

Whore, thief and cuckold spy Insults, gender and the politics of everyday life in early modern Bologna

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On Monday 6 September 1723, Maria, wife of Giovanni Berti, made her way to one of Bologna's criminal court notaries to record a complaint against her neighbour Angela Monti. According to Maria, Angela had been pestering her every single day with injurious words; bothersome encounters to which only a recent incarceration in a bishopric cell was able to bring relief from temporarily. However, immediately after being released Angela again sought out Maria and called her not only a 'puttana', but also accused her of having 'fatta la spia'.¹

Verbal exchanges like these may appear trivial, but had a huge impact in honour-based societies where mere words could potentially disrupt one's standing in the community. For women to be called a whore directly tapped into stereotypical and gendered notions of honour and respectability. The predominance of sexualized forms of insults towards women are sometimes read as an indicator for their restricted public roles in early modern societies, or even for their confinement to the domestic arena. An interpretation such as this fits rather neatly into depictions in general discussions or syntheses of women's experiences in "the south" as defined by cultural constraint, seclusion and enclosure.² Yet such characterisations have been subject to substantial criticism from scholars of Italian history, not in the least place because they are predominantly based on normative sources. These indicate what women *should* not, rather than representing what they *could* or *did* not do. Scholars have furthermore contended that the relationship between women's social realities and the language of verbal affront often sexualised, – but not always – was more complex than commonly assumed.

Drawing on this criticism, this paper aims to re-examine the relationship between gender and the culture of verbal affront in early modern Italy. It seeks to do so through the lens of the denunciations to Bologna's early modern criminal court, the Tribunale del Torrione, between the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth century.³ These

¹ Archivio di stato di Bologna (hereafter ASBo), Tribunale del Torrione, Atti e processi, Busta 7869-1, folio 163.

² For a good overview of the interpretations of various sources that have led to these assumptions, see E.S. Cohen, 'To pray, to work, to hear, to speak: Women in Roman streets, c.1600', in: *Journal of early modern history*, 12 (2008), pp. 292-293. The broader debate about the position of 'the south' or 'the Mediterranean' in historical scholarship is discussed elaborately in P.P. Viazzo, 'What's so special about the Mediterranean? Thirty years of research on household and family in Italy', in: *Continuity and change*, 18, 1 (2003), pp. 111-137.

³ For more information about the sources used, samples taken, or other crimes scrutinized alongside insults, see my PhD dissertation, S. Muurling, *Everyday crime, criminal justice and gender in early modern Bologna*, dissertation Leiden University, May 2019.

denunciations represent the initial complaint or report about a crime to a local official of the criminal court. They could be made free-of-charge, and drew in thousands of bolognesi of all social stripes on an annual basis in an attempt to find relief from an often long-term strenuous and volatile rapport with their community members. While the language of verbal affront was decidedly gendered, the insult cases reflected women's broad engagement in social and legal domains of everyday life as they manoeuvred between informal and formal methods of conflict resolution. The violent altercations described in the court records, this paper argues, reveal ordinary women not as constrained and secluded, but as violent protagonists and decisive litigants worth being studied.

Violence, women, and the criminal court

Compared to compelling accounts of murder or treason, complaints about verbal affront may at first glance appear rather inconsequential. Yet early modern magistracies heard numerous insult cases on a daily basis, revealing in the very least a contemporary sensitivity to vilification that rendered it worthy of legal recourse. The desire to discipline interpersonal violence, whether physical or verbal, was intrinsically tied up with ideas about honour. Both words and physical actions were believed to have the power to wound the victim physically or through the loss of reputation, could provoke further violence, damaged wider family networks, and required reparation. The statutes that many Italian communities published from the Middle Ages onwards therefore treated hostile words and physical assaults in a similar manner.⁴ In Bologna's criminal bylaws they were discussed together in the same paragraphs and were subject to the same punishments, ranging from three pulls of the corda to a sentence to the galleys.⁵

Violence, in its broadest sense, was considered a regular feature of everyday life far into the early modern period. The well-known historian Robert Muchembled went so far as to state that 'like death, like the cemetery which is at the heart of the village, violence is at the heart of life in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries'.⁶ In this narrative the south of Europe has taken a special place, as the "Mediterranean" culture is generally believed to have been especially violent.⁷ For example, homicide rates – often used as an indicator for levels of violence in societies – remained high in the few early modern Italian towns and villages that have been researched until well into the nineteenth century. In many other European regions a sustained decline had set in centuries earlier.⁸

⁴ References to other statutes are mentioned in E. Horodowich, *Language and statecraft in early modern Venice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 93-96.

⁵ Chapter XLVII 'On injuries and insults': *Bando generale della legazione di Bologna e suo contado, fatto pubblicare li 12. ottobre 1756 dall'eminetiss., e reverendiss. sig. cardinale Fabrizio Serbelloni, legato a latere di detta città*, Bologna, 1756, pp. 86-87.

⁶ R. Muchembled, 'Anthropologie de la violence dans la France moderne (XVe-XVIIIe siècle)', in: *Revue de synthèse*, 108 (1987), p. 40.

