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Words and Deeds: Gender and Social Practices of Verbal Violence in Bologna's Trial Records (1350–1385)

Studying verbal violence allows to reflect upon the construction and representation of masculinity and femininity in a given society. Gender and Language studies show that the words we use, like the way we speak, reveal a lot about the perception of social and gender order.¹ For the medieval period, historians agree that the words of insult directed against women aimed at disparaging their sexual reputation, whereas the invectives directed against men were mostly aimed at impairing their social reliability and professional honour.² As Trevor Dean has noted, in late medieval Bologna women were accused mostly of being whores (*puttana*), prostitutes (*meretrice*) and madams (*ruffiana*), while the insults directed at men accused them of being traitors (*traditore*) and thieves (*ladro*), emphasising the absence of those values typically associated with masculinity such as fidelity and loyalty.³ Scholars have rightly observed that when men were the target of sexual insults, the attack was not directly addressed to them but called into question their womenfolk's sexual honour: they were accused of pimping their wives (*ruffiano*) or else – to a lesser extent in Bologna – called sons of a prostitute or bastards (*figlio della putana, bastardo, sterpone*). In Bologna, as in other medieval societies, men, as husbands were expected to control their wives' sexuality.⁴

The way gender affects the use of language – abusive or not – in the Middle Ages has been little studied. A pioneer in the field, Trevor Dean suggested in his 2004's article on insults cases from Bologna's criminal court records that 'the contrast between men and women as speakers of insult is one between the strong and the weak'.⁵ Leaning on linguist Robin Lakoff's work on 'women's language' (1973) and on Brown and Levinson's work on politeness theory based itself on Erving Goffman's definition of 'face' (1987), Dean's study

¹ For a general introduction to the field, see Holmes and Meyerhoff, eds., *The Handbook of Language and Gender*.

² Many historical studies have been carried out on the gendered language of insult in the medieval period. The most significant are: Lesnick, 'Insults and Threats in Medieval Todi', pp. 71-89; Laura Gowing, 'Gender and the Language of Insult', pp.1-21; *Ibid.*, *Domestic Dangers*; Dean, 'Gender and Insult in an Italian City', pp. 217-231; *Ibid.*, *Crime and Justice*, p. 113-134 (Chapter 6); Sandy Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues*; Karen Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime in Late Medieval England* (Chapter 4), p. 94-128. In Italy and France studies have been carried out in the field of the history of crime, but few focus on gender issues: Nada Patrone, *Il messaggio dell'ingiuria*; *Ibid.*, 'Simbologia e realtà nelle violenze verbali del tardo Medioevo', pp. 47-87; García and Beaumatin, eds., *L'invective au Moyen Age*; Gonthier, *Sanglant Coupaul! Orde Ribaude!*; Raveggi, 'Il lessico delle ingiurie contro le donne', pp.129-150. For other areas, Madero, *Manos violentas, palabras vedadas*; Bremmer Jr, 'Insults Hurt', pp. 89–112.

³ Dean, 'Gender and insult in an Italian city', p. 219–224. Allegations against women of pimping for friars and priests or keeping a brothel in their house were also frequent.

⁴ On masculine identity, see Bullough, 'On Being a Male in the Middle Ages', pp. 31–46.

⁵ Dean, 'Gender and Insult in an Italian city', p. 231.

argues that ‘women’s insults were simpler, less powerful than men’s, and attacked negative face [i.e speaker’s desire to be unimpeded in one’s actions]; men’s insults were more complex, more varied, encompassed blasphemy and attacked both negative and positive face [i.e speaker’s desire to be approved of]. What women could do with words differed qualitatively from what men could do’.⁶ According to Dean, gender would determine the form of abusive language in the late medieval Bologna: in contrast to women, men would have been more inclined to combine different types of insults (such as elements of scatology, animality, bastardy, etc.), to use direct physical threats, expressions of revenge, to curse and cross more easily social boundaries.⁷ In other words, at the time a ‘female way’ and ‘male way’ of using abusive language existed.

However, a serial screening of Bolognese criminal court records provides a more nuanced reality.⁸ Based on an analysis of many hundreds of *verba iniuriosa* trials dating from 1350 to 1385, my research indicates that women and men resort to similar linguistic resources when it comes to insult and share, therefore, potentially the same language power.⁹ From a methodological point of view, it should be borne in mind that women’s speech is quantitatively less reported in the sources aiming at criminalising abusive language, although

⁶ Dean refers to Robin’s article on gender difference in language (‘Language and woman’s place’, *Language in Society*, II (1973), pp. 45-80), prelude to the publication of her book *Language and Woman’s Place* in 1975. Lakoff argues that women use a speech style that is powerless and therefore ‘women’s language’ reinforces female subordination in patriarchal societies. Lakoff’s analytical model has been strongly criticised by scholars for its general lack of empirical evidence. See the revised and expanded edition of 2004, Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place*. Brown and Levinson study of politeness relies on Erving Goffman’s notion of face, Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*. By being polite, speakers would attempt to “save their own face” or the “face” of the person who is talking. They would avoid “face-threatening acts” (FTAs), such as insults that constitute intentionally threatening acts. According to them, a person’s face can be positive or negative. The positive face is the need to be appreciated/accepted by others whereas the negative face is the need not to be disturbed by others. In any social interaction, speakers wanting to be polite would strive not to threaten the listener’s positive/negative face (solidarity politeness/respect politeness).

⁷ See also Dean, *Crime and Justice*, p. 115.

⁸ By sampling every five years cases judged by the Bolognese podesterial court, Melissa Vise questioned first the idea that women were “necessarily as passive as Dean presents them”, Vise, ‘The Threat of the Tongue’, p. 192.

