

**Report by Amy Kaminsky, Professor of Women's Studies and Global Studies,
University of Minnesota, on Deanna Shemek's presentation, "Renaissance Italy,
Isabella d'Este and Sara Copio Sullam," part 1**

Deanna Shemek began her talk with an anecdote about a fresco she came across in Ferrara, depicting a number of scantily dressed and naked figures. Popular accounts describe these transgressive figures as Jews and prostitutes. Because there is nothing in these images (or in the scholarly literature) to suggest this explanation, it is a particularly good example of the phenomenon of linking two marginal groups--sexually transgressive women and religiously transgressive men--in the popular imagination. Shemek argued convincingly that moneylenders (as a metonym for Jews) as well as prostitutes (as a metonym for women) were both necessary and despised in early modern Venetian society. As such, they were symbolically linked, as in the Ferrarese fresco. As both a woman and a Jew, the sixteenth century Venetian poet and polemicist, Sara Copio Sullam, was caught in a crossfire in which both her Jewishness and her being a woman made her both visible and suspect

Jewish moneylenders and female prostitutes were both despised and needed to maintain the social order. Christian merchants needed moneylenders to extend them the credit necessary to engage in their commercial ventures. Jewish money lending was virtually compulsory. Not only did the Catholic Church proscribe usury among its members; it claimed that Jewish law required Jews to lend at interest to non-Jews. Between the proscription of Jewish participation in skilled trades and the denial of the right to own property, Jews could only earn money buying and selling used clothes and other cast-offs, or as entertainers, physicians, or moneylenders--and the shifting economy needed moneylenders. In order to enable the growth of mercantile capitalism, merchants needed to borrow on credit against future returns.

For their part, prostitutes played an important function in channeling the non-marital sexual behavior of men, thereby assuring that property was kept in the male line generation after generation. The sexuality of those women who were going to produce legitimate heirs needed to be contained within marriage so that male inheritance could be assured; but inheritance, and therefore the means to marry, came late. "Decent" women's virginity was guarded before marriage and their chastity guarded afterwards. Non-marital sex was condoned for men, but not for women. Just as there was a need for moneylenders to foster legitimate Christian trade, there was a need for a sub-group of women, despised but needed as prostitutes, to stabilize legitimate marriage and procreation.

The similarity between the structural functions of Jews and prostitutes is made manifest in the laws governing the two. Both lending money at interest and engaging in non-marital sex occurred under the socially accepted radar, so --ironically-- laws governing Jews and prostitutes functioned to make them visible so they could be identified and controlled. Jews and prostitutes were required to wear identifying hats, veils, or other markers, and their movements were controlled. Jews had to live in the Ghetto, where they were locked in at night and on Christian feast days.

In the sixteenth century Venice was an intellectual center, a prestigious center of publishing. Many of the books that were to define the Italian Renaissance were published there, and writers sought publication there. At the same time, the traffic in and out of the Ghetto got increasingly heavy. Curious Christians came in and Jews began going out in to the city. Jews, wanting to be understood, and to increase the level of tolerance among Christians, began writing in Italian. At the same time, across Italy Christian women were becoming more visible as literary writers and intellectuals, and for some, at least, a Humanist education (including mathematics, poetry, rhetoric, and physical exercise) was promoted. Some women wrote, and a subset of those were published. Gaspara Stampa, Vittoria Gambara, Tullia d' Aragona, Laura Terracina, and Chiara Matraini, for example, all published in the 1540s and 50s, following on Vittoria Colonna's *Rime*, which was issued in 1538. Some women writers joined in the debates on women; others wrote romances, scientific studies, philosophical tracts, and prose fiction. Responses to all this writing included diffidence, accusations of plagiarism, hostility and public slander. Some of the writers provoked anxiety about class and gender boundaries: they were attacked as social climbers, or invaders of male territory. At best, some women writers were considered prodigies and curiosities. Their work has not historically been given the kind of philological scrutiny afforded to their male contemporaries, and so we know little about their writing culture; but they were published and read in their time. Since the 1980's, thanks largely to the work of feminist literary critics, these works are being reprinted and studied. (One resource is the University of Chicago Press's series on Renaissance women writers in translation.)

One of these writers was Sara Copio, born in the Ghetto toward the end of the sixteenth century. Sara was the eldest of three daughters whose father was a moneylender, merchant, and insurer of ships' cargos. When he died he willed Sara a portion of his estate for her to use as she pleased. In 1606, Sara married Jacob Sullam, from Mantua. They had no children. Both survived the plague of 1630.

Around 1612 Sara created a kind of salon, opening her house (probably located in the Ghetto Vecchio) to gatherings dedicated to discussing books and ideas. She herself was known for her interest in philosophy, especially the Neo-Platonists. From a wealthy family, with a father who believed in educating his daughter, and with no brothers to take precedence, she was the product of Humanist culture. (According to Dana Katz, Judith Baskin argues that in Italy Jewish women were more literate than their Gentile counterparts. Murray Baumgarten reports that in Jewish families without sons, some fathers taught their daughters Torah. Cynthia Baker notes that in the second and third centuries Jewish daughters were often taught Greek as a kind of ornament, and that vernacular teaching is more common for girls than for boys during much of Jewish history.)

Sara had three contretemps with Christian men, in which both her gender and her religion played a role. In 1615, a cleric, Ceba, wrote a narrative poem in heroic verse about Queen Esther. Three years later, Sara wrote to Ceba, praising the poem. During the four years of their correspondence, they exchanged portraits and poetry (hers was saved

thanks to these letters), he urged her to convert to Christianity, and she refused. Sara's poem in praise of Ceba's Queen Esther text suggests that she sees herself, another Jewish woman, reflected in Ceba's Esther.

In 1624, Bartolomeo Bonifacio, the Archdeacon of Treviso, claimed that Sara Copio Sullam did not believe in the immortality of the soul. Worried that this accusation could bring harm to the Jewish community, Copio replied with a manifesto, written in both prose and poetry. She used the rhetoric of the invective, which characteristically allows for the display of erudition and the rhetorical force of the writer. Here, as is often the case, the invective is cast as a response. Writing in self-defense, Copio speaks of coming into battle unarmed and compares herself to the biblical Abraham. She disavows writing for her own sake, but rather casts herself as the defender of her people.

In 1626, Emilio Paluzzi, a tutor she took into her home and whose medical bills she paid, published a book of verse. His friend and publisher, who also moved into the Copio Sullam house, claimed that Paluzzi wrote all of Sara's poetry. A recently discovered manuscript, probably written shortly thereafter, defends Copio's authorship.