% Gendered Temporalities in the Early Modern World

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5 Times told

Women narrating the everyday in early modern Rome

Elizabeth S. Cohen

Abstract
In the criminal courts of Rome c. 1600, women’s testimony, delivered in formal settings and recorded verbatim, carried serious legal weight. Yet telling time orally to intimidating male officials was challenging. As complainants, as suspects, and as witnesses, women had to remember, reconstruct, and tell stories about recent and more distant pasts and to situate their accounts within convincing temporal frames. Some of their expressions reflected their particular experience as women, but in this public arena they, much like their male counterparts, used varied narrative strategies and temporal rhetorics to lend veracity to their tales. The abstractions, precisions, and disciplines of official time—the sort that we moderns prioritize—often gave way in early modern courts, as in life, to less clear and less efficient, but nevertheless functional practices of local time.

Keywords: time-telling; women; testimony; judicial records; Rome

In the criminal court records of Rome c. 1600, ordinary women show themselves to be canny and adept tellers of time. As elsewhere in early modern Europe, criminal courts took active part in government campaigns to corral and correct the behavior of the broad population. To that end, Roman tribunals, needing to reconstruct and verify offenses that the culprits wished to obscure, interrogated witnesses and asked them to narrate from memory events in the less and more distant past. In generating these accounts, in which magistrates and witnesses collaborated, rhetorics of time became an important dimension of ordering evidence convincingly. An energetic Roman justice created hundreds of fat volumes of complaints and testimonies, recorded verbatim, including many by women as well as by men. Ratified by delivery in the same, rather intimidating judicial settings, both men’s and women’s words carried

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weight. Here I focus on women’s testimonies and on the ways that they told time in this distinct arena where what they said did matter, to the courts, but also to themselves, their families, their neighbors, and their enemies. Early modern time-telling, especially in an oral mode, was not straightforward, and not all women talked time alike. Roman women’s temporal language sometimes reflected their particular gendered experience. Much of their testimony, however, deployed various forms of telling time selected from a repertoire of local oral usages that women shared with their male counterparts.

As we begin, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the gaps between early modern expectations and what our modern—or postmodern—culture takes for granted in its routine, everyday senses of time. We usually think first of ‘clock’ time, of time as something concrete, moving relentlessly forward in consistent, precisely labeled units, authorized by governments, and coordinated even beyond national borders. For us, everyday time is deeply mediated by technologies of nano-measurement and global-scale communication. Numbered minutes, hours, days, and years, recorded in writing or digitally and publicly proclaimed, are everywhere. We assume that most people know of and shape their doings to a common electronic drummer. The early modern world had complex and elaborate ways of thinking about and expressing time, but, with less capacious technologies and weaker governance, it lacked the precision of detail and the consistency across space that we assume. In the culture of early modern Europe, time was not one concept but many. It had several dimensions including scale—from deep time to minutiae—duration, and sequence, as well as directional patterns of linearity or cyclicity. Early modern narrators could draw on an intricate, broadly shared repertoire of ideas, feelings, and expressions to make sense of their own temporal experiences and to represent them to others. Historians have, therefore, asked how some kinds of people, operating in settings or spaces diversely shaped by physical environments, political structures, technologies of communication and counting, and gendered bodies, may have selected from the general cultural treasury and used some forms of time in distinctive ways.

Although we need to be careful with the sometimes distorting clarity of binaries, some such contrasts concerning time have been suggestive: the precise mechanics of clock time versus the organic rhythms of nature or the human body; the empowered time of public affairs versus the private, everyday patterns of domesticity;¹ the large-scale official time of the nation

¹ Hershatter, Gender of Memory. In their life histories rural women timed public interventions with reference to the lives of their families, for example, the births of children, while the men spoke more often of ‘campaign time’, the chronology of party policy.
versus customary local practices; urban professional versus rural, peasant time.² While an analogous binary of male versus female time might be illuminating, that is not my principal approach here.³ Rather than focus on gendered differences, this essay explores the temporal expressions of a strata of non-elite women, many of them illiterate, from whom we seldom hear. Drawing on the records of the criminal courts, we see female witnesses deploy many ways of telling time. Not only do different women use different temporal rhetorics, but a single witness often uses more than one. Furthermore, some women speak with clarity, as others struggle to recall and report what they remember. Particularties of women’s experiences find a place in their testimonies, and also sometimes in men’s accounts of female activities. Overall, indeed, on the question of gender, the range of women’s temporal expressions overlaps substantially with those of their male peers. Partly this has to do with the settings, both general and specific, in which we hear them speak.