⁷ J. Davies, 'Introduction', in: idem (ed.), *Aspects of violence in Renaissance Europe*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, p. 1; S. Carroll, 'Revenge and reconciliation in early modern Italy', in: *Past and present*, 233 (2016), pp. 106-107; M. Calzolari, 'Delitti e castighi', in: idem, M. Di Sivo & E. Grantalano (eds.) *Giustizia e criminalità nello stato pontificio*, Roma, Gangemi Editore, 2001, p. 55; O. Niccoli, 'Rinuncia, pace, perdono. Rituali di pacificazione della prima età moderna', in: *Studi storici*, 40, 1 (1999), p. 188; P. Blastenbrei, *Kriminalität in Rom 1560-1585*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1995, p. 284; M. Eisner, 'Long-term historical trends in violent crime', in: *Crime and justice*, 30 (2003), pp. 83-142; M. Eisner, 'Modernization, self-control and lethal violence. The long-term dynamics of European homicide rates in theoretical perspective', in: *British journal of criminology*, 41 (2001), pp. 618-638.

⁸ Eisner, 'Long-term historical trends', cit., pp. 83-142; Eisner, 'Modernization, self-control and lethal violence', cit., pp. 618-638.

The roles of early modern Italian women in physical and verbal violence have remained largely uncharted. Some scholars have taken to this historiographical silence to contrast “southern” women’s more restricted scope of action to that in a “freer” northern Europe.⁹ The enduring importance of an honour culture has led scholars to assume that patriarchal norms were especially stringent and restrictive for women in Italian communities. One of the assumed outcomes of these relatively strict gender norms and the ethics of honour is that women – though this is increasingly contested – did not partake in the physical violence so very omnipresent in pre-modern Italy. Retributive violence was a culturally accepted and sometimes even demanded means to maintain one’s honour for men, while this was not the case for women. In his work on criminal justice in late Renaissance Florence, John Brackett has argued that for women it was neither ‘expected nor desirable’ to engage in aggressive acts for any reason.¹⁰ The ethics of honour prescribed passivity to women, submitting them to the control of men and relying on them to defend their honour.

In light of these gender norms another presumption is that women themselves would have had to rely on insults and defamatory slurs as the primary means of conducting the small politics of their daily lives.¹¹ Women, it is commonly argued, primarily assisted in violent scenes with their voices and gestures.¹² Scholars like Daniel Lesnick and Sharon Strocchia have argued that the ritualized vocabulary of vilification – aimed at influencing friends, neighbours or relatives in the community – was in fact a distinctly female form of crime that gave women of all social classes an informal but major means of influencing and shaping public opinion in a highly patriarchal society.¹³ ‘The language of slander’, Laura Gowing asserts based on her research into seventeenth-century London, ‘offered particular linguistic powers to women through which they asserted their verbal, physical, and legal agency to judge and condemn other women’.¹⁴ As such, the ecclesiastical courts from which she and several other scholars have drawn their evidence reveal women’s important roles in policing the social and sexual morality of their communities through gossip and insults.¹⁵

Examinations of different types of courts across early modern Europe paint dissonant pictures of the social landscape of aggression. Many types of crimes – especially those of women – are known to have been handled via lower criminal courts, ecclesiastical courts or by less formal methods of conflict resolution rather than by the high criminal courts.¹⁶ In contrast to aforementioned ecclesiastical courts, which

⁹ For a discussion of the literature about assumptions made based on cultural precepts, see Cohen, ‘To pray, to work, to hear, to speak’, cit., pp. 291-295.

¹⁰ J.K. Brackett, *Criminal justice and crime in late Renaissance Florence, 1537-1609*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 133-134.

¹¹ S.T. Strocchia, ‘Gender and the rites of honour in Italian Renaissance cities’, in: J.C. Brown & R.C. Davis (eds.), *Gender and society in Renaissance Italy*, London, Longman, 1998, pp. 52-54.

¹² E. Crouzet-Pavan, ‘Crimine e giustizia’, in G. Calvi (ed.), *Innesti. Donne e genere nella storia sociale*, Roma, Viella, 2004, p. 57.

¹³ D.R. Lesnick, ‘Insults and threats in medieval Todi’, in: *Journal of medieval history*, 17 (1991), p. 76; Strocchia, ‘Gender and the rites of honour’, cit., p. 54;

¹⁴ L. Gowing, *Domestic dangers. Women, words, and sex in early modern London*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 109.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 101; U. Rublack, *The crimes of women in early modern Germany*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 220; S. Lipscomb, ‘Crossing boundaries: Women’s gossip, insults and violence in sixteenth-century France’, in: *French history*, 25, 4 (2011), p. 411.