⁹ I collected about 400 *verba iniuriosa* cases during the period from 1350 to 1385 (blasphemy against God was not counted). They all come from the criminal court records of the judge *ad maleficia* of Bologna, kept in *Archivio di Stato di Bologna, Comune, Curia del podestà, Giudici ad Maleficia*, henceforth abbreviated to ‘AsBo’, either from the *Libri inquisitionum et testium* series (henceforth *Inquisitiones*), the *Accusationes* series or the *Carte di Corredo* series. The *Inquisitiones* series is supposed to contain trials initiated *ex officio* or by denunciation of an official (*ministrales/massarii*) but it contains also trials initiated by *accusatio*, whereas the *Accusationes* series for the second half of 14th century contains mostly registers of banishment and corporal punishments *Carte di Corredo* series contains unbound parchment sheets, which record various aspects of trial procedures as transcribed by the notaries during the trial. On Bologna’s judicial records see Blanshei, *Violence and Justice*; Blanshei, ed., *A Companion to Medieval*, especially Diana Tura’s contribution (Chapter 1 ‘Archival Sources: Governmental, Judicial, Religious, Familial’). In the trials studied the Latin term for verbal abuse was given in most of cases as *verba iniuriosa*, but there are also juridical declinations of abusive vocabulary, such as: *verba contumelia*, *verba minatoria*, *verba vituperosa*, *verba infamatoria*, *verba opprobiosa*, *verba ignominiosa*, *verba inhonesta*, *verba petulantia*, *verba turpia* (these latter legal categories are present in minute proportions, often in addition to the category of *verba iniuriosa*).

crimes of speech seem to be predominantly related to females.¹⁰ That is why there are proportionately more examples to illustrate men's speech than women's, but there is no evidence that this quantitative difference is accompanied by a qualitative one. It should also be pointed out that Bolognese criminal court records usually analysed by historians do not reflect the actual abusive verbal language used at that time, especially when it comes to females. Many cases of verbal aggression involving female speakers were closed without prosecution and therefore were not recorded in the judges' registers.¹¹

Taking Dean's work as a starting point, this article aims to revise, and depart from, essentialist analyses which assume that the speaker's gender determines the characteristics and forms of his or her verbal interaction in the Middle Ages. Thanks to the advances of contemporary research in sociolinguistics, 'speakers should be seen as "doing gender" rather than statically "being" a particular gender'.¹² Rather than remarking on the stark differences between men's and women's abusive language in late medieval Bologna, I will show first the many similarities, since gender is intersected by other categories of analysis such as social class, age, education or religious allegiances.¹³ As pointed out by sociolinguists, gender as a linguistic variable never works independently of other aspects of social identity.¹⁴ In the sources examined, convicts and victims of verbal abuse shared everyday social and cultural practices, including language use. Few cases involved people from outside the community.¹⁵ Male and female citizens mentioned were almost exclusively lower-class adult speakers: artisans, local trading class or peasants from Bologna's countryside. They mostly lived in the same parish, often in the same street or under the same *portico*. By paying attention to the context of utterance described in the indictment, I will argue that verbal abuse could present an opportunity for social actors – male and female – to perform their gender identity to the

¹⁰ In a forthcoming paper in *Publications de l'École française de Rome* on 'Giudicare la violenza verbale alla fine del Medioevo: il reato di *verba iniuriosa* nei registri giudiziari bolognesi della seconda metà del Trecento (1350-1390)', I determined that women – victims and convicts, all crime included – represent about 9% of persons cited in the *Libri inquisitionum et testium's* series. In specific *verba iniuriosa* cases (1350-1390), there are about 18% of women – victims and convicts included – whereas 79% of individuals mentioned are men. In my sample of 1350-1385, women are perpetrators of *verba iniuriosa* in only 16% of cases contrary to high figures got by Lesnick on Todi's criminal records ('women fully comprised 27,5% (11 of 40) of those convicted of verbal insult or threat during 1275–1280'), Lesnick, 'Insults and threats in medieval Todi', p. 76. These differences are caused by the method used. First, my period considered is longer. Secondly, during my serial analysis, I considered all the indictment with legal mention of *verba iniuriosa*, whether it was the only charge brought or it was accompanied by other legal categories such as *percussio*, *insultus et aggressura*, *rixa et rumore*.

¹¹ *Carte di Corredo'* serie contains some of *verba iniuriosa* cases dismissed.

¹² Coates, *Women, Men and Language*, p. 5-7.

¹³ Coates, *Women, Men and Language*, p. 216-217.

¹⁴ Eckert and McConnel-Ginet, 'Communities of practice: Where language, gender, and power all live', pp. 89-99. The two linguists develop the notion of 'communities of practice' to encourage a view that connects gender and language with the social practices of particular local communities.

¹⁵ I identified only four male *forensis* convicted of verbal abuse.

community.¹⁶ By insulting a woman of being a ‘whore’ or a man of being a ‘thief’, the person – male or female – publicly alleged that his or her target did not conform to gender expectations (i.e. being a virtuous woman/an honest man), thereby asserting him/herself as a guarantor of gender norms in the community.

How Did Medieval Men and Women Insult Each Other?

Whether criticising, denouncing, threatening, cursing or reproaching, both genders as speakers of verbal abuse seem to have shared a common behavioural and linguistic code. If there is a gender difference, it occurs in the lexicon, not in the forms of verbal abuse used.

In late medieval Bologna men and women often initiated an injurious exchange by using the vulgar term of address ‘sozzo’ if they targeted a man, or ‘sozza’ if it was a woman (also spelt ‘çoço’, ‘suçço’ or ‘çoça’, ‘suçça’ according to dialectical differences). Meaning filthy, the term, which may be derived from the Latin adjective ‘*sucidus*’ (juicy, full of sap),¹⁷ was used to introduce a gendered insult:

‘*sozza putana e ruffiana*’ (‘filthy whore and madam’)¹⁸

‘*çoça putana marça va al bordello*’ (‘filthy rotten whore, go to the brothel’)¹⁹

‘*çoço traditore março per che vientu a chaxa mia*’ (‘filthy rotten traitor what brings you to my home’)²⁰

‘*sozo vechio buçirone rufiano*’ (‘filthy old bugger pimp’)²¹

This was a common term of address, employed not only in Bologna, but all over northern and central Italy.²² Expressing the speaker’s abusive intention, ‘sozzo/sozza’ aims to

¹⁶ Pragmatics in linguistics have pointed out the crucial importance of the context of utterance to feel insulted. Lagorgette, ‘Termes d’adresse, acte perlocutoire et insultes’, pp. 317–332; Lagorgette, ‘Les syntagmes nominaux d’insulte et de blasphème’, pp. 177–188 and Lagorgette, *Les insultes en français*; see also the anthropologist Larguèche, ‘L’injure comme objet anthropologique’, pp. 29–56 and Larguèche, *Espèce de... ! : les lois de l’effet injure*. On gender as performance, see Butler, *Gender trouble*.