Premodern European culture embraced several widely shared understandings of time on bigger and smaller scales, while it also accommodated many local adaptations. Nevertheless, although by modern standards of precision and consistency early modern time may look like a untidy hodgepodge, it worked for its users. A natural or environmental rhythm of time, at once cyclical and variable from year to year or decade to decade, shaped agriculture, hunting and fishing, commerce, and construction. References in medieval records to these deep dimensions of time, both taken for granted and difficult to track, are scattered and often oblique. In the explicit framework of culture, on the other hand, a very visible time was predominantly Christian and teleological. It looked to an ultimate end in first apocalypse and then salvation or perdition for eternity. In the long beforehand, however, human beings lived in time, and that meant unsettled and recurrent change. Life was a fraught effort to minimize sin, endure suffering, and with God’s providence achieve some prosperity in a deeply unstable earthly world. Within this sweep of eschatological time, an annual cycle of Christian holidays mapped onto the natural rotation of the seasons. During the Middle Ages, following a calendar of days dedicated to saints, the Virgin Mary, and holy events, Christians invoked providential aid for the security of life and livelihood. For diurnal timekeeping there were sundials and later a few institutional clocks, but most often church bells marked time’s passage. From the early Middle Ages, bells called monks to pray a

³ In parallel, a recent study of English gentlewomen’s timekeeping is Korhonen, ‘Several hours’.
cycle of five offices, or liturgical hours, that broke the day into segments. Prime, or the first hour, was sung around daybreak, Terce, Sext, and Nones followed, and, at sunset, Vespers concluded the round. Three other hours or offices divided the night—Compline, Matins sung at midnight, and Lauds, marking the first hints of dawn. This ecclesiastical schedule, with its details adapted to different terrains and human needs, endured and spread from monasteries outward to the lay world. Later, in Italian towns and cities, civic bells from clock towers joined the clamor, announcing hours of work and rest, and occasions of celebration and of mourning.⁴

Gradually, European culture acquired more confidence about human ordering of the earthly realm, and in early modern times new human structures and mechanical technologies served a more optimistic view of change. As part of this process, public authorities and work foremen embraced a more regular pattern of daily hours to discipline human activity. On a larger scale of time, accounts of the past moved from chronicles or annals—year-by-year lists of events—to fuller narratives of histories that sought to explain and teach. As writing and literacy spread, the creation and storage of records and contracts adopted dating as a means of identifying, verifying and ordering both private papers and swelling repositories of public documents. Complementing the writing of manuscripts, printing reinforced a linear sense of time and narration. Precision about dates—in the burgeoning corpus of administrative paper, on the one hand, and diaries, on the other—came more surely with sequential numeric designations for years and days, and a cyclical but regular rotation of named months.⁵ Yet even such an apparently self-evident practice long sustained local variants. For example, the New Year, and its change of number, began in Rome on 1 January, but in Venice on 1 March and in Florence on 25 March, the Feast of the Annunciation.⁶

In the Roman courts, as in other early modern institutions, time took on more structured, urban, and administrative particularities. Doing business with the Governor’s criminal tribunal, which is the source of the records used here, was to many ordinary Romans, male and female, both familiar and intimidating. Keen for business, the court initiated many trials, but also encouraged residents to bring their complaints. For women and men

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⁴ For a general introduction, Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour*.
⁵ For a woman’s example, the impressive diary of the eighteenth-century frontier American midwife, Martha Ballard, ‘Martha Ballard’s Diary Online’, at dohistory.org/diary.
⁶ Many dimensions of local time are well described for Florence; see Trexler, *Public Life*, pp. 73–77, 247–63.
alike, testifying took place in circumstances intended to draw out the truth and to lend legal force to the evidence given. Although complainants and sometimes witnesses might have consulted lawyers in advance, everyone speaking to the court faced the magistrates alone, under oath, and usually in special offices, often adjacent to the jails. Indeed, not only culprits, but also many associates and even bystanders, notably those of modest rank, were arrested and jailed to ensure their appearance and to reduce collusion. Furthermore, the threat of torture loomed, although only some men and a few women suffered it in the end. Some other witnesses—among them, ill or injured victims, respectable women, and prominent courtesans—received accommodation, with a notary sent to take a deposition at their homes. In whatever setting, notaries recorded in full and close to verbatim the words of all testimonies. These transcripts, once collected, then became, at a later stage of the process, the basis for legal arguments and judgment.  

Under Roman criminal law, testimony from women as well as from men, its truthfulness tested by these protocols, carried hefty legal weight. Women were routinely called to testify, some as accused, alone or in combination with others, of slanders, thefts, sexual misconduct, and violence, and many others as witnesses to a wide range of disorders, deceptions, and more serious troubles. Altogether, for the decades just before and after 1600 we have testimonies from many hundreds of women. Most women who appear before the court were of middling or lower social rank. Prostitutes, whose trade attracted the rowdy clientele whose antics filled the police reports, were notably numerous. Often knowledgeable about local regulations and law enforcement, sex workers used the courts to seek their own ends. While only some female witnesses could read or write, testimony drew on oral skills that need not put them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Before the court, everyone—high and low, educated and illiterate, men and women—operated in the same spoken mode of communication that predominated in the lives of all, but which mostly eludes later scholarship. Without denying that women had distinct experiences, the broad cultures of time were not, for present purposes, inherently gendered, nor indeed were the particular practices of the courts. Women spoke to the officials about what they had seen and what they knew, but in this highly structured setting they shared much of their roles as legal actors and many of their words with their male peers.