¹⁶ G. Schwerhoff, *Köln im Kreuzverhör: Kriminalität, Herrschaft und Gesellschaft in einer frühneuzeitlichen Stadt*, Bonn, Bouvier, 1991; R. Shoemaker, *Prosecution and punishment. Petty crime and the law in London and rural Middlesex, c.1660-1725*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 292; P. King, *Crime and law in England, 1750-1840*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 202-210; D.D. Gray, *Crime, prosecutions and social relations. The summary courts of the city of London in the late eighteenth century*, Blasingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 9, 170-171; M. Dinges, ‘The uses of justice as a form of social control in early modern Europe’ in: H. Roodenburg & P. Spierenburg

predominantly dealt with women's transgressions, magistracies such as Venice's Avogaria di comun (Venetian state lawyers) hardly prosecuted any women as offenders of verbal aggression.¹⁷ The brunt of this magistracy's rigour fell on verbal aggression up the social ladder: on male members of the underclasses hurling insults at nobles or state officials, disrupting civic peace. Records from other councils such as Venice's Signori di notte, which primarily shouldered the responsibility to control verbal injuries in early modern Venice, could have perhaps balanced the scale, had these records survived the passing of time.¹⁸ Regardless, the premise that verbal affront can be characterized as a "typically female" or a "typically male" act is too simplistic.

An Italian court that allows us to more fully explore the relationship between gender and slander is Bologna's Tribunale del Torrione. This secular criminal court was established around the 1530s, some decades after the conquest of the city of Bologna by Pope Julius II, and operated until the French invasion in 1796. Especially when combined with its medieval predecessor, the Torrione is considered one of the most long-term, best-preserved and systematic criminal court archives both within and outside Italy.¹⁹ Its value to the study of insult and gender is heightened by the survival of the large number of denunciations by men and women of all social stripes. Complaints of all kinds could be brought before this criminal court because it functioned as a forum for conflict resolution. In an attempt to expand the papal authority's hold over the community, it presented the Torrione as a free and reliable alternative to the capricious and now illegal feudal courts.²⁰ As a result, thousands of bolognesi flocked to the criminal court each year to complain about and settle predominantly petty disputes with their fellow community members. With the Torrione situated in the city centre of Bologna, city dwellers were able to bring their grievances to the criminal court in person, whereas villagers had to rely on local bailiffs to relay crimes they deemed worthy of further scrutiny. This direct, personal access to justice in the city affected what and whose crimes came under the Torrione's purview, as well as in what words. A considerably higher share of the denunciations dealt with women's grievances in the city than in Bologna's countryside. While still mediated through a biased notary's pen, urban denunciations were also richer in detail about the violence endured, including about the language of verbal affront. As such, the Bolognese denunciations provide biased yet unparalleled access to the words and deeds of Italian commoners that would have otherwise largely gone unrecorded.

The functioning of the Torrione as a forum for conflict resolution explains both why it was used by so many lower-class bolognesi and also why their complaints led to so few criminal trials. Neither the litigants bringing on complaints nor the Torrione's magistrates desired to prosecute the bulk of these petty offence cases in a full trial.²¹

(eds.), *Social control in Europe. Volume 1, 1500-1800*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2004, pp. 159-175.

¹⁷ Horodowich, *Language and statecraft*, cit., p. 101.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 98.

¹⁹ G. Angelozzi & C. Casanova, *Donne criminali. Il genere nella storia della giustizia*, Bologna, Pàtron Editore, 2014, p. 54; S.R. Blanshei, 'Introduction', in: idem (ed.), *Violence and justice in Bologna 1250-1700*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2018, p. xvi.

²⁰ C.S. Rose, *Homicide in North Italy: Bologna, 1600-1700*, dissertation University of Toronto, 2016, p. 61.

²¹ For similar mechanisms elsewhere in early modern Europe see D.D. Gray, 'The regulation of violence in the metropolis; the prosecution of assault in the summary courts, c.1780-1820', in: *The London journal*, 32, 1 (2007), pp. 75-77; P. King, 'The summary courts and social relations in eighteenth-century England', in: *Past & Present*, 183 (2004), pp. 147-150. Interestingly, this use of the courts brings to light a more diverse notion of the historical development of the dealing with deviant words and deeds in early modern communities and blurs the lines between what is seen as the traditional system – in which shaming was an important means of controlling behaviour that broke the rules of community – and the 'more modern one' in which the repression was increasingly taken over by the state. See Burke, *The historical anthropology of early modern Italy*, cit., p. 103.

The statutes of the Torrione provide specific instructions to the judges not to pursue so-called “minor crimes” such as insults, threats and non-life threatening fights among the lower classes.²² Similarly, litigants employed their denunciation to the criminal court as part of their own negotiation strategies. For scholars, these sources provide opportune windows into the everyday practices of insults and conflict resolution by ordinary men and women. The tensions between formal and informal mechanisms of social control – one felt by men and women alike – were incorporated within the language of affront and will be discussed in more detail later on.

