

EARTHLY MADONNAS?  
WOMEN TROUBLEMAKERS IN 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
MALTA

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In the criminal reports and court proceedings of the eighteenth century one comes across a large number of women, almost equal to the number of men, getting into all kinds of trouble. In many cases women were the victims of injustices and criminal acts. However at other times it was the women themselves who were personally involved and committed the crimes. Although their own legal rights were limited, women regardless of marital status, could be sued in the same way as men. For example, court records show that women were sued in civil law in such matters as the non-payment of debts and illicit gambling in their taverns. Accusations against women both from Valletta and the villages included those of abusive and blasphemous conduct, drunkenness, theft offense, smolesting, fighting and beating up people. Punishments took the form of fines, warnings as well as imprisonment, incarceration in a *conservatorio* and even exile to Gozo.

From the large number of instances of imprisonment of women found throughout the eighteenth century, the population in the women's prison must have been impressive. Unfortunately it is impossible to check the actual figure, since no published records of the prison population of the eighteenth century exists. One need not, in fact be too surprised at a huge number of women prisoners in the eighteenth century, considering that for example a mere 76 years ago in 1921, there was a total of 480 women prisoners in Malta.<sup>1</sup> This figure is relatively high for Malta's 1921 population of 210,000, especially since for the past twenty years the average number of women prisoners has been in the region of 10!

One explanation for a large number of 18th century prisoners might be that women were imprisoned for reasons which we would today consider minor offenses.

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Margerita Crocco<sup>2</sup> was caught by the Court Sergeant with a hen which did not belong to her. As she was very poor it was assumed that she had stolen the hen, while on the other hand she insisted that she had found it on her doorstep and was just about to return it to the owner. Nevertheless she was found guilty of the crime and imprisoned for three months in the prison of the Castellania.

In Malta the Roman Catholic Church was a very dominant factor which tended to view 'decent' and 'honorable' women as primarily being mothers and wives and strongly condemned those who failed to adhere to this prevailing view of women. With this background the authorities and the Maltese themselves held a particularly stern view of women who committed the slightest act which was considered immoral. A woman's reputation and public image were crucial factors in labeling her guilty or not. Even when not quite relevant to the case, one finds various statements by parish priests and neighbours praising the accused woman in question as being a virgin, an honest woman of very good moral character or denouncing her of having very low moral standards.

On the other hand one cannot hold too rigid a view over what was accepted or not of women's behaviour in eighteenth century Malta. Surprisingly, some things which we would not tolerate today seem to have been taken for granted by the people living in Malta in the eighteenth century. Although prostitutes were frowned upon they seem to have been accepted as part of eighteenth century society. In court cases women openly refer to themselves as prostitutes, apparently without any embarrassment and it is interesting to note that not one example was found of an unmarried woman being imprisoned for the sole reason that she was a prostitute.

Claudio Bonnici<sup>3</sup> in 1749 was very friendly with Giuseppa Lave, a Sicilian woman. This did not prevent him from referring to her as a public prostitute. He reported to the Inquisitor that while visiting her on one occasion he found her very ill. To ease her suffering he started praying to the church and to some saints. He reported Guiseppa that he had overheard her cursing the Church and the saints. He reported her cursing but not that she worked as a prostitute which was only briefly and casually mentioned at the beginning of the case. Perhaps the reason for this was because the jurisdiction of the Inquisition was limited solely to matters of a religious nature, prostitution would fall under the jurisdiction of the Castellania.

In 1715 Albimo Vassalli<sup>4</sup> repeatedly took men to Maria Mizzi's house

for them to have sex with her. What prompted Maria to bring a case against Vassallo was the fact that she could not refuse anyone, for Albimo forced her every time even against her wishes. When answering the charge, Vassallo the accused pleaded, "but Maria is a public prostitute!" To him this reply justified everything he had done.

A frequent charge brought against women in the eighteenth century was that of theft. Women were charged not only with petty thefts, mainly foodstuffs, household goods and clothing but also with stealing gold, silver and jewellery. Many women used to work as servants in private households and were trusted with the running of the house. This offered them a golden opportunity to steal in an unperceived way by slowly putting things aside in the hope that they would not be missed. Amongst the servants who stole from their employees one finds Rosa Galdes<sup>5</sup> who was accused in 1793 of stealing from the house of Christina Seychell where she worked as a maid. In 1787, Theresia Valvo<sup>6</sup> was robbed by her servant Giuseppa. In a long list which included over fifty stolen items, Valvo mentions silver earrings, silk stockings, mantles, ladies' shirts, hats, white handkerchiefs, napkins, towels and linen. One thief who struck not one house but several was Maria Vella.<sup>7</sup> She stole clothes and linen from all the different people she worked for. Amongst her employers was Giovanni Damico who had employed her for thirteen months. Signora Enriona and Antonio Levon both from Zebbug, who employed her - the first for thirteen months and the second for fourteen months accused her of being a thief. Vella, a Gozitan, was apprehended in 1701 before she could steal any more goods. As a punishment she was exiled to Gozo and prohibited from ever returning to Malta again.