Shaped by the language and evidentiary demands of the law, formal interrogations were dialogic, and the verbatim transcripts that recorded

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them were, as texts, collaborative. Always under the jeopardy of perjury, oral delivery, on the spot, without notes or reinforcements, in response to previously unknown questions, could be challenging. Speakers had to guess at the court’s interests and assess their own, all the while asserting veracity and deferring courteously to the authority of the state. Often enough, memory did not serve or the stakes were obscure, and the deponent was forced to improvise. Consequently, in testimonies expressions of time were often approximate or hedged, with efforts to convince built by heaping up different kinds of time and associated markers of activity. Habits of oral narration were often not linear, but sinuous and given to doubling back. As the court worked to hone the proffered stories, it was interested in, among other details, more precise representations of time than everyday discourse required. Witnesses sought to oblige, but were also quick to beg forgiveness for any lapses.

Judicial inquiry used two frameworks of interrogation: direct questions and more open-ended invitations to narrative. The first usually opened the interrogation, as the officials asked the witnesses to identify themselves and the circumstances of their appearance. Answers to questions might be straightforward statements of when one was arrested, or how long one had been in Rome. Sometimes, though, a short answer shifted into the second form, a more extended oral narrative. There the witness had to remember something that had happened more or less long ago, and to recreate a plausible tale.

As an example of a complex, retrospective narrative, consider this elaborate testimony by a marginal woman relating a half dozen encounters during a single day many months before. In April 1603, a serving woman absconded with a pricey necklace belonging to the new bride of the Governor’s deputy. To build his case, this important magistrate had questioned a cluster of women who had known his thieving servant. Among them was Thomassina, a poor widow who scrounged a living from begging, sewing, and brokering job tips.

One day I heard from the wife of Boschetti [a neighbor] that her husband had sent outside the city to get a serving woman, but that she had not come, and standing myself begging there on the steps of San Pietro, that woman called Madalena went by, and I was on the steps of the Gregoriana, and she said to me that she was looking for a place as a servant and did I know anything, because in company with me were many other women begging; and so I remembered what Boschetti’s wife had said. So I said
to Madalena that I would find her a master, and I took her to the house nearby of Signore Pompilio who is said to be a tailor, although he does not keep a shop, and to a goldbeater because Costanza, his sister-in-law with whom I chat, had said that he wanted to fire one servant and to find another. But when I took Madalena there, that other servant began to shriek that she was there; and so therefore they did not take Madalena, and so I lead her to the house of Signore Antonio Boschetti and they gave her a job and she stayed 3 or 4 months and she got 5 giulii a month. But I don’t remember the dates exactly.9

Though her linear account of one day’s encounters contained very few temporal markers, Thomassina buttressed it with abundant details of space and persons. Though, as she explained, she did not know the dates of Madalena’s service with Master Boschetti, she told in other ways exactly what had happened and, in parallel, validated what mattered to her, the legitimate expectation of a tip for finding the job.

Since many of the events that figured in trial testimonies had just occurred, the shorter temporal units of days and hours appeared frequently. As in many early modern cities, sound signaled public time in Rome. Many church bells clanged, and from the fifteenth century a few public clocks joined the clamor. Leadership and consistency in timekeeping across Roman neighborhoods remain, however, little known. Testimonies cited the sound of bells as a time marker, but often as a gesture more than a confirmation of fact. For example, according to one serving woman, ‘it was in the morning when the clock struck five times but I don’t know what time it was’. In the same trial, a male servant protested when the court pressed him about time, ‘I really can’t say because days often go by when I don’t hear the hours sound’.10 Although these statements may reflect an impulse to obfuscate, they also show a characteristic expectation of uncertainty.

Witnesses readily testified in a language of hours, but in several ways these units were local and notional rather than consistent measures. Roman timekeeping broke the day into a time of light and a time of darkness, each divided into sets of twelve hours. Yet, as light waxed in the summer and waned in the winter, daytime hours lengthened and shrank with the seasons, and night-time hours inversely. Hours were usually numbered from

9 All archival citations date between 1590 and 1610 and come from the Archivio di Stato di Roma, Tribunale criminale del Governatore; they will be designated by series name, volume, and folio numbers. As here: Processi, xvii secolo, busta 25, fol. 442v.
10 Processi, xvii secolo, busta 44 (1605), fols. 703v, 772v.
1 to 24, counting from sunset. Thus, in testimonies the evening was usually designated as the first or second hours of night and the late afternoon as 22 or 23 hours. Confusing for us, however, counting sometimes started at a different point, as in the example above where ‘five hours’—implicitly after midnight—referred to very early in the day. Testimonies spoke of ‘hours’ and of half-hours, but references to smaller amounts of time were rare. In official contexts, and occasionally in men’s testimony, familiar prayers—the paternoster or the miserere—one labeled short intervals, corresponding to the length of time needed to recite the well-known words. This usage appeared, in parallel with clock time, in the very official setting of the torture room.\textsuperscript{11}