¹⁷ See entry ‘sozzo’ of Ottorino Pianigiani’s etymological vocabulary of the Italian language, available online (<https://www.etimo.it/?term=sozzo>). However, according to the *Tesoro della lingua italiana delle origini* it would come from ‘socius’ (ally, companion) (<http://tlio.oiv.cnr.it/TLIO/>).

¹⁸ AsBo, *Inquisitiones*, busta 191, 2, fol. 52 (1360). A woman to another one.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, busta 179, 4, fol. 17 (1354). A man to a married woman

²⁰ *Ibid.*, busta 222, 4, fol. 83 (1375). A man to another one.

²¹ *Ibid.*, busta 187, 4, fol. 33 (1358). A woman to a man.

²² The nineteenth-century archivist Salvatore Bongi, who collected the vernacular injurious lexicon in medieval Lucca’s court records (1330–1384), listed many abusive sentences initiated by ‘sozzo/sozza’, Marcheschi, ed., *Ingiurie, impropri, contumelie*. Out of the 323 cases recorded, more than 80 sentences include a ‘sozzo/sozza’ address, that is in 25% of cases examined. Pär Larson did the same review work in Pistoia’s criminal court record of 1295–1296, Larson, ‘Ingiurie e villanie dagli Atti podestarili pistoiesi del 1295’, pp. 373–380. On 16 cases recorded, there are 6 occurrences. Likewise, in Marche’s criminal court records, Lett, ‘Écrire, lire et représenter la violence’, p. 113. Also present in Venetian dialect, Els Sheikh, ed., *Atti del podestà*. See also, Raveggi, ‘Il lessico delle ingiurie contro le donne’, p. 144.

call out the addressee and belittle his or her identity.²³ Past scholarship has shown that speakers and victims of verbal abuse were nearly always of similar social rank, most often neighbours or colleagues, sometimes both. Use of the familiar pronoun *tu* that often followed the term of address confirmed the social equality between the two parties.²⁴ Nevertheless, both genders could challenge the hierarchical authority. In 1384 the notary Galasso Castellani de Soldaderio went to the podesterial court thrice to denounce a boilermaker, a cobbler's wife and her son. The accused threatened to put him in jail for producing a false claim.²⁵ In each case they invoked similar elements of insults as gluttony (*ghiottone*) and called for shaming punishment, (i.e. to wear the 'mitre of shame').²⁶

Whether the slandered person was of similar or higher status, Bolognese speakers rarely diverged from the use of gendered insults. The category of 'political insults' (*proditor, traditor*) as defined by Italian historian Anna Maria Nada Patrone only targeted male actors at that time.²⁷ In the 1350s being Guelph or Ghibelline – or even being suspected of belonging to either faction – could still be a motive for verbal insult between men.²⁸ In September 1353 a certain Prando, threatening with a spear and a knife Giacomo de ser Raymocino, supposedly told him that 'he was a traitor Guelf' (*quod ipse Jacomus erat guelfus proditor*).²⁹ Similarly, 'thief' as an insult remains a masculine label in the Middle Ages. Only two references to the feminine of the word thief (*ladra*) used as an insult are recorded for the period spanning 1350

²³ As theory of subjection in philosophy highlighted, 'mark interpellation makes is not descriptive but inaugurative. It seeks to introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one', Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 33.

²⁴ '*suçço traditore et robadore che tu e*', *Ibid.*, busta 171, 3, fol. 81 (1351). A man to another. However, speakers of insult could show deference and use the polite form "*voi*" when the situation required it. In September 1365 Guglielmo son of late Giovanni, from Pizzocalvo, in the countryside, is denounced by the municipal official for having said to *domina* Giovanna, daughter of late *dominus* of Vaynerii de Samaritanis, *verba iniuriosa*: "*voi me voli forçare come faxia vostro padre*", *Ibid.*, busta 202, 1, fol. 76 [my emphasis]. In that case, insult does not lie in specific abusive words but in speaker's intuition by reference of the late father.

²⁵ The boilermaker: "*ghiottone ghioctone ladronzello marzo al sangue di dio io te faro immitriare chio bene le scripture qui in questo carnico*", *Ibid.*, busta 244, 3, fol. 52; the cobbler's wife: "*Galasso, Galasso, tu ai facto quello testamento falso, ti tu si uno falso nodoro in bona fe i te faro immetuare come falso notario, ghitone março*", *Ibid.*, busta 245, 2, fol. 80 and AsBo, *Carte di Corredo*, busta, 1984 (II semestre); The cobbler's son: "*et io sono zavatiere io sono migliore che ti che tu si iey falsso nodaro et ay fatto quello testamento falso ti che iudi che tu voy produrre in fe de dio io te faro in mitriare chomo falsso nodaro e che vo ghioto*", *Ibid.*, busta, 1384 (II semestre).

²⁶ 'ti faro immitriare' means literally 'I will make you wear the mitre of infamy [on the head]'. In my corpus, it is a common threat for fake, used by both men and women.

²⁷ Nada Patrone, *Il messaggio dell'ingiuria*, pp. 50-52.

²⁸ On the political tensions that marked the civic and institutional life of Bologna at the end of 13th and beginning of the 14th centuries (the conflict between the pro-Ghibelline Lambertazzi faction and the pro-Guelf Geremei faction), see Milani, 'From One Conflict to Another', pp. 239–259.