When it came to robbing and stealing, women at times worked with accomplices. In 1794 Joannes Mamo<sup>8</sup> of Valletta found the doors of his house open and on entering the dining room he realised that he had been robbed of four silver posate (kitchen utensils), four silver spoons and four silver forks. A neighbour told how she had seen a man dressed in white and two women open and enter Mamo's house. Caruana, a Valletta jeweller, recalled how two women had come to his shop and tried to sell two silver posate to him. He had refused them since the wares were not the type he dealt with. Apparently the women were never caught, Caruana's description of them having been of little help.

Women sometimes executed their thefts with great skill and cunning. They achieved their aim by fairly elaborate plans and one might call them

the female counter part of 'con-men'. Such a woman was Paulica Demicoli<sup>9</sup>, who in 1744 managed to steal various objects from Thomas Mifsud of Bormula. Amongst the many things which were stolen there were: four walking sticks, men's and women's silk stockings of various colours, an Indian blanket, a white embroidered sheet, thirteen Maltese cotton caps, two pieces of Indian curtain and a cutting of bed hangings made of green wool.

Paulica managed to do this by going to Mifsud's house while there was nobody there except his young daughter Maria. Paulica tricked Maria Mifsud into handing over all these objects by giving her a scudo. Paulica then talked to Maria for quite a while telling her how she appreciated what she had done for her. She also gave Maria another scudo to keep personally while telling her that a good young man named Felice was interested in her. Having been so nice to Paulica her marriage with him had been secured. When Maria's father returned home he was not amused and filed a case against Paulica demanding that all his goods be returned.

Such acts of theft demanded both daring and wit. However in a number of cases, if one believes what the women said, their actions were motivated quite simply by poverty. For example, Theresia<sup>10</sup> of Valletta who lived in a mezzanin near the soldiers' quarters in 1788, admitted that she had made a mistake by stealing from Vincenzo Agius. But she said she had no choice since she had a hungry five year old who had not eaten for three days.

The social conditions which existed in the eighteenth century constrained many women to borrow money in order to be able to make ends meet. Unfortunately a large number of these women, who were often widows, got into serious trouble when they were unable to repay their debts. Examples of women who had debts are many, for example in 1768 Carmina Brincat owed Maddalena 9 tari and 10 grani<sup>11</sup> in 1732 Eugenia Mifsud<sup>12</sup> owed a certain Gratio 17 tari, and also in 1732 a woman called Paolina<sup>13</sup> owed Teresa Abdilla 20 tari for a set of cotton socks which Teresa had worked for her. It was not only money which women borrowed. In 1791 Maria Zarb<sup>14</sup> complained that Francesca, a neighbour, had not returned a gold necklace which she had lent her. Other women like Carmela La Rosa<sup>15</sup> in 1772 could not pay the rent something which she had in common with several other women.

Court cases involving debts were often settled by the debtor being obliged to repay the borrowed sum slowly at a stipulated rate per month.

The mentioned Paolina and Eugenia Mifsud had to repay their debts at two tari per month. The Monte di Pieta was in fact set up precisely for the purpose of helping people who wished to borrow money and many were the Maltese women who made use of its services and pawned their jewellery there. In some cases certain women are referred to as 'impegnatrice Monte di Pieta' and it would appear that these women took care of the arrangements involved when someone, often other women, wished to pawn anything. One such impegnatrice Clara Darmanin<sup>16</sup> got into trouble when a woman from Vittoriosa accused her of stealing her silver sideplate which she had given to her in order to have it pawned for 4 scudi.

One major way in which women caused quite a bit of trouble in the community was through fighting and arguments. These often led to violence and to people getting beaten up as a result. In 1787, Evangelista Gauci<sup>17</sup> was attacked and beaten up by Theresa Seychel. Apparently Evangelista was hurt quite seriously. Theresa was obliged to pay for all the damage which included the medical expenses for an injured eye, all the damage done to Evangelista's property and the loss of income Evangelista suffered because she could not work at her "Rotella" (spinning wheel) for 26 days.