Even in a large city, the alternating periods of light and darkness were central to everyday time. Sunrise and especially nightfall were the pivotal moments, each marked by so-called Ave Maria bells, that were the clearest public markers of time and frequently cited in testimonies. Human physiology and common needs to eat and sleep, to work and pray, responded to these natural diurnal rhythms. Darkness posed special risks for women, and some of their language reflected such gendered circumstances. Although not everyone kept the same schedules, in early modern Rome a rotation of daily activities was a common point of reference for retrospective narration. Reporting their everyday rounds, women often situated themselves by location more than time, although a rhythm of activities might suggest a temporal sequence. For example, they spoke of being inside doing household chores, that often meant the morning, or sitting by the doorstep spinning, that more likely occurred in the afternoon.\textsuperscript{12} Other women, including sometimes prostitutes, told of going to church for mass or to view a special religious display and collect an indulgence (\textit{perdonanza}).\textsuperscript{13} Here the church indicated both a place, but also an occasion linked to the calendar of liturgies. Other markers of everyday time used sociability. Mealtimes appeared often, especially when taken in company with family or friends—nothing in the morning, but dinner (\textit{pranzo}) in the early afternoon, and supper (\textit{cena}) in the early evening. In the rhetorical habits of combination, Romans talking would readily pile on different temporal markers in a single expression, such as a reference to a meal with other measures of time. According to one prostitute, she had stayed home until ‘the hour of eating’, meaning

\textsuperscript{11} Cohen, ‘She Said’, p. 411.
\textsuperscript{12} Processi, xvii secolo, busta 28bis (1603), fol. 848r.
\textsuperscript{13} Prostitutes at mass: Processi, xvii secolo, busta 44 (1605), fols. 701v, 703r; busta 58 (1607), fol. 317. Apostles displayed at San Giovanni in Laterano: Investigazioni, busta 388, fol. 45r; Costituti, busta 505, fol. 116v. Perdonanza: Costituti, busta 390, fol. 87; Querele, busta 8, fols. 93r, 94r, 95v.
midday dinner, and then went out to visit two churches and returned by 23 hours.\textsuperscript{14} A client arrived at his prostitute’s house, ‘after dinner, around the time of vespers’, although prayers were likely not the first thing on his mind.\textsuperscript{15} A doublet-maker explained that he ate his dinner ‘at midday’, but delayed his supper until one and a half hours of night, because his mother was a midwife and came home late.\textsuperscript{16}

The transition from darkness to light and from sleep to activity had no sharp threshold. People got up and began their days at different times. Some started before dawn, others later. The Ave Maria bell at sunrise announced the beginning of the day. ‘I left the house Friday morning at the sounding of day [\textit{sonare del giorno}],’ testified a woman who was a domestic servant in a boarding house.\textsuperscript{17} Note the layered temporal expression that named the day, the morning, and the bell. Or, in 1610, early one summer day, four wives, each with a basket of laundry on her head, set out very early for a private fountain near the church of Sant’ Andrea della Valle. ‘Five hours’ had sounded, but three of the women carried lanterns because it was dark and still ‘night’, as a male witness awakened by the women’s knocking confirmed. The plan to go together was likely prudent in the twilight, for, near the door of the wash place, they were accosted, ‘oh poor women’, by two men who noted the early hour. One of them proceeded to assault the youngest and prettiest of the laundresses.\textsuperscript{18} Early-rising women often invoked religious duty to designate time, that is, they were attending an early mass. Occasionally, in the criminal context, they noticed a neighbor’s door or shutters that had been defamed in the night with ink or excrement.\textsuperscript{19} A later rising prostitute’s client, on the other hand, spoke of leaving her house, ‘quite early although it was already bright daylight’.\textsuperscript{20}

More than dawn, sunset and the end of daylight figured prominently in criminal testimonies about Roman daily life. Unlike daybreak, at the sounding of the evening Ave Maria bell, almost everyone was awake and likely to remain active for some hours. As historians of early modern Europe have recently shown, darkness did not mean sleep and even where reliable lighting was not available, night was often a busy time, both for work and

\textsuperscript{14} Investigazioni, busta 351, fol. 50r.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., fols. 176v–177r.
\textsuperscript{16} Processi, xvii secolo, busta 19 (1602), fols. 1019v–1020r.
\textsuperscript{17} Processi, xvi secolo, busta 257 (1592), fol. 1046r.
\textsuperscript{18} Processi, xvi secolo, busta 87, fols. 451r–459r.
\textsuperscript{19} Costituti, busta 591, fol. 92r. On house-scorning, Cohen, ‘Honor and Gender’.
\textsuperscript{20} Costituti, busta 591, fol. 153v.
for sociability.\textsuperscript{21} Not only in the streets, but also at taverns and in their homes, people kept busy for some hours after nightfall. A man appeared at his girlfriend’s door when it was ‘deep night’ (\textit{molto notte}).\textsuperscript{22} One woman claimed to have stayed up spinning until after midnight and then gotten up to go to early mass.\textsuperscript{23}