The abundant denunciations in Bologna further nuance the notion of verbal affront as a “typically female crime”. Firstly, Bolognese women in the seventeenth and eighteenth century by no means limited themselves to verbal aggression. While over four-fifths of the complaints made to the Torrione against female offenders concerned violence in its broadest sense of the word, only about one-fifth of these complaints concerned verbal aggression alone. The dockets suggest that women physically fought their neighbours, acquaintances, economic competitors, their customers and their employers – and played considerably larger roles as defendants before the criminal court than normative prescriptions would ever suggest.²³ Of course, the verbal assaults that were litigated in court only represent a small fraction of the conflicts arising at the most basic levels of everyday life. Many physical assaults also mention the exchange of injurious words, often setting in motion a chain of physical aggression around which the case would then centre. However, it is important to note that early modern women did not only rely on the sharpness of their tongues to settle their conflicts, an observation that is also confirmed by other recent studies on towns in Italy and elsewhere in Europe.²⁴

Secondly, while it is undoubtedly true that defamatory speech was a powerful tool to negotiate power in women’s everyday lives, these mechanisms were by no means a female preserve. In early modern Bologna, women constituted around one-fifth of the bolognesi accused of insults and threats between the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth century.²⁵ This does not deny that defamatory speech was a powerful tool for women to negotiate power in their everyday lives, but instead suggests that these mechanisms were not exclusive to them. Indeed, in an honour-based culture one’s honour was considered public property, measured and conferred by one’s peers, and mere words could upset one’s standing in the community.²⁶ The power of insults to mar reputations rendered them useful currency for both men and women.

²² G. Angelozzi & C. Casanova, *La giustizia criminale a Bologna nel XVIII secolo e le riforme di Benedetto XIV*, Bologna, CLUEB, 2010, p. 391.

²³ Up to one-third of the criminal complaints about petty violent crimes concerned female defendants in Bologna, a share that is comparable to those found in cities in early modern Holland, England and Scotland. For a more elaborate treatment of this topic, see Muurling, *Everyday crime, criminal justice and gender in early modern Bologna*, cit.

²⁴ C. Vasta, ‘Per una topografia della violenza femminile (Roma, secoli XVI-XVII)’, in: *Genesis*, 14, 2 (2015), pp. 59-81; Angelozzi & Casanova, *Donne criminali*, cit.; E.S. Cohen, ‘Honor and gender in the streets of early modern Rome’, in: *Journal of interdisciplinary history*, 22, 4 (1992), pp. 616, 623; S.K. Taylor, ‘Women, honor, and violence in a Castilian town, 1600-1650’, in: *The sixteenth century journal*, 35, 4 (2004), p. 1080; Lipscomb, ‘Crossing boundaries’, cit., p. 411; D. Roussel, ‘La description des violences féminines dans les archives criminelles au XVI^e siècle’, in: *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines*, 19 (2010), p. 71; J. Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and petty violence in London, 1680-1720*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2005; A.M. Kilday, *Women and violent crime in Enlightenment Scotland*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2007; M. van der Heijden, *Women and crime in early modern Holland*, Leiden, Brill, 2016.

²⁵ In my sample, 53 out of 260 defendants accused of insults, defamation or threats were women.

²⁶ S. Carroll, ‘Introduction’, in: idem (ed.), *Cultures of violence. Interpersonal violence in historical perspective*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2007, pp. 23, 27; J.C. Wood, ‘Conceptualizing cultures of violence and cultural change’ in: Carroll (ed.), *Cultures of violence*, cit., p. 87.

Perhaps verbal aggression by men and women differed less in its function, than in the way that it was received. While the court records attest to women's ability and audacity in violently confronting their male and female adversaries for a wide range of socio-economic motives, the testimonies reveal that it was nonetheless considered 'unladylike' comportment that was explicitly frowned upon by contemporaries.²⁷ By acting aggressively, women disrupted order in a practical sense, as well as normatively by defying their prescribed gender roles. Nevertheless, the denunciations reveal this practice was far too common to be viewed as an anomaly.

The gendered vocabulary of insults

Scholarship has often discussed women's insults in relation to morality. This is part due to the form and type of verbal affronts. Peter Burke convincingly argued that while insults can be viewed as breaches of social and cultural codes of conduct, they did follow cultural rules and conventions 'as closely as a sonnet'.²⁸ Indeed, in early modern Italy the lexicon of insults drew from a 'stereotyped, gender-loaded stockpile of invectives which both women and men adapted according to the needs of the situation'.²⁹ Defamatory speech therefore followed gendered conventions and value systems.

Research on towns all over medieval and early modern Europe has distinguished a basic division between the insults directed at women and those directed at men.³⁰ Evidence both from secular and ecclesiastical courts suggests that the terms of insult against women were often sexual in form.³¹ Research on medieval Todi and late-medieval Bologna suggest that insults to women were indeed overwhelmingly sexual, impugning her as some variant of a whore, adulteress or procuress.³² Slurs for women in early modern Bologna also regularly referred to their sexual honour and, as Giancarlo Angelozzi and Cesarina Casanova remarked, often concerned a substantial subordination to the dominant masculine cultural model: 'puttana' (whore), 'buzzerona' (a woman dedicated to sodomite practices), 'sfondata' (worn out), 'porca' (sow), 'vacca' (cow) and 'ruffiana' (pimp) were the most common abuses used for women.³³

A traditional understanding of these slanderous words is that they directly called into question the sexual reputation of their victim. Since a woman's moral value was bound up in her sexual status and role as a producer of legitimate heirs, defamers would consciously draw upon the specific, gendered meanings of words such as "whore" or "cuckold" to make their insults as effective as possible, exposing the private acts of their victims.³⁴ More recently, however, scholars working on early modern England, Germany and Spain have argued that sexualized insult was only obliquely related to women's actual sexual behaviours. Sexualized insults actually

²⁷ Cohen, 'Honor and gender', cit., pp. 133-134.