One particularly vicious quarrel occurred in 1738 between Theresa Borg and Maria Gulieimo.<sup>18</sup> It all started when Teresa remarked that Maria's six year old son was a bastard.. Apparently wanting to start a fight Teresa went on shouting and banging on Maria's door repeating what she had said. Maria and her mother came out and a vicious fight occurred with the mother being pushed to the ground and Teresa being bitten by Maria.

There were many factors which helped to instigate and fuel these types of quarrels. Some women like Maria Schembri<sup>19</sup> behaved in a disorderly way after drinking too heavily. In 1793 she was accused of punching Fidele Giordomina in the face while in a drunken stupor. Many of the quarrels which did not involve men, are characterised by insults, the favourite being calling the other woman a prostitute and her husband a weakling and a cuckold. These insults were often taken seriously and there seemed to exist the idea that a woman had to retaliate to save her and her family's honour.

The overcrowding of families in one building helped to create a tense atmosphere with women ready to jump at each other's throat. One area in Valletta which produced quite a few vicious quarrels and fights was the Manderaggio. Thus in 1724 Mattheola Casha<sup>20</sup> and her daughter Teresa

quarrelled with Maria known as La Basusla. La Basusla went over to the other's house, threatening to break down the door of Casha. Mattheola and her daughter came out with two "castre" (flower pots stands). Eventually it was Basusla's husband who came out and broke up the fight.

Actual violence sometimes arose on the merest trifle. Maddalena<sup>21</sup>, wife of Joseph gave Giovanna Bellini of Senglea a rotolo of cotton to be worked for her, plus two tari. Later Maddalena angrily insisted that a quarter was missing from the rotolo she had given Giovanna. She then attacked Giovanna with her hands. Maddalena also injured Giovanna's daughter Rosaria Saladina on the head with a stone which she produced from the pocket of her dress.

Many of these cases involve women alone. However examples can easily be produced of women taking the initiative and quarrelling with men other than their husbands. In 1724 Gio Maria Gafa<sup>22</sup> sought refuge in the church of Santa Lucia in Valletta because he was afraid of the consequences of a quarrel he had had with a woman called Maria Giordan. He pleaded that he had never touched Maria wife of Aloysio. He had met her in a street in Valletta and she rudely demanded to know what he was doing there. He told her to leave him in peace and raised his arm as if to strike her. He was later advised by Carlo Farrugia, a sailor, that for his own good he should give himself up or seek refuge.

Some women were labelled as trouble makers. Liberata Said<sup>23</sup> was accused in 1793 of possessing a vicious tongue always ready to spread malicious gossip on her neighbours. Another woman who caused a bit of trouble was Catarina

Muscat<sup>24</sup>. In 1787, amongst other things she was warned by the court under threat of heavy punishment not to molest Don Lorenzo Mifsud and his family. She was also prohibited from entering the shop of Francesco Schembri.

Some women disturbed the neighbourhood so much that they were evicted from their house. This happened to Liberata Vassallo<sup>25</sup> from Valletta in 1781. She lived in Strada Stretta and her house faced one of the windows of a hall of the Sacra Infermeria. The Principal of the hospital complained that Liberata and her women friends were disturbing the sick with their noise, singing, shouting, dances and scandals. The Principal demanded that the sick must enjoy perfect quiet and in fact Liberata was forced to move out within 8 days. In 1784 Anna Maria Vella<sup>26</sup> and her daughter Rosa

were also evicted from their house and prohibited from living in Valletta, after the father of a young man named Vincenzo complained that Vella had introduced his son to her house and seduced him.

In 1715, an Italian buonavoglia, Juliano Tarchi<sup>27</sup> was stabbed with a knife by Rosa Bugeja. Juliano recalled how Rosa, who lived in Vittoriosa, invited him to her house together with other buonavogli, one Italian and one Corsican. Juliano said that they were all fooling about and having fun when he went over to Rosa and started joking with her by touching her face and hands. Rosa became very angry when he did this and suddenly taking out a knife she gave him a blow. She was detained in prison for twenty days.

Women like Rosa show that some Maltese women did not shirk from using weapons or violence if annoyed. These women together with the thieves, con-artists, drunks etc drift away from the stereotyped image of women which the majority of people have. Far from being timid and passive they show that they were real flesh and blood characters who definitely knew how to take care of and protect themselves.

There is no doubt that women are less deviant than men according to various criteria such as crime statistics. They tend to be more conformists than men. Yet, still, as one can see from these cases, women can at times be just as aggressive, especially since in some places in Malta's eighteenth century society, the environment in which these women lived demanded that one had to be tough in order to survive.

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#### NOTES

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