Highlighted by Roman law, the differences between light and dark figure frequently in criminal court proceedings. In daylight, events in the street were readily observed by many witnesses. During the shrouded evening hours, it was harder to see and to identify malefactors. To validate their reports, witnesses to night-time events would explain that they were carrying a lantern, or that the moon was bright. Due to darkness but also because evening gave opportunity for recreation, including for the many men in Rome lacking strong household ties and seeking distraction, the first several hours of the night were the time for disorder in some neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{24}

For these reasons, the boundary between light and dark shaped one official temporal restriction specific to women. To minimize night-time disorder, Roman authorities imposed a curfew that police patrols enforced, if fitfully. After the Ave Maria bell, women were not supposed to leave their dwellings alone, nor to move about the city streets unless accompanied by male kin. Aimed largely at prostitutes, the regulation constrained as well the considerable numbers of mostly respectable poor women, many of whom lived on their own. In practice, these women did go out and sometimes were nabbed by the police as they went to get a light for their fire or to buy fruit at a shop or wine and take-out from a pub (\textit{ostaria}).\textsuperscript{25} When arrested, women usually protested that they had not gone far or that night had just begun. Another legitimating explanation for being out at night was visits to female kin or friends, and especially going to help the sick. Angela, the wife of Giuseppe Ciapponi, was arrested on a Sunday evening, at two hours of the night, in the house where she had been called to administer certain salves and a clyster to an ailing woman.\textsuperscript{26} Eugenia, charged by her husband Ventura Pacini with adultery, highlighted in her defense the difference between night and morning: ‘[…] I never go out at night except for some reason, and it’s been more than four months that I have not done so, although it is very

\textsuperscript{22} Costituti, busta 589, fol. 124v.
\textsuperscript{23} Querele, busta 8, fol. 92r.
\textsuperscript{24} Nussdorfer, ‘Priestly Rulers’.
\textsuperscript{25} Cohen, ‘To Pray, to Work’, p. 303. Also, Costituti, busta 485, fols. 194v–195r; busta 505, fol. 61r; busta 592, fol. 38r
\textsuperscript{26} Processi, xvii secolo, busta 25 (1603), fol. 19r–v; also, Costituti, busta 508, fols. 10v–12r.
true that in the morning, always two hours before daylight I go to weave in the house of my woman friend [commare] until 14 or 15 hours [roughly, 8 or 9 am]. The cops, showing excessive zeal, even arrested women returning from midnight mass on Christmas Eve.

Narrating on a scale of weeks, witnesses used oral habits that mixed naming days with other expressions of redundancy and relational time. Women and men spoke of a Sunday, Wednesday, or Friday, often coupled with the oral designation phrase, ‘just passed’ (prossimo passato). This usage, which appears in Latin in the court’s questions, invites specificity, but appears to have been familiar to the witnesses. Catholic practices also shaped narrative speech, even where a term’s religious sources were lost. Where we would refer to a ‘week’, Romans spoke of ‘8 days’ or an octave, a unit of the liturgical calendar allocated for the celebration of major holidays from Sunday to Sunday inclusive. Similarly, for two weeks or a fortnight, Romans spoke of ‘15 days’. For example, in 1607 the courtesan Domitella Stagli, living in the piazza San Silvestro, opened her complaint of a house-scorning, ‘You should know that, yesterday evening made it a week [i.e. a week ago yesterday], it was Sunday around four hours of the night, when I was in bed, I heard someone knocking on my door and making a disorderly racket, and because it was night, thinking that it might be the police, I got up and went to my window’. And then again, just last night, Domitella continued, at ‘four and a half hours of night’, the ‘insolent’ ruckus happened again. She went to her window, recognized the culprits as the same ones as before, and shouted to them, ‘tomorrow morning I will send the Court [Corte, meaning the police] after you’. A witness, Margarita, who lived with her sick husband downstairs below Domitella, was frightened by the assaults. She confirmed both incidents, saying that last night’s troubles occurred, ‘I believe, as midnight sounded at the Trinità’ and lasted for a quarter of an hour. Although qualified with the conventional disclaimer, this statement atypically refers to a specific church bell and to so brief a time span as a quarter hour.