²⁸ P. Burke, *The historical anthropology of early modern Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 96.

²⁹ Strocchia, 'Gender and the rites of honour', cit., p. 54.

³⁰ D. Garrioch, 'Verbal insults in eighteenth-century Paris', in: P. Burke & R. Porter (eds.), *The social history of language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 104-119; J. Sharpe, *Defamation and sexual slander in early modern England: The church courts at York*, York, University of York, 1972, p. 15; Horodowich, *Language and statecraft*, cit., p. 99.

³¹ Gowing, *Domestic dangers*, cit., pp. 59-138; Lipscomb, 'Crossing boundaries', cit., p. 417; Taylor, 'Women, honor and violence', cit., p. 1083.

³² T. Dean, 'Gender and insult in an Italian city: Bologna in the later middle ages', in: *Social history*, 29, 2 (2004), pp. 219, 231; Lesnick, 'Insults and threats', cit., p. 71.

³³ Angelozzi & Casanova, *Donne criminali*, cit., p. 74.

³⁴ As for example argued by M.R. Greenshields, *An economy of violence in early modern France. Crime and justice in the Haute Auvergne, 1587-1664*, Oxford, British Library, 1986, p. 233.

represented concerns about a wide range of economic and social resources, such as financial extravagance or economic independence.³⁵

Occasionally the slurs recorded in the Bolognese court records referred to the (surmised or imputed) sexual behaviours of the female recipients. In 1725 some of her neighbours shouted ‘parole ingiuriose trattandomi da donna poco da bene’ at Rosa, an unmarried daughter of Domenico Mazzoni. She had been standing in the doorway of her apartment building talking to a young man she describes as her friend and her neighbours had disapproved of the conversation and, implicitly, what it could lead to.³⁶ Conversely, sexual probity garnered the same result in a case from 1675. Anna Maria, wife of Angelo Michele Capelli, refused to have sexual intercourse with barber Giovanni Battista Bordani, explaining she was a ‘donna honorata, e da bene’. Anna Maria declared that after this rejection, Giovanni Battista started calling her a ‘puttana bizzarona e simile, e minaccio di darmi de pugni, perche non volevo acconsentire alle sue voglie’.³⁷

More often than not, however, these insults pertained to a wide range of social and economic behaviours outside of the sphere of sexual behaviours. In 1653, Maria, wife of Giovanni Battista Chiarini, was called a ‘bizzarona infame puttana et altre parole simile’ by the son of a man who had an outstanding debt with her husband.³⁸ Similarly, a year earlier the carpenter Horatio Foglia called his direct neighbour Domenica, wife of Battista Secchandi, not only a ‘ladra’ but also ‘una puttana’ after accusing her of stealing wine from their shared cellar.³⁹ Aside from disputes over debts and possessions, another example from 1674 demonstrates how sexualised slurs were also used in the context of mundane neighbourhood enmities. The mother and sister of Anna Maria, wife of Antonio Caballi, were coming over to visit her apartment and knocked loudly on the door and windows. These loud noises vexed her neighbours Giorgio, Giovanna and Elena Bonetti to such an extent that they started shouting insults to Anna Maria and ‘Giulia mia madre et Antonia Maria mia sorella, con dirci che siamo tutte puttane, e barone nonostante che detta mia sorella sia putta zitella honorata, e da bene’.⁴⁰ Rather than implying knowledge about actual sexual impurity, this case demonstrates how the sexualised rhetoric of honour and dishonour could be employed as a tool in the pursuit of a broader range of social and economic interests.

As a rule, insults against men were more varied. Men were also called ‘bastardo’ (bastard), ‘becco’ (cuckold) or ‘becco fottuto’ (fucking cuckold) in Bologna, but it is clear that these sexual insults were essentially female-centred, aiming to ridicule men’s affiliation with women who did not adhere to the sexual mores.⁴¹ Similar to what has been argued for insulted women, these verbal affronts did generally not infer actual sexual transgressions. Again, they consisted of stock insults suitable for a wide spectrum of circumstances, ranging from theft and outstanding debts to noise complaints. For example, in 1652 Sabattino Alterino caught sight of Anna and her son Pellegrino on the lawn behind his house. Commenting that they would crush his grass, they started calling Sabattino ‘villanie, cioe razza di becco ladro, et simile, et che ho da figliole che sono puttane’, which offended him ‘per essere un huomo honorato’.⁴²

Men often also received non-sexual insults, referring to their honesty or ability to carry out a profession. Men in medieval Todi were often called “liar”, “thief” and

³⁵ Gowing, *Domestic dangers*, cit., pp. 115, 118; Taylor, ‘Women, honor and violence’, cit., pp. 1084-1085; Rublack, *The crimes of women*, cit., p. 26.

³⁶ ASBo, Tribunale del Torrione, Atti e processi, Busta 7869-1, folio 201.