²⁹ AsBo, *Inquisitiones*, busta 176, 10, fol. 40. 4 occurrences referring to the Ghibelline and Guelf factions have been identified between 1350–1385, all uttered by men. No such charges have been found after 1360. In addition to below: *Ibid.*, busta 172, 11, fol. 2 (1351); *Ibid.*, busta 178, 2, fol. 13 (1354); *Ibid.*, busta 188, 5, fol. 11 (1359).

to 1385 and, it is necessary to specify, in both cases the word was uttered by women.³⁰ Labelling a woman a thief seems to have been outrageous at the time, because it implied a transgression of the gendered categories of insult. In November 1384 Catarina, a married woman, accused Lippa (diminutive of Filippa) of having insulted her using the following *verba iniuriosa*: ‘you Madona you’ve stolen things from me and these things you’ve stolen from me are in your house’.³¹ From the proceedings, we learn that Catarina retorted to Lippa: ‘you make me a thief and you say I stole the things that belong to you’. Accusing a woman of theft was a serious allegation so much so that Lippa in her defence in front of the judge clarified that she did not accuse Caterina of being a thief but allegedly said to her: ‘things have been stolen from me and these things are in your house’.³² Therefore, Lippa denied any accusation of insult or defamation and rather argued over a mere denunciation of robbery. In contrast, in the thirty-five year-period under study, accusations against men never featured feminine insults: in the Bolognese people’s mouths, the word *putana* could only qualify a feminine behaviour.³³

However, the effective scope of insults, especially against men (‘thief’, ‘traitor’), should not be overestimated.³⁴ Indeed, these insults are sometimes stripped of their original meaning to generally qualify a masculine dishonest behaviour. In December 1355 a female neighbour, Gianna Trecola, Guglielmo’s wife, went to Bartolomeo’s home alerted by a noisy conjugal quarrel and bellowed at him the following *verba contumeliosa*: ‘thief, you killed your wife’ (*latro tu interficisti uxore tuam*).³⁵ In this case the word ‘thief’ was not used as a reflection of reality or even as an insult, but it was used by Gianna as a swear word, allowing her to express the very strong emotion – anger, fear? – that she felt facing the situation. ‘*Latro*’ here has an auto-cathartic function. But the significant fact is that Gianna expressed

³⁰ *puctana marça, ruffiana e ladra che tu sey, io te rompero el capo* (‘rotten whore, madam and thief you are, I will break your head’), *Ibid.*, busta 238, 9, fol. 5 (1381); *tu Belleça si ei una ladra* (‘You Bellecia you are a thief’), AsBo, *Carte di corredo*, busta, 1384. Raveggi makes the same observation: accusations of being a *ladra* were very few in late medieval Italy, Raveggi, ‘Il lessico delle ingiurie contro le donne’, p. 146.

³¹ *de eo in eo et super eo quod dicta domina Lippa, malo modo et animo et intentione iniurandi dictam dominam Catelinam dixit et protullit eidem domine Cataline contra ipsam dominam Catelinam et in facie ipsius domine Cataline infrascripta verba iniuriosa videlicet tu madona Catalina si ma robada de le cosse mie e sia le chose che tu ma roba in cassa toa*, AsBo, *Inquisitiones*, busta 245, 1, fol. 176.

³² *ego nunquam dixi sibi quod fuisses furata res meas sed bene dixi sibi quod michi fuerat dictum quod tu habebas res meas in domo et nichil aliud dixi nec dico*, *Ibid.*, fol. 180v.

³³ *Puttana* came from the old French *putain*, itself coming from Latin adjective *putidus*, *a, um* that means rotten, spoiled. From the beginning of the 13th the gender-neutral adjective *putidus* became a noun belonging exclusively to the feminine gender in order to qualify a woman of ill repute, Le Nan, ‘Dire le genre et "le mauvais genre" au Moyen Âge’, p. 44.

³⁴ Already noted by linguists, Alfonzetti et Spampinato Beretta, ‘Gli insulti nella storia dell’italiano’, p. 12.

³⁵ AsBo, *Inquisitiones*, busta 183, 1, fol. 6.

herself in a gendered way, because ‘thief’ worked for men as ‘whore’ did for women: it is the typical male insult in medieval Italy.

Threats of physical violence and revenge, which sometimes accompanied the gendered insult, may have been perceived as a male prerogative.³⁶ The classic formula for expressing desire for revenge in late medieval Italy was ‘*te ne pagaro*’ (I’ll pay you back).³⁷ But it was used indifferently by male and female speakers and could target both genders. In April 1375, two mothers came to a fight after their young children had themselves fought. After falling to the ground one of them said to the other: “filthy rotten whore, I’ll pay you back”.³⁸ In May 1384, a mother warned a former gonfalonier that she would retaliate against him for having banished his sons from Bologna.³⁹ Like men, women could also threaten physical harm to their opponents – whether male or female. Gender is nevertheless a criterion in determining the type of physical abuse. Men could threaten to kill their male adversaries, but also to hang them, blind them or cut their tongues off, the way medieval justice used to condemn traitors, perjurers or blasphemers.⁴⁰ If they addressed a woman, they would threaten her with retribution that was also gendered, to cut her nose off or to burn her, i.e. traditional punishments for female prostitution and witchcraft.⁴¹ Women threatened their female or male opponents in similar ways.⁴² However, they never made death threats but threatened more generally to hit with any tools they had at hand, like a spindle.⁴³

Beside threats of physical violence, men and women could use very coarse language to put their opponents down. In late medieval Italy a common expression was ‘*te ne cago*’ or ‘*te*

³⁶ Dean considers revenge expression as a ‘complex insult’ and, according to him, ‘men’s insults were more complex’ than women’s, Dean, ‘Gender and Insult in an Italian City’, p. 231.

³⁷ Dean, ‘Gender and Insult in an Italian City’, p. 223.

³⁸ ‘*soça putana marça io si tene in pagaro bene mo*’, *Ibid.*, busta 224, 5, fol. 24v.