On a longer scale of time, too, when women spoke to the court of months or seasons, they used a variety of temporal rhetorics. Female witnesses sometimes named months, but very seldom did they number days. For example, in 1590 Jacoba, wife of Gregorio Bell’huomo, gave shelter in her

27 Costituti, busta 594, fol. 181v.
28 Costituti, busta 593, fols. 44v, 45v; busta 594, fol. 54v.
29 Processi, xvii secolo, busta 57, fol. 501r.
30 Ibid., fol. 502v.
hometown of Velletri, north of Rome, to a homeless young woman. Several weeks later, the matron found herself arrested and taken to the city where she testified in the Corte Savelli jail: ‘it was the month of May, just passed, and, if I remember rightly, it was the eighth of that month, one evening, late, while I was standing in front of my house, there passed by that maiden [zitella] dressed as man wearing some ragged old hose, a patched doublet, and on her head a cap of very old fabric, and [she was] crying [...].’ Although this testimony exceptionally gave a precise date, it was typical in the phrasing that piled up details and incorporated the cautionary rhetorical allusion to memory. More commonly, witnesses approximated with phrases such as ‘about two months ago’ or Thomassina’s ‘three or four months’ to describe Madalena’s employment. Sometimes, under pressure, witnesses could not make good temporal sense at all. Asked when she had heard a piece of information, a woman responded, ‘about a year or six months, I don’t have it well in mind’; later of another exchange, she said that it happened ‘about 9 or 10 months [ago], or 15, if I remember rightly.’ Although the magistrates pushed for clear answers, they did not expect always to get them.

About some things, on the other hand, women could be precise. Monetary sums paid for rent or received for work, usually expressed as rates by month or day, were often cited, although partial compensation in kind, such as room, board, or other goods, was routine and never included in the quote. Even if she would not say how long Madalena worked, Thomassina knew exactly what she was supposed to be paid: 5 giulii per month. Another servant earned one scudo (equal to 10 giulii) per month.Prostitutes, though not paid a regular rate, remembered cash received at different times. For example, Francesca from Assisi, described a regular client, a soldier turned cop, who, when they had sex, gave her ‘sometimes one giulio sometimes two, and in all she may have gotten one scudo from him’. As to paying out, a recently widowed, former prostitute sublet a room from a respectable matron, but had to give it up, because she could not afford the rent of one scudo per month.

Female bodily time was a gendered setting for counting by days and months. Asked about her livelihood, Bastiana, a poor, unmarried woman from Rieti, explained: ‘I do nothing except spin twine [spago]; I spin a

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31 Processi, xvii secolo, busta 237, fols. 52v–53v.
32 Processi, xvi secolo, busta 286 (1595), fols. 743r, 746r.
33 Processi, xvii secolo, busta 6 (1600), fol. 218v.
34 Costituti, busta 505, fol. 62r.
35 Costituti, busta 507, fol. 56v.
pound and a half a day and earn three carlini a day’. She linked these assertions closely to the forthright proclamation that she was six months pregnant and that it was her second time, though by a different man. John Christopoulos, using Roman trial records, has pointed out the layered uncertainties around knowing if you were pregnant, and for how long. Yet when women addressed the court, giving a temporal length to a pregnancy, even one still too recent to be noticed, verified its potential legal utility. For example, in 1601, Isabella from Albano, was arrested at night below the Trinità dei Monti in mixed company. To the magistrates, she explained that her husband was out of town, she was two months pregnant and had done heavy laundry work the day before. Fearing that she would miscarry, she had sought the support of her compatriot, Giovanna d’Albano, who was arrested with her. This logic, including the citation of pregnancy, did not excuse Isabella from a fine of one scudo to be paid to charity. Agata of Tivoli was, she testified, four months pregnant and with a babe in arms, when she was arrested in the evening riding on the croup of a gentleman’s horse. She had come to the city with her young children to look for her husband, who had left home a month earlier to take the water of the Holy Wood, a cure for syphilis. Found to be indeed a respectable woman, she was released without charges. More often, however, pregnancies measured in months were cited in cases of miscarriage due to accident or violence.

While city women occasionally referred to agricultural seasons like the harvest, usually in connection with a trip to the country, the Catholic calendar supplied a primary language of time. If neither language nor behavior much distinguished Sundays from workdays, major holidays and festive liturgical octaves marked the narration of the everyday. In the context of criminal trials, probably the most often cited season was Carnival. For several weeks from late January, streets and homes teemed with parties, dancing, masquerades, high jinks, perfumed eggs, and frequently also violence. For young women Carnival was an occasion for amorous encounter. It was time, too, for quarrels, as two women were ‘at war since Carnival’, because one