³⁷ *Ivi*, Busta 7028, folio 178-179.

³⁸ *Ivi*, Busta 6653, folio 41.

³⁹ *Ivi*, Busta 6609, folio 254.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, Busta 7028, folio 80-81.

⁴¹ Strocchia, ‘Gender and the rites of honour’, cit., p. 54; Dean, ‘Gender and insult’, cit., p. 221.

⁴² ASBo, Tribunale del Torrione, Atti e processi, Busta 6609, folio 209.

“crook”, accusations that undermined their economic credibility and called into question their success and stature as a merchant, tradesman, artisan or labourer.⁴³ In early modern Bologna men were also commonly insulted with these “economic” aspects of their good or bad reputation: ‘ladro’ (thief), ‘barone’ (scoundrel), ‘birichino’ (rascal), ‘poltrone’ (good-for-nothing), ‘guidone’ (scumbag) and ‘furbo’ (crook). Vincenzo Tura was for example called a ‘guidone, un fallito, et un traditore’ by Nicolo Mini in 1705. He had failed to pay off the still outstanding amount of 30 lire for a house his father had purchased from him, making the references to his economic failure befitting.⁴⁴ In other cases, the connection between the direct meaning of the slur and the behaviour was less clear, suggesting that these verbal affronts could be used at random, and in a range of different combinations.

Injurious words such as ‘ladra’, ‘poltrona’ or ‘barona’ were also hurled at women. However, both the late-medieval and early modern Bolognese court records suggest that this non-sexual form of slur was used less commonly for women than for men and, furthermore, that the vocabulary of affront was less varied and more repetitive when directed at women than the insults directed at men.⁴⁵ Alongside gendered differences in the repertoire of verbal affront, part of the reason for the ‘semantic poverty’ of insults towards women may be found in the magistrates’ prosecutorial indifference.⁴⁶

Insults and the state authorities

The criminal court records support the idea that the petty violent acts among the lower classes were generally not a priority to the authorities. Many of the court records merely mention the exchange of “injurious words” (‘parole ingiuriose’), “dishonest words”, “impolitenesses” (‘villanie’) or “insolent remarks” (‘insolenze’), without specifying what words had been used exactly. When specific slurs were jotted down by the notaries, it was rather imprecise and summarily, with some examples of slurs followed by ‘ed alter simile’. As discussed, the potential harm of verbal injuries to the honour and reputation of individuals and their families was widely recognized. The harsh sentences that the criminal bylaws prescribed bore witness to the fear of violent retaliation and vendetta that insults could bring forth as easily as physical affront could. But while the defamation of a social superior was generally taken very seriously by the authorities, verbal aggressions among commoners of roughly equal status was not.⁴⁷ It was exactly this group that made up the bulk of those appearing before the criminal court. That the majority of these affronts would not be prosecuted in an inquisitorial trial may have influenced how notaries documented the denunciations.

These mechanisms of disregard were likely exacerbated for women. Women’s assumed “weaker nature” and judicial minority derived from Roman law may well have caused their violent behaviours to have been taken less seriously than men’s.⁴⁸ In the Bolognese countryside, the village’s local bailiffs (*massari*) are believed to have been reluctant to relay women’s complaints to the criminal court, as their concerns were

⁴³ Lesnick, ‘Insults and threats’, cit., p. 71.

⁴⁴ ASBo, Tribunale del Torrione, Atti e processi, Busta 7608-1, folio 197-198.

⁴⁵ Dean, ‘Gender and insult’, cit., p. 226; Angelozzi & Casanova, *Donne criminali*, cit., p. 75.

⁴⁶ Dean, ‘Gender and insult’, cit., p. 226.

⁴⁷ Burke, *The historical anthropology of early modern Italy*, cit., p. 99. For the insults against nobles and state officials that were taken seriously and prosecuted by the state authorities, see Horodowich, *Language and statecraft*, cit., pp. 105-112.

⁴⁸ For more on women’s legal position according to Renaissance jurists, see M. Graziosi, “Fragilitas sexus”. Alle origine della costruzione giuridica dell’inferiorità delle donne’, in: N.M. Filippini, T. Plebani & A. Scattigno (eds.), *Corpi e storia. Donne e uomini dal mondo antico all’età contemporanea*, Roma, Viella, 2002, pp. 19-38.

more likely to be perceived as unimportant and unworthy of the time investment.⁴⁹ Similarly, the lack of female offenders prosecuted for verbal injury by Venice's Avogaria di comun probably also have had less to do with the hypothetical confinement of women to the domestic arena than with an administrative disregard.⁵⁰ It is not difficult to reconcile the notion of a magistracy seeking to protect civic order and the stability of the state with a judicial paternalism towards women probably widely shared among court magistrates.⁵¹ At times this judicial paternalism resulted in less harsh sentencing, and other times in women not being prosecuted at all.