³⁹ ‘*missire Bartolomeo vui no sidi piu confaloniero e si no avidi piu la manareta driedo gotone ladro e traitore che tu ei, tu a chaçado omie fioli de sta tera ma ie se tene pagarano bene, che possa essere taiada la mane a chi to scripse per confaloniero*’, *Ibid.*, *Carte di Corredo*, busta 147, 1384 (I semestre).

⁴⁰ ‘*ladro et proditore maledicto oportet quod interficia te*’, *Ibid.*, busta 179, 1, fol. 67; ‘*soço ladro da Meçene necesse est quod faciam te suspendi*’, *Ibid.*, busta 184, 5, fol. 170 (1357); ‘*tu es latro oportet quod ego tibi adhuc crevam oculos sterpone merdose*’, *Ibid.*, busta 187, 5, fol. 33 (1358); ‘*ego faciam tibi extrahere lingua*’, *Ibid.*, busta 185, 1, fol. 15.

⁴¹ ‘*asena putana perche tui paçi tuy de mia fiola elela sie bona femina che tuy sie putana e si te lo provato, e fa bona guardia se tuy say chio te convegno taliare lo nasso dal volto e metetotelo in mane inti instesa e gardite se tu say quando dare chio te convegno ardere conessa le mie mane*’, *Ibid.*, busta 204, 12, fol. 17. On gendered punishment in Medieval times, Skinner, ‘The Gendered Nose and its Lack’ pp. 45–67; more generally on medieval retribution, Gonthier, *Le Châtiment du crime au Moyen Âge*. However, I would like to mention

⁴² ‘*maledicta meretrix tu tantum te intromicitis de factis meis quod oportet quod ego incidam tibi nasonem cum isto cultellino*’, *Ibid.*, busta 206, 4, fol. 89.

⁴³ ‘*chogoço março ladro traditore, se tu me di plu villania io te daro si de questo fluxo che tu non mangiara mai*’, *Ibid.*, busta 206, 6, fol. 15 (1368); ‘*putana marça soza assina bruta chio te convegno dare d’una manara*’, *Ibid.*, busta 204, 12, fol. 36–37.

ne cagaro’, often ‘*in gula*’ (‘I shit on you’ or ‘down your throat’).⁴⁴ Examples showing its use by men are abundant in trial records. However, sources confirm the female use of this language. In February 1353 Catarina, also called Catocia, wife of a certain Filippo, from Pontecchio, commune of Sasso Marconi, insulted Sanguino in a gendered way (‘you are a traitor and a thief’). But Catarina did not stop there: she accused Sanguino of being painted on the wall of the communal palace for perjury, just like his father had been.⁴⁵ At that time, defamatory painting was quite common in north-central Italy.⁴⁶ This imputation provoked Sanguino’s anger who threatened to denounce her to the court for using such words. Unafraid, she replied: ‘*ego ingesto tibi in gulla*’. In 1355, the district official of Santa Maria de Muradellis denounced a married woman, Chechola, for having uttered the same expression against a man.⁴⁷ Women could also complement the verbal attack with scatological epithets (*merdoso, merdosa, de merda*) as men used to do. The Bolognese corpus suggests therefore that ‘vulgar language’ use was a shared verbal practice.

Along with insults, cursing was certainly the privileged form of verbal abuse in in medieval and early modern times.⁴⁸ However, cursing did not reflect a ‘male use of language’ at that time.⁴⁹ In late medieval Italy the common form of cursing was a disease-curse. The worst misfortune was to get the *vermocane*, a disease that supposedly affected the brain, driving the victim insane.⁵⁰ In the thirty-five years under scrutiny, twenty-one disease-curses were brought to the attention of the criminal court of Bologna: nineteen were addressed to human beings and two to divinities or saints.⁵¹ Among the nineteen cursers, fourteen were males and five females corresponding to the unbalanced sex ratio provided by sources.

⁴⁴ In Latin form, another variant exists: ‘*ego inchacho tibi in gullam*’, *Ibid.*, busta 191, 1, fol. 113.

⁴⁵ ‘*tu es prodictor et latro, tu ad hunc eris pinctus in palatio pro falso, sicut fuit pater tuus*’, *Ibid.*, busta 175, 6, fol. 6. In this case the power of abusive acts does not lie in a classic face-to-face configuration but in the mobilisation of three actors, present and absent: the person who insults (Catarina), the insulted person whom she faces physically (Sanguino), and the person who, although absent during the exchange, is the object of the insult, in this case Sanguino’s father. The anthropologist Evelyne Larguèche called it ‘injure référentielle’, Larguèche, ‘L’injure comme objet anthropologique’.

⁴⁶ See Ortalli, *Pingatur in palatio*.

⁴⁷ AsBo, *Carte di Corredo*, busta 111, 1355.

⁴⁸ In his article on verbal insults in eighteenth-century Paris, David Garrioch finds no trace of such verbal attacks in archives of the *Commissaire au Châtelet*, Garrioch, ‘Verbal insults in eighteenth-century Paris’, pp. 104–119.

⁴⁹ Dean, ‘Gender and Insult in an Italian City’, p. 226. Vise’s dissertation also contradicts Dean’s interpretation, Vise by providing an example of female cursing, p. 191.

⁵⁰ *Vermocane*’s etymology refers to worms (*vermis*) and dogs (*canis*), certainly in link with intestinal worms that attacked the stomachs of animals but which, by extension, came to qualify a human disease. *Vermocane* curse is attested in all northern and central Italy e.g. in Venice see Els Sheikh, ed., *Atti del podestà*. p. 27.

⁵¹ ‘*maledicto scia deo et nascha lu vermechane a dominedio et ad despetto de domenedeo et de la matre*’ (‘Damned God and may Dominic get the *vermocane* and in the defiance of Dominic and the mother [Virgin Mary]’), AsBo, *Inquisitiones*, busta 207, 11, fol. 77 and fol. 83 (1369). It is actually one and the same man but in fol. 83, there is no mention of St. Dominic.

