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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS
Caroline Walker Bynum, and Nancy Bradley Warren. She examines gender, law, and female agency while also filling the gaps left by the records with scholarship on female spirituality, penitential practice, and the impact of natural disasters. Readers and students unfamiliar with female religious life will find *Apostate Nuns* accessible and engaging. Scholars and educators will find it a useful teaching tool with its many examples and anecdotes to facilitate class discussion.

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Medieval prostitution was more than just a trace social element: the entire life of prostitutes, including relationships, self-esteem, religious beliefs, morality, and social position, were all defined by the fact that they and their communities had decided that they would exchange sex for money. Yet, as Maria Serena Mazzi argues in this brief study, we actually know little about the motivations that led women into prostitution, or how they lived once there. Was it due to choice, or circumstance, or coercion (viii)? Whatever the reason women ended up on this path, prostitution was a consistent and remarkably prominent aspect of medieval urban life. As Mazzi justifies her study, the endurance of the phenomenon alone suggests we (and medieval people) cannot do without it (ix).

Originally published as *La mala vita: Donne publiche del medievale*, the book is organized into three sections consisting of twelve chapters of sometimes less than ten pages each. Mazzi’s archival base is drawn almost entirely from Florentine civic registers, statutes, police records, and censuses, though her argument is largely pieced together via secondary literature. From these other sources she includes Italian cities (primarily Perugia, Ferrara, and Pistoia), medieval urban Spain, France, and from time to time, northern European cities as well.

Chapter 1 captures much of Mazzi’s argument: the primary reason that prostitution has always been so controversial, she explains,
is due to its ambiguity. However, much of the vocabulary associated with prostitution is hardly ambiguous, and indeed is quite specific: the simple *puta* (a woman who operated out of a household), was distinct from the *puta de canton* (the corner whore), the *puta de posada* (the tavern whore), the *puta de calleja* (street whore), and of course the *puta de cementerio* (“the woman who hid in mysterious places inhabited by the dead”) (6). Many of the names within this lexicon of slurs evoked an “olfactory distain,” emphasizing the Latin root *putidum*, or “dirty, foul-smelling” (7). Mazzi then moves on to institutional perceptions: chapter 2 focuses on the Church and the ways in which theologians offered a theoretical base of support for laws targeting prostitutes. Many civic laws were written in the wake of the disasters of the fourteenth century and reflected the fear that prostitutes might attract divine wrath. Yet ultimately the Church tolerated prostitution (even if it was despicable) and supported taxing and tithing prostitutes. Chapter 3 delves further into the legal ambivalence towards prostitution through a discussion of urban crime against women in the later Middle Ages. Though leaders argued that brothels served a purpose in containing the lust of (ideally, unmarried) men, brothels actually created spaces of “exploitation, criminality, and misery” (32).

Section two transitions into the social definition of the trade: chapters 4 and 6 examine the boundaries of prostitution and how officially recognized public women were enclosed or excluded from certain sectors of the city. Chapter 5 surveys how public women were identified as such: unsurprisingly, this rested primarily with witnesses who “acted . . . as interpreters of public opinion,” testifying how a woman’s community had often already decided that she acted like a prostitute, and therefore should legally be categorized as such (52). Chapter 7 discusses the taxation and licensing of brothels. Section three returns to many of these themes, albeit from a spatial perspective: chapter 8 examines the establishment of municipal bordellos, particularly in Montpelier and Castilla/León. Chapter 9 compares urban prostitution with urban slavery, at which point Mazzi presents what is possibly one of the most striking archival details of the book: in 1488, a young Florentine girl named Sandra was sold to a brothel for the “equivalent of the cost of a donkey.” Like so many of the women that populate Mazzi’s book, the absence of more information almost says more about the misery of urban prostitution than would more details.

The final section presents a range of minutiae concerning the life and experience of prostitutes, particularly on how they were often kept
in near economic slavery. As chapter 10 explains, most prostitutes (and pimps) were foreigners in the cities they inhabited; consequently, women depended on their keepers for nearly everything and could be fined if they broke the conditions of their agreements. Owing money for clothes, room and board, and taxes to the state, prostitutes were kept in a near “chronic state of indebtedness” (121), and their debts could be bought or sold by anyone. Chapter 11 returns to several of the topics introduced earlier and continues to explore how violence marked these women. Almost as an afterthought, chapter 12 concludes with a brief discussion of houses of repentance; even in a society which viewed prostitution as necessary, repentance and conversion were burdens placed only on the women (147).

As a translation, the book preserves much of the structure and tone of the original Italian, sometimes relentlessly so: the argument is heavily couched in the same ambiguity that Mazzi contends was a defining characteristic of the profession itself, and many sentences are long and difficult to parse. For instance: “The spatial distribution of prostitutes in the city was aimed at limiting and distancing displays, judged to be scandalous, from the most sensitive areas of the city with the added intention, not always stated, of also hiding the clients from view, essentially to conceal the commercial transaction, which was judged to be not quite honourable or respectable, for the good name and prestige of the municipalities and governments” (61). The chapters tend to jump back and forth topically, and Mazzi is prone to generalizations, both in geography and in sources. Still, *A Life of Ill Repute* is a decent synthesis of the state of the field, enhanced through a careful presentation of important Florentine civic sources. The detail (and indeed, juiciness) of the variety of names for prostitutes and the tidbits on how they were treated and lived makes this book a good reference for sourcing anecdotes for lectures or other research on this topic.

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