As mentioned before, most litigants did not seek out the criminal court to pursue their complaints about insults to a full criminal trial. Some scholars have argued that taking conflicts to the judicial authorities may have been particularly appealing to those with a marginal position in society. In her examination of sixteenth-century Rome, Elizabeth Cohen asserts that while established householders might resolve attacks to honour through other routes, prostitutes found in the criminal tribunal a 'public and socially sanctioned forum in which to air their grievances and, within the conventions of honour culture, to spread shame on their attackers'.⁵² For early modern Bologna there is little evidence that those appealing to the criminal court belonged to a particularly disreputable segment of the urban lower classes. Yet the mechanism that Cohen identifies may be comparable. By bringing their grievances to the criminal court, Bologna's common labourers and small-time artisans hoped to gain additional leverage in often long-term conflicts with their social peers. What they expected from the law was not an intervention by the authorities per se, but an advancement of their extrajudicial settlement.

Strategies like these worked because aggressors did not consider a criminal complaint against them a triviality. The court records recount defendants pleading with plaintiffs to withdraw their complaints, sometimes even years after the fact, describing these complaints as a burden that weighed heavily on them.⁵³ Court testimonies furthermore report defendants physically chasing plaintiffs down the streets in anger after finding out that the plaintiffs had taken recourse to the criminal court.⁵⁴ Involving the law was clearly not taken lightly.

While recourse to the criminal court may have been a common strategy to enhance one's social bargaining power, it was also frowned upon on a broader social scale. Such sentiments were not only reflected in the aforementioned disgruntled responses by those incriminated in denunciations, but the political dimension was also in a tangible way incorporated into the vocabulary of verbal affront. There is evidence for early modern Bologna, Rome and Venice that the corpus of insults was complemented with invectives of "traitor" and, above all, "spy" ('spia').⁵⁵ 'Spia' was a serious insult because it conjured up associations with the inquisition and oppressive social control.⁵⁶ Locally, within the Papal States, the insult furthermore specifically alleged deceitful collusion with the foreign "operators of justice"; represented in Bologna by the Torrone and its *sbirri* (early modern lawmen). Of course, local officials

⁴⁹ Angelozzi & Casanova, *Donne criminali*, cit., pp. 70, 257.

⁵⁰ The cautious suggestion regarding women's confinement to the domestic arena was put forward in Horodowich, *Language and statecraft*, cit., p. 101.

⁵¹ For the notion of judicial paternalism, see C. Casanova, 'Crimini di donne, giudici benevoli (Bologna XVI-XVIII secolo)', in: *Historia et ius*, 9 (2016), p. 3.

⁵² Cohen, 'Honor and gender', cit., p. 624.

⁵³ ASBo, Tribunale del Torrone, Busta 7606-1, fascicolo 278; fascicolo 81.

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, Busta 7028, fascicolo 254-255; Busta 7869-1, folio 96.

⁵⁵ E.S. Cohen & T.V. Cohen, *Words and deeds in Renaissance Rome trials before the papal magistrates*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993, pp. 159-187; Angelozzi & Casanova, *Donne criminali*, cit., p. 76.

⁵⁶ Rose, *Homicide in North Italy*, cit., p. 214; Horodowich, *Language and statecraft*, cit., p. 100.

or others working directly for the authorities formed the most obvious target of these slurs. The denunciation by Stefano a Porta, a local bailiff of the Via Nuova in Bologna's inner-mural parish of San Giorgio, from the early 1650s is illustrative in this regard. While investigating a brawl that had taken place in his district, he encountered the day-labourer Giovanni Monti, who upon questioning started called him so much as a 'fucking cuckold spy and a thief who was a spy as his profession'.⁵⁷ People who performed duties for the court, like the aforementioned Domenico Antonio, were understandably similarly targeted with these kinds of slurs.

This particular kind of slander extended beyond these actual officials to the wide range of ordinary labourers (textile workers, cobblers, tanners and so on) who merely took recourse to the law. Although this specific form of verbal aggression was most prevalent among male recipients, there is ample evidence that the contempt for cooperating with the criminal court was shared equally by men and women of all social classes.⁵⁸ The example from the beginning of this article, in which Angela accused her neighbour Maria of having acted as a spy (*fare la spia*) after having her incarcerated for her previous misbehaviour is a good example of this.⁵⁹

The contempt for taking recourse to the law can be attributed to a combination of cultural and political factors. Firstly, traditional understandings of honourable behaviour precluded the use of criminal courts. According to the *scienza cavalleresca*, i.e. the laws of honour which governed gentlemanly conduct first codified in the 1550s but still widely discussed in eighteenth-century Italy, a man of honour was required to punish offences without recourse to the law because a true gentleman demanded satisfaction for himself rather than punishment by a third party.⁶⁰ Even though these codes formally only pertained to the honour of gentlemen, there were broader social and political tensions that made both conceptions of honour and using the law a contested affair for men and women of all social standings.