Women typically cursed each other, except for one who cursed a man.⁵² In order to reinforce the scope of offensiveness, the insulting person could not only wish that the disease would spread from the intimate parts – the ‘arse’ for both sexes, the ‘cunt’ for a woman – but also that it should multiply several times – a thousand times, even ten thousand times.⁵³ Trevor Dean finds in his corpus two minor forms of disease-curse: the ‘St Anthony’s fire in the face’ and the ‘I hope you get the strangles’ (*che te nasca el stranguglione*).⁵⁴ My research brings forward other variants: ‘May you get the aposteme’ (*che te nascha la postema*) in the throat (*in la gola*) or again in the ‘arse’ (*in lo culo*).⁵⁵ This imprecation had a version that invoked St Anthony too: ‘May you get St Anthony’s aposteme in the throat’ (*Che te vengina le posteme de santo Antonio in la gola*).⁵⁶ Another typical curse was: ‘May God give you the *mala Pasqua*’ (*che dio te dia le mala Pasqua*).⁵⁷ ‘*Mala Pasqua*’ literally means bad Easter, but in this context, it was a matter of predicting the worst misfortune to someone in general. Contrary to the previous curses that drew their power from the repertoire of the worst diseases of the time, the latter borders on blasphemy. Indeed, for Christians Easter commemorated the resurrection of Christ and was the most solemn event of the liturgical year.

Lastly, even a cursory linguistic analysis is not without interest since sentence construction of both male and female speakers appears to be very similar.⁵⁸ Their syntax is often disorderly and poorly constructed. The ‘e’ (‘and’) and ‘che’ (‘that’) are used excessively.⁵⁹ Both genders frequently used accumulation, the iteration of the same insult was common. Diminutive, augmentative or pejorative suffixes also abound in their sentences.⁶⁰

⁵² *te nasca el vermo chano tu e perzerto cativo ribaldo* (‘May you get the vermicane, you are a depraved nasty rogue’), AsBo, LIT, busta 219, 1, fol. 30 (1373).

⁵³ A man to another: ‘May you get a thousand *vermocane*, you are a traitor and betrayer to our lord’ (*nascantur tibi mille cani tu es proditor et proditor domini nostri*), *Ibid.*, busta 184, 5, fol. 117 (1366); a woman to another: ‘rotten whore may you get a thousand *vermocane*, you are a bastard and the daughter of a prostitute, you were excommunicated through the Pope’s mouth, filthy whore’ (*putana marça quod naschavit tibi mille vermi canes, tu es bastarda et fuisti filia unus meretricis, tu es excommunicata ab ore domini pape, soça putana*), *Ibid.*, busta 204, 12, fol. 43 (1367).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 224. The first curse refers to ergotism, the second one to a disease of the tonsils.

⁵⁵ *o te nasca la postema in le gola tu vo*, *Ibid.*, busta 183, 4, fol. 82 (1356, a man to another); *soza putana e ruffiana che tu sey chi ete nasca mille posteme in lo chulo, asena vacha stenegoxa*, *Ibid.*, busta 209, 4, fol. 223 (1370). A prostitute to a married woman.

⁵⁶ AsBo, *Inquisitiones*, busta 227, 9, fol. 40 (1377, between men). According to the *Tesoro della lingua italiana delle Origini*, it is possible to find ‘la postema’ or ‘l’apostema” (<http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO/>). The aposteme was an abscess, a purulent swelling made of humoral material, according to Galenic medicine.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, busta 206, 1, fol. 31 (1368). A man to another.

⁵⁸ The following analysis relies on the works of two Italian linguists, Alfonzetti and Spampinato Beretta, ‘Gli insulti nella storia dell’italiano’; Spampinato Beretta, ‘La violenza verbale in un corpus documentario del tardo Medioevo italiano: aspetti pragmatici’, pp. 683–694.

⁵⁹ For example: *vane putana marça che tu ei ruffiana che te nasca mile vermicani che tu ei putana e rufianase zingue donzole e dei sta conventa in palaxio da vinti homini che caschare te posa quello che tu ai in corpo a peçi a pezi che ongnon te vegna a vedere per grani mera via*, AsBo, *Inquisitiones*, busta 204, 1, fol. 87 (a woman to another); *tu menti per la golla ladro et traytore che tu ey chi ben ey ladro, che ene sera che tu veni dala*

To Insult Each Other in the Same-Gender Group

Verbal abuse, as reported in legal documentation, is a theatrical performance.⁶¹ It implies an audience, sometimes explicitly mentioned in the indictment (neighbours, spouses, children, judges and the *familia*...) and a stage: public streets, the *piazza*, the palace of Podestà, shops, etc.⁶² It should be recalled that the specific reason for producing *verba iniuriosa* cases lies in their public nature. As Anna Maria Nada Patrone has noted, domestic violence is rarely accessible to the historian.⁶³

Men's right to question women's sexuality or free mobility has been perceived as a form of male dominance. Through insults, men reminded women of their rightful place in society and the strict gender spatial segregation. They ordered them to go home ('May you get the *vermocane* and go home', 'What are you doing here, go home')⁶⁴ or to the brothel and be silent ('Shut up, rotten whore, go back to the brothel in Ferrara').⁶⁵ When women went about or walked freely in the streets, they could be insulted. In January 1370 *domina* Guida and her daughter, from St Christopher of Saragozza, walked down the street towards the church of St. Dominic. As they passed through the district of St Dominic's, Giacomo called out to them in these terms: 'Where are you going to, you dirty whores?' ('*oi andate voi putane marçe*').⁶⁶ Men could also mock women about their physical appearance and deny their beauty, an integral part of the medieval female identity ('Filthy whore, shitty cow, you will never be a beautiful woman').⁶⁷

However, it is necessary to emphasize that women themselves were the first to use insulting words and gendered injunctions to each other. In my sample, 60% of *putana* ('whore') and 70% of *ruffiana* ('madam') recorded were uttered by women.⁶⁸ Just as men did,

formaye, tu involle uno sacho de forna de fava de fara che tu veni de la formaye de fora, cogozo bruto che tu e, va cogozo e mename toa moiere che vioio montare adosso, sozo ladro veclo traditore che tu ei da Modena', Ibid., busta 207, 9, fol. 108 (a man to another) [my emphasis].

