers. Unlike Paré's passive objects, courtesans controlled the sexual situation with writing, speaking, and singing of desire and by literally raising body temperatures and manipulating voices.

In addition to mimicking the bodily motions of sex, singing enacted a bodily exchange whose currency was fundamentally physical, and embodied a social capital and penetrative force which had to be guarded against by male listeners. Often described in vocal treatises and accounts of singers as hard or soft, the human voice was understood as a kinesthetic entity that traveled from the mouth of the singer to the ear of the listener, where it worked a variety of physical and physiological transformations. Giulio Caccini, perhaps the most famous singing teacher of the early seventeenth century, described ornaments that "tickle the ear" of the listener—sounds literally move through the ear. The voice in these terms holds a penetrative and material power, one that in the mouths of courtesans became a commodity of exchange.

When the voice flowed out of the body it became something that could be exchanged, like the letters, books, and other currencies that courtesans circulated. It was a physical substance open for exchange that could increase a courtesan's sexual capital. Read in the material terms that dominated early modern Italy, the voice becomes an object of exchange between a courtesan and her audience, one of many circulating goods in which the courtesan trafficks, and one that positions her both as a subject of patronage and a subject of power, thus complicating her role as object of desire. It is her voice that allows her, if only for a moment, to control the bodies and souls of her listeners. In early modern Italy conceptions of song and sensuality were inextricably linked, and courtesans by definition commercialized both. Not surprisingly, Venice, the capital of courtesanship, would also become the first space to commercialize music in the form of opera, a market system in which singers were paid for their services and their voices were rendered commodities on a free-exchange market. We know that early divas pursued musical careers outside the courts and parlors of the nobility, negotiated very complex contracts, and even earned enough money to put up their own dowries.[58] And perhaps courtesans who used the arts of song, rhetoric, costume, and makeup paved the way for female singers to enter a world of theatrical impersonation.

Notes

1. Tullia d'Aragona, *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, trans. Rinaldina Russell and Bruce Merry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 94.

2. Moderata Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, ed. Adriana Chemello (1600; Venice: Eidos, 1988), 84.

3. "The Horrors of Falling in Love," letter to the Count of San Secondo, from Venice, June 24, 1537. Pietro Aretino, *Selected Letters*, trans. George Bull (New York: Penguin, 1976), 99; in Italian in Pietro Aretino, *Lettere*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1992), 228.

4. Veronica Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, trans. Ann Rosalind Jones and Margaret F. Rosenthal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51.

5. Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985), 52.

6. Tullia d'Aragona, *Dialogue*, 84.

7. Corinna quote from Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 171. Franco admirer quote from Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 91, vv. 65–66.

8. Ibid., 102.

9. Ibid., 165.

10. *Venice: A Documentary History, 1450–1630*, ed. David Chambers and Brian Pullan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 117.

11. Letter to Angela Zaffetta, December 25, 1537, in Aretino, *Lettere*, ed. Procaccioli, 609–11.

12. Tomaso Garzoni da Bagnacavallo, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (Venice: Gio. Battista Somasco, 1589), 605.

13. For more on sirens, see Meri Lao, *Sirens: Symbols of Seduction* (Rochester, NY: Park Street Press, 1998). See also Linda Phyllis Austern, "Nature, Culture, Myth, and Musician in Early Modern England," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51 (1998): 1–49, and *Music and the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming 2005).

14. Amore, da che tu vuoi pur ch'io m'arrischi
In udir e vedere
Sirene e Basilischi,
Fammi gratia, signore,
S'egli avvien che mi strugga lo splendore
Di due occhi sereni, e ch'io sia preda
D'un ragionar accorto,
Che chi n'ha colpa creda
Che per udir e per veder sia morto.
Gentil coppia eccellente,
Chi vi mira et ascolta
Solamente una volta
E non mor di piacere,
Può gir arditamente
Ad udir e vedere
Le Sirene d'amor e i Basilischi.

Adriano Willaert, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 14, ed. Helga Meier, Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae, 3 (n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1977), 92. I have altered the punctuation.

15. The two women are named by Andrea Calmo in his fourth volume of letters devoted

to popular courtesans. Andrea Calmo, *Lettere*, ed. Vittorio Rossi (Turin: E. Loescher, 1888), 266–67.

16. Homer, *The Odyssey*, 12. 44–46; trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998), 210.

17. Pliny the elder, *Natural History*, 8. 33; trans. W. H. S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

18. Pietro Aretino, *Dialogues*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Marsilio, 1971).

19. Ibid., 362.

20. Pietro Aretino, *Ragionamento dialogo*, ed. Nino Borsellino and Paolo Procaccioli (Milan: Garzanti, 1984), 468 (translation mine).

21. See especially the fifteenth lesson of Ferrante Pallavicino, *La rettorica delle puttane* (1673), ed. Laura Coci (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo, 1992). Wendy Heller discusses this in *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

22. This reliance on humoral medicine is part of the humanist immersion in ancient texts of all kinds. For comprehensive studies of the impact of ancient medical practice on medieval and Renaissance Europe see Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); eadem, *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy: The Canon and Medical Teaching in Italian Universities after 1500* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medieval Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Giancarlo Zanier, "Platonic Trends in Renaissance Medicine," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987): 509–19. Andrew Wear estimates that between 1500 and 1700 at least 590 different translations of Galen appeared in western Europe; see his "Medicine in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1700," in *The Western Medical Tradition, 800 BC to AD 1800*, ed. Lawrence Conrad *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 253.