Secondly, many of the new regimes that emerged in Italy during the first half of the sixteenth century lacked legitimacy and struggled to collaborate with local elites.⁶¹ Bologna was governed by a 'governo misto' in which the papal Legate – a cardinal installed as a city governor by the Pope – worked in cooperation with the civic Bolognese Senate. Being ruled by priests was widely resented and in the eyes of parts of the population the Pope (and consequently the papal government) represented a foreign despot.⁶² Because the Torrone was in the hands of the papal authorities, involving this "foreign" institution rather than resolving a conflict informally was regarded a deplorable "collaboration". Recourse to the law was thus both very efficient particularly because of this external leverage, but also, ultimately, morally reprehensible. While the continued use of 'spia' and 'fare la spia' as insults throughout the eighteenth century suggest that the contempt was deep-seated, the use of law courts by those seeking to resolve disputes over insults and other forms of petty aggression increased as well. The frequent occurrence of these particular types of slurs therefore ultimately reflected the Bolognese community's interaction with an expanding state.

⁵⁷ ASBo, Tribunale del Torrone, Atti e processi, Busta 6609, fascicolo 142: '[...] et esso subito mi ha ingiuriato di parole dicendome spia becca fotuta, ladro, dicendome inoltre ch'io vada a fare la spia, ch'è mio mestiere'.

⁵⁸ Angelozzi & Casanova, *Donne criminali*, cit., p. 76.

⁵⁹ ASBo, Tribunale del Torrone, Atti e processi, Busta 7869-1, fascicolo 163.

⁶⁰ Carroll, 'Revenge and reconciliation', cit., pp. 102, 113.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 106.

⁶² G. Angelozzi & C. Casanova, 'Il tribunale criminale di Bologna' in: M. Cavina (ed.), *La giustizia criminale nell'Italia moderna (XVI-XVIII sec.)*, Bologna, Pàtron Editore, 2012, pp. 252-253.

Conclusion

The seemingly simple insult from one woman to her neighbour in eighteenth-century Bologna at the start of this article is in many ways illustrative for the relationship between insults, gender, and the politics of everyday life in this papal city. Accused of verbal abuse, Angela Monti was one of the many women who violated the gender norms prescribing passivity in these kinds of everyday encounters. The realities of working women's lives did not permit the honourable enclosure prescribed in conduct books, religious texts and commentaries. The discrepancy between norms and practice is echoed in the denunciations to the Tribunale del Torrione, which detail the aggressive words and deeds that bolognesi deemed sufficiently bothersome to complain about. Making up approximately one-fifth of the defendants and litigants of recorded verbal affront, early modern Italian women are protagonists worth being studied.

When Angela called Maria names, she was able to draw on a lexicon of injurious words that closely followed gendered conventions and value systems. By referring to a married woman like Maria as a 'puttana', she made use of the gender-loaded stockpile of invectives that carried over from the patriarchal cultural norms that morally valued women all over premodern Europe by their sexual honour. Offenders like Angela most likely drew on this stereotypical and sexualised imagery not necessarily to criticise her opponent's actual sexual probity. Instead, the sexualised slurs were used as a tool, as a means to an end, to denote other types of behaviours such as financial extravagance or social or economic independence.

In assessing the relationship between gender and the culture of insults, it is important to look not only at the differences between men and women, but also to pay attention to the similarities that existed between them. After all, while the sexualised form of the bulk of insults to women appears to have been rather uniform throughout medieval and early modern Europe, particular insults had specific cultural and political connotations and histories. Bolognesi denounced transgressive words and deeds to the state-sanctioned criminal court to enhance their social leverage, even though this act in itself defied older community norms regarding conflict resolution. This culture, in which using the criminal court was both commonplace and despised, was shared among men and women. 'Fare la spia', of which Angela accused Maria, is an important example of how particularities of a local culture could impact the lexicon of insult in a similar way for men and women.

A larger comparative question – whether Italian women were less or more assertive in verbal affront than their northern counterparts – remains open. But, as has also been argued for women's use of the urban space, a more interesting inquiry does not necessarily only ask how much, but also who, in what context, and how.⁶³ While masculine and feminine forms of speech and behaviours are certainly present in early modern Italy, they should be explored alongside a broad spectrum of shared, similar behaviours.

⁶³ Cohen, 'To pray, to work, to hear, to speak', cit., p. 311.

Keywords

Women, gender, insults, crime, Bologna

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RIASSUNTO

Puttana, ladro e becco spia

Insulti, genere e politica della vita quotidiana nella Bologna della prima età moderna

Quest'articolo indaga il rapporto tra affronto verbale, genere e agentività legale nella Bologna della prima età moderna. Per molto tempo gli studiosi hanno trascurato di considerare l'impegno delle donne nell'attività criminale, o ne hanno sottolineato la distinzione. In tale contesto l'insulto è spesso stato caratterizzato una forma criminale tipicamente femminile e considerato in rapporto all'incapacità delle donne di agire in altri ambiti sociali, economici e politici della vita. Il presente studio intende sottoporre a meditazione critica tale assunto, esaminando il linguaggio e la pratica dell'affronto verbale quale discorso deviante attraverso il casellario giudiziario del Tribunale del Torrione, la corte penale di Bologna nella prima età moderna. Mentre tale fonte conferma l'esistenza di un lessico altamente sessista degli insulti, si sostiene che l'insulto maschile e femminile non vadano trattati distintamente, dal momento che i protagonisti maschili e quelle femminili attinsero a un ampio spettro di convenzioni e pratiche culturali condivise che vale la pena di esplorare.