⁶⁰ For example: '*ghiottone ghioctone ladronzello marzo*', *Ibid.*, busta 244, 3, fol. 52 (a man to another).

⁶¹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. See also Vallerani, *Medieval Public Justice*.

⁶² The Inquisitorial trial is, in any case, based on the publicity of the event, according to the classic formula '*ad aures et noticiam dictorum dominorum potestates et eius iudicis mallificorum fama publica precedente et clamorosa insinuatione subsequente*'.

⁶³ Nada Patrone, *Il messaggio dell'ingiuria*, p. 23.

⁶⁴ '*o te nascha lo vermocan' a ti e che te vo in caxa*', AsBo, *Inquistiones*, busta 177, 1, 89 (1353); '*che fa tu qui, vane a caxa che deo ti dia lo male animo*', *Ibid.*, busta 185, 7, fol. 67 (1357).

⁶⁵ '*taxi taxi puctana marça va et torna et sta nello bordello a Fferrara*', *Ibid.*, busta 202, 6, fol. 16.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, busta 208, 5, fol. 49. However, Guida's daughter retorted: 'why are you acting nasty about where we are going?' ('*che va tu a fare tignoso la o noi andamo*')

⁶⁷ '*soza putana vacha merdoxa sel fose lo tempo chi foza e io sine imbratarane si lo volto che tuto lo tempo de la vita nostra mi no seresse bella femena*', *Ibid.*, busta 173, 5, fol. 84.

⁶⁸ Sixty-eight occurrences of *putana*: twenty-eight by men, forty by women; nineteen occurrences of *ruffiana*: six by men, thirteen by women.

they accused each other of being a prostitute and ordered one another to go to a brothel, in a very crude language that defies the common understanding that women expressed themselves with more restraint at that time:

‘Filthy rotten whore, go the brothel at Ancona as you are used to keep it’⁶⁹

‘You filthy rotten whores, go to the brothel to get your arse cracks scraped’ said a married woman to a widow and her two daughters, and specifically to the mother: ‘filthy rotten old pimp, take them to the brothel and get your arse cracks scraped’, and to one of daughter : ‘a rotten whore go to the brothel and get your arse cracks scraped’⁷⁰

They could also belittle one another on physical attributes:

‘Filthy fat-bottomed whore, you are an ex-whore, and a prostitute and friend of a man who keeps you fat’⁷¹.

‘Filthy rotten and stinky toothless woman, may you get ten thousand *vermocane*’⁷²

Trevor Dean does not exclude that these insults could be directed at actual prostitutes.⁷³ What is certain is that prostitutes themselves employed gendered insults.⁷⁴ This reinforces the hypothesis expressed above about the ‘desemanticization’ of some insulting words, that is the linguistic process by which the literal meaning of a word is lost. As ‘thief’ or ‘traitor’, ‘whore’ as an insult could qualify more generally a feminine dishonest behaviour and allow speakers to express their resentment to the addressee.

All these observations resemble commentaries made by current sociologists who have shown that young girls nowadays are also the first to use sexist discourses in verbal abuse against other girls.⁷⁵ But unlike today’s teenage girls who can be verbally aggressive with their friends in the context of joking, Bolognese convicted women or victims of verbal abuse

⁶⁹ ‘*soça putana marça, va tene el bordello a Ancona commo tue usa de tenere*’, *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ These examples come from the same case, *Ibid.*, busta 216, 6, fol. 33. A married woman to a widow and her daughters: ‘*zoze puctane marze, andarene allu burdello a fareve cavare la ruza de lu chulo, che voy ja vidi lu feghoni ne lu culo*’; ‘*soza vecla marza rufiana menale alu bordello a fareve chavare la ruza de lu chulo*’ (against the mother); ‘*une putana marza vane alu bordello affareve chavare la ruza de lu chulo*’ (against one daughter).

⁷¹ ‘*soza putana del cullo grosso tu est ex putana et bagassa et amica de uno homo che teteno tropo grassa*’, *Ibid.*, busta 176, 1, fol. 157 (1353).

⁷² ‘*zoza desdentada puzuolente mazza che te nasca diximilia vermocani*’, *Ibid.*, busta 204, 9, fol. 25 (1367).

⁷³ Dean, ‘Gender and Insult in an Italian City’, p. 221.

⁷⁴ In February 1371, two German prostitutes were accused by the district official of having uttered to each other the *verba iniuriosa*; ‘*putana marcia*’, *Ibid.*, busta 210, 7, fol. 8.

⁷⁵ Clair, ‘S’insulter entre filles’, pp. 179–199; Eliassona, ‘Verbal abuse in school’, pp. 586–608.

did not seem to insult each other in a ritualized way to enforce their closeness and camaraderie. Within a group of the same gender and social class, their sexual insults rather aimed at rejecting the stigma of being a prostitute. As stated in the introduction, medieval female honour was strictly linked to sexual virtue. According to common belief, women were inherently sinners. Therefore, they were expected to demonstrate their good *fama* daily through words and deeds, and denounce women who did not conform to the canons of femininity to not disqualify their gender. It may explain why all threats to femininity - or those seen as such- were criticized by women themselves, and not by men. In late medieval Bologna women often used to call into question the legitimacy of one another's children, raising doubts about possible adultery and fornication:

‘you Agnese you are a dirty whore, go away and return your son to his father who is not Marco your husband, and go away, wear the white coat as the other prostitutes do in Bologna’⁷⁶

‘rotten madam, you pimped your daughter-in-law and Corbolino, your son, is the son of friar Alberto from St. Agnes’⁷⁷

‘filthy rotten whore, your son is not your husband’s’⁷⁸

It seems that women insulted one another by referring to features commonly expected from females. In my sample, trials for *verba iniuriosa* among women on other themes are rare.⁷⁹ When a woman insulted another, she was therefore actually promoting and defending gender norms (being a virtuous woman and a faithful wife, etc.), by accusing others of not respecting them.