23. Bonnie Gordon, *Monteverdi's Unruly Women: The Power of Song in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Most obviously, the clitoris was known as a little tongue. These associations were handed down from the ancients. Galen understood the neck of the uterus as capable of opening and closing and the vagina as the door to the womb.

24. *The Medical Works of Hippocrates*, ed. John Chadwick and W. N. Mann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 262.

25. Jacques Ferrand, *A Treatise on Lovesickness*, trans. David A. Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 294.

26. As quoted from Hippocratic gynecology in Ann Hanson and David Armstrong, "The Virgin's Voice and Neck: Aeschylus, Agamemnon 245, and Other Texts," *British Institute of Classical Studies* 33 (1986): 97–100, at p. 99. The authors suggest that ancient Greek ideas about the physical signs of virginity stemmed from folk belief and held sway, along with Galenic medicine, well into the seventeenth century.

27. As other scholars have argued, a variety of discourses conflated sex organs with the mouth and positioned both as signs of female lasciviousness and unruliness. See Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), and Peter Stallybrass, "The Body Enclosed: Patriarchal Territories," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret M. Ferguson *et al.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 123–42.

28. In addition to medical conflations of mouths and wombs, artistic representations conflate mouths with the damning abyss of hell and recall the medical associations by em-

phasizing the entrance to this dark and mysterious place. Barbara Spackman, "Inter musam et ursum moritur: Folengo and the Gaping 'Other' Mouth," in *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender in the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 19–35.

29. Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, 1. 42; ed. V. Perone Compagni (New York: E. J. Brill, 1992), 162. Translation mine.

30. Quoted from Marcus Fiertz, *Girolamo Cardano*, trans. Helya Niman (Boston: Burkhauser, 1983), 99. Pliny the elder makes a similar statement; *Natural History*, 7. 15; ed. T. E. Page (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 2: 549.

31. Soranus, *Gynecology*, trans. Owsei Temkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 133.

32. Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo della istitutione delle donne* (Venice: Giolito, 1560), fol. 9^{v}.

33. Ibid., fol. 9^{v}.

34. A. Segarizzi, "Niccolo Barbo patrizio veneziano del sec. XV e le accuse contro Isotta Nogarola," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 43 (1904): 39–54 and 50–54; the passage is translated in Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 40.

35. Francesco Barbaro, "On Wifely Duties," in *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, ed. Ronald E. Witt *et al.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 205.

36. Cited in Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities*, 33.

37. Cited in Ellen Rosand, "Barbara Strozzi, *virtuosissima cantatrice*: The Composer's Voice," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 31 (1978): 241–81, at 251.

38. Claudio Sartori, "La prima diva della lirica italiana: Anna Renzi," *Nuova rivista musicale italiana* 3 (1968): 430–52, at p. 450.

39. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 45.

40. Alessandro Ademollo, *La bell'Adriana ed altre virtuose del suo tempo alla corte di Mantova* (Città di Castello: S. Lapi, 1888), 39.

41. For an example of the kind of music these women sang, listen to track 8 of the CD that accompanies this book; for the text and translation see the appendix. Luca Marenzio most likely set *Cantate ninfe* for the original *concerto delle donne*.

42. Antonfrancesco Doni, *Dialogo della musica (1544)*, ed. Gian Francesco Malipiero (Venice: Fondazione Giorgio Cini, and Vienna: Universal Edition, 1965).

43. See Irma Jaffe, *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 311–39.

44. On the *concerto delle donne* see Anthony Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara, 1579–1597*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

45. Stuart Reiner, "La vag'Angioletta (and Others)," *Analecta musicologica* 14 (1974): 26–88.

46. Robert L. Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens: Nuns and Their Music in Early Modern Milan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), and Craig Monson, *Disembodied Voices: Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

47. Franco, *Selected Poems and Letters*, 38.

48. Ibid.

49. Quoted ibid., 39.

50. Ibid.

51. Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3.

52. Franco, *Selected Poems and Letters*, 69.

53. Aristotle insisted that hot breath produced deeper, more noble voices and cold

breath produced higher voices; *Generation of Animals*, 5. 7; trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 342. Galen argued that drier, and thus more male, bodies made better sounds; *Galen: On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, 1. 389; ed. Margaret Tallmadge May (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 344.

54. Mazhar H. Shah, *The General Principles of Avicenna's Canon of Medicine* (Karachi: Naveed Clinic, 1966), 343.

55. Ferrand wrote that uterine frenzy led women to chatter incessantly and speak about sexual matters; *A Treatise on Lovesickness*, 263.

56. Soranus, *Gynecology*, 29.

57. As cited in Thomas Lacquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 102.

58. For details see Beth L. Glixon, "Private Lives of Public Women: Prima Donnas in Mid-Seventeenth-Century Venice," *Music & Letters* 76 (1995): 509–31. For more, especially on the link between courtesans and their operatic representations, see Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*.