36 Costituti, busta 485, fols. 82v–83v.
38 Costituti, busta 505, fols. 5v–6v; Registrazioni d’Atti, busta 143, fol. 30. In the same neighborhood in 1605, baptismal records list an Isabella d’Albano as the mother of an illegitimate daughter, with a Giovanna d’Albano as godmother. San Lorenzo in Lucina, Battesimi, fol. 55v.
39 Costituti, busta 599, fols. 118v–119r.
40 Investigazioni, busta 345, fols. 78v–79r; busta 351, fols. 208r–v, 210r; Costituti, busta 507, fol. 55v.
41 Processi, xvii secolo, busta 18 (1602), fols. 720v–721r; busta 28bis, fols. 417v, 423v.
failed to invite the other to a party.\footnote{Processi, xvii secolo, busta 18, fol. 1056v; another party, Costituti, busta 499, fols. 23v–25r.} Sometimes, however, the festival was simply a marker, as when a woman told, ‘It was a bit [\textit{pezzo}] before Carnival and I was returning from the house of the saddler, and because it was raining I had my apron over my head.\footnote{Costituti, busta 595, fol. 108v.} Religious holidays also figured in testimony in relation to special events. A hairdresser asked a client to lend her a nice dress so she could appear in a holy pageant (\textit{sacra rappresentazione}) on Easter Tuesday.\footnote{Processi, xvii secolo, busta 26 (1603), fol. 402r.} For a parade for the octave of Corpus Christi, a decorative plasterer’s wife explained giving paints from her husband’s supply to a neighbor to decorate a float.\footnote{Querele, busta 8, fol. 95r.} And a prostitute reported returning from mass on ‘the day of the Madonna in September’, referring to the holiday of the Virgin’s birth.\footnote{Ibid., fol. 22v.} Other times, the festival was, like Carnival in the earlier example, only a marker. Thus, a wife testified in May that, ‘on the Saturday before Christmas just passed’, because angry at her notary husband, she had decamped from her household and two daughters and had gone to stay with her brother out of town, returning only on the ‘first Friday in March’.\footnote{Processi, xvii secolo, busta 18, fol. 719r.}

Longer spans of time, measurable in years, appear in the court testimonies in several forms. Simple statements of duration expressed as a number of years most often appeared in response to the court’s preliminary questions set to locate the witness: how long have you been in Rome? how long have you been married or widowed? what is your work and for how long? As Rome’s population, both male and female, was highly mobile, time in the city was often a first inquiry. In 1610, Lavinia, wife of Emilio, a carpenter, described, convolutedly, her family’s history: in paraphrase, many years ago her mother, Europia, came to Rome and brought her and her two sisters, but in fact her sister Artemisia and the small one, Apollonia, had been born in Rome, and there came as well her father, who has been dead ten years, and since the Holy Year (1600) they had always lived in this house in (the parish of) San Nicolo in Carcere.\footnote{Processi, xvii secolo, busta 89, fol. 13r.} The Roman sojourn question was often coupled with queries about livelihood. Hieronima, wife of Lothario, in 1603 testified that she had been in Rome ‘ten years […] and in that time I have worked as a servant for various people, and among others I worked for Messer Andrea Bacci, who was a physician, and I was there five or six years, and it is two years since I left’. She then goes on to tell of events at Bacci’s house one morning, five
or six years earlier.\textsuperscript{49} In a specialized context for the duration of women's work, midwives called as forensic experts to inspect women's bodies verified their authority by citing unusually long, but still approximate—'five or six', 'thirty', or 'many'—years of professional experience.\textsuperscript{50}

In the court's direct questions seeking to identify witnesses, for women marital status drew more attention than age. The answers normally reported as numbers of years the lengths of marriage or widowhood. Thus, Menica Romana said, ‘I have a husband called Francesco who sells clothing, and it is four years since I took him [as a spouse].’\textsuperscript{51} Claudia della Valle, age 35, testified that she had been a widow 9 years and now lived with her 12-year old son and 8-year old daughter, who had been a prostitute for 3 or 4 years and evidently supported the family.\textsuperscript{52} Where women's ages did appear, mature adults usually gave rounded numbers such as 35 or 40.\textsuperscript{53} For teenagers and younger women, specific ages seem to have had more evidentiary or explanatory weight in parsing the ambiguities around virginity, marriage, and responsibility for the conduct of female youth.

For more distant pasts involving many years, narrative rhetorics of time required more than numbers. For example, in 1608, a married woman described her nubile sister: ‘of the age of about 17 years \textit{[in circa]}, she was born the year of the Great Famine’, that is 1590–91.\textsuperscript{54} Much less clearly, when prosecuted for impregnating his teenaged servant, Florestano, a man who with his wife did laundry for a living, explained that the girl had come to work for them two years earlier, ‘in the year that bread cost two \textit{baiocch}i the loaf’.\textsuperscript{55} More commonly, Romans identified years by naming their rulers, the popes. To designate a particular time, they specified papal reigns—even those that lasted only a few months—or notable deeds. Testifying in 1603, a widow from Constantinople said that she came to Rome when Sixtus V (r. 1585–90) was pope and later met another Greek immigrant in the city ‘a little while before the Pope [Clement VIII, r. 1592–1605] went to Ferrara’.\textsuperscript{56}

This military venture in 1598 likely figured in the witness's temporal map, because these Greek women, who received monthly alms from the pope's