Men also experienced and tested manhood by insulting each other. Most of the time men insulted each other regarding their own moral characteristics and actions – no criticism about physical appearance has been found. In 85% of cases the gendered insult ‘traitor’ was uttered by other men.⁸⁰ The same applies to ‘thief’, which in 80% of the cases was expressed by a male speaker. When spoken by men, these words seemed charged with their true

⁷⁶ ‘tu Agnexina si ei putana merdoxa, va e si restitusse to fiolo al padre che ello no e ça fyolo de Marcho to marido, e va porta la mantelleto biancho adosso como fa li altri publiche putane per la çita de Bologna’, AsBo, *Inquisitiones*, busta 240, 6, fol. 148 (1382).

⁷⁷ ‘ruffiana marzza tu a rufiana toa nora e Corbolino to figluolo si fo figlolo de fra Alberto da sancta Guexe chio lo so per vero’, *Ibid.*, busta 242, 2, fol. 170 (1383).

⁷⁸ ‘çoça putana marça quello fiolo che tu ay, non e de to marito’, *Ibid.*, busta 224, 10, fol. 25 (1376).

⁷⁹ I have one case categorized as *verba iniuriosa* in which a woman said to another: ‘tu ei facto male a romere lo mio muro’ (‘you acted wrong by breaking my wall’), *Ibid.*, busta 245, 1, fol. 200 (1384).

⁸⁰ Out of fifty-nine occurrences of *proditor/traditor* identified in my sample, fifty are by men, nine by women.

meaning. Men accused one another of taking false oaths, stealing money, inheritances or tools (a common accusation among craftsmen), or of not repaying their debts:

‘you are a false witness and you cannot say that in front of the Podestà and his judge’⁸¹

‘I am not a thief like you, you have stolen 140 *bolognini*’⁸²

‘you are a thief and I will prove to you that you're a thief and you stole six steel rules from Tomaso dal Ferro and you took them under your coat from the crossroad of *Porta Ravennata*’⁸³

‘Big rotten thief, you have robbed Bernardo dalla Banbase’s heirs’⁸⁴

‘You have asked me for 2 shillings *bolognini* and have become my debtor’⁸⁵

Contrary to women, men rarely questioned their sexual conduct as medieval masculinity was mainly constructed on social and professional status. In the space of thirty-five years, only three male charges of deviant practices have been brought before the podesterial court. Each time men were accused of being sodomites (*bugirone*).⁸⁶ But by such an accusation, did men seek to reflect reality or to harm a foe ‘emasculating’ him? As noted in the introduction, men could discredit their opponent’s masculinity by emphasizing their wife’s supposed deviant or immoral sexuality. But I would like to add that in that case sexual insults appear as a final argument to conclude the exchange to a man’s advantage and silence his opponent. Sexual insults among men would therefore reflect a strategic use of offensive language. In March 1374 Lorenzo, son of Marcello, a craftsman from Camugnano, in the Bolognese countryside, was accused by a shoemaker, the fellow-townsmen Guglielmo, son of the late Raynari, of having insulted him. After blaming him of having denounced other men from Camugnano to the municipal officers in charge of mill taxes, Lorenzo quipped as follows: ‘your wife keeps a brothel for friars and priests and other common people’.⁸⁷ A few years before, in June 1369, Giovanni Cardi, a wine carrier (*brentator*) from the parish of San Giorgio in Poggiali, insulted his neighbour in a similar way, going from a reproach on

⁸¹ ‘*tu e tistimonio falso e non po venire allegare dinançi del dicto messire la podesta el suo giudice*’, *Ibid.*, busta 202, 6, fol. 6 (1365).

⁸² ‘*io non son ladro como ti che tu rubasti cento quaranta et cinque libri de bolognini*’, *Ibid.*, busta 238, 8, fol. 68 (1381).

⁸³ ‘*tu ei ladro, ei te provaro che tu ei ladro, e che tu tolisti sey regle d’aciario a Tomaxio dal Ferro e si te le tolse de sotta lo mantello dal carobio de porta Ravennate*’, *Ibid.*, busta 204, 3, fol. 36 (1367)

⁸⁴ ‘*ladronecli marçi voie avidi robado li herede de Bernardo dala Banbase*’, *Ibid.*, busta 237, 5, fol. 73 (1385).

⁸⁵ ‘*tu petis a me duos solidis bolognini in quibus tu asservis me tuos debitorem esse*’, *Ibid.*, busta 204, 3, fol. 78 (1367).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, busta 178, 5, fol. 2 (1354), *Ibid.*, busta 187, 5, fol. 48 (1358), *Ibid.*, busta 192, 6, fol. 75 (1361).

⁸⁷ ‘*la toa molglere tene bordello de preti et de frati et altra gente mondana*’, *Ibid.*, busta 219, 3, fol. 50 (1374).

professional matters to a sexual insult. Indeed, Giovanni accused Bartolomeo of stealing sacks of flour from him many times. After these complaints, and certainly after having exhausted all verbal options of attack, he ended up saying that he would like “to fuck his wife”⁸⁸. Symbolically, the use of sexual insult among male peers was the final step to overpower the opponent.

Dean’s work has certainly paved the way for gender and language studies in the Middle Ages by applying concepts and analytical tools of modern linguistics to medieval documentation. However, by reconsidering the role of gender in medieval abusive interactions, this study has questioned male and female use of language. Using serial screening of Bologna criminal court records over the period going from 1350 to 1385, this study has demonstrated that female speakers in late medieval Bologna showed familiarity with abusive language. The idea that qualitative differences existed between male and female speakers should thus be nuanced, at least for what concerns the Bolognese case. Nonetheless, gender remains a salient category of analysis for the study of verbal abuse in this period. When insulting publicly a person of the same sex, men and women would perform a gendered and social role in their community. Because of this abusive language appears as a social resource for the construction of gender identity in the Middle Ages.

⁸⁸ See footnote n.56.

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