\textsuperscript{49} Processi, xvii secolo, busta 26, fol. 873r.
\textsuperscript{50} Processi, xvi secolo, busta 309 (1598), fol. 295v; Processi, xvii secolo, busta 26, fol. 732r; Investigazioni, busta 351, fol. 208v.
\textsuperscript{51} Processi, xvi secolo, busta 309, fol. 296v.
\textsuperscript{52} Costituti, busta 507, fols. 175v–176r.
\textsuperscript{53} Costituti, busta 506, fols. 114v–115r.
\textsuperscript{54} Processi, xvii secolo, busta 65 (1608), fol. 398r.
\textsuperscript{55} Processi, xvi secolo, busta 286, fol. 755r.
\textsuperscript{56} Processi xvii secolo, busta 26, fols. 628r–v, 630r.
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officials, kept careful track of their benefactor’s movements. The jubilees or Holy Years that took place every 25 years were also a point of reference. Thomassina, the job broker, answered the court’s initial inquiry, ‘I am not married since my husband died this Holy Year’. She referred to the Jubilee of 1600, three years earlier. So did an unmarried Spanish laundress, aged 40, who reported in 1609 that she had first come to Rome for the Holy Year.

To reiterate the intricacies and varieties of how women, and men, talked in court about time, let me conclude with several testimonies from a single trial, another night-time house-scorning, in which women of different statuses report on events that had happened just recently and over the preceding year or two. Remember that, although witnesses may have consulted in advance, each testified alone. In early May 1602, Giulia Marenghi, a well-known courtesan also called Giulietta Romanesca, brought charges in the Governor’s court against several soldiers in the light cavalry (cavalleggieri) for assaulting her house in the Via Paulina. The principal defendant, Pietro Ciani, was a would-be client of Giulia’s, who had gathered his fellows to express noisily his umbrage at her unwillingness to entertain him. Giulia began her testimony, ‘the day after the evening that my house was invaded and insolence was done to me, as I deposed in the complaint that I made the other day, Pietro Ciani came to my house in the morning and said to me that he had heard that my house had been invaded’. Although Giulia aimed for accuracy, her switchback mode of oral narration is not easy to follow. The chronology appeared to have involved a ruckus one evening, a self-congratulatory visit by the culprit to his victim’s house the following morning, and then her complaint to the court, probably later that day. Pietro was arrested on 1 May, and within a few days Giulia had organized several sympathetic testimonies from her nearby colleague Signora Settimia Lochetti, that courtesan’s servant, Caterina from Cività Castellana, and another neighbor, also called Giulia Romana. In this context where the witnesses were not suspected of complicity in the attack on Marenghi’s house, they were treated as respectable women, and the notary took their depositions in the relative comfort and privacy of their homes.

The interrogation, in jail, of Pietro himself opened the trial. He began with answers to the court’s preliminary questions. ‘I have been in prison one other time, it was a while ago, in the time of Pope Gregorio XIII (r. 1572–85); I was also convicted in the time of that pope because I killed a

57 Processi, xvii secolo, busta 25 (1603), fol. 44r.
58 Costituti, busta 594, fol. 192r.
59 Processi, xvii secolo, busta 18, fol. 985r.
certain Andrea [...], I was dismissed from the Company of the Saviour, and for that homicide I was banished for six years, and I went away to war’ in France.60 Since then he has returned to Rome and, as a member of the light cavalry, has served in a papal troop under Capitano Bardi.

Signora Settimia Lochetti, another prominent courtesan living nearby, was called to support Marenghi’s case, with testimony about similar incidents involving Pietro Ciani that had taken place a year earlier. Aiming for precision in an oral form, Settimia used convoluted but typical language about time: ‘Since that summer, that just now [in May] it will be a year [ago], I have known Pietro Ciani; although at first I knew him only by sight, during this last year Pietro, sometimes alone and sometimes with others, at different times of day, came knocking on my door’. After many attempts to send him away, one day, during daylight hours, Settimia confronted him directly from her window and the two exchanged insults, culminating in Pietro’s threats to ‘come every night to kick her door down’. ‘As evening came [that same day]’, Settimia continued, ‘I being in my house, it must have been four or five hours of the night, all at once [a un tempo], I heard kicking against my door […].’ Settimia once again called Pietro out, explaining later that she recognized him from his gait, ‘because the moon was shining’.61 Here Settimia related exchanges that took place over a year ago; she gave a season—summer—but no dates. In the context of the crucial day, she highlighted the differences between day (giorno) and evening (sera), and offered approximate but numbered hours to tell the time—four or five hours of the night.

Caterina from Civita Castellana, Lochetti’s servant, confirmed her mistress’s report, but added a few temporal details. First, Caterina situated herself temporally in her employment: ‘It is three years that I have been in the service of Signora Settimia, my mistress.’ Then she offered her version of the back story: ‘[...] and during this time I have met many people who came to the house, and in particular, a certain Pietro light cavalryman [...] who, since Pentecost [Pasqua rosata], came many times during the day to knock on Signora Settimia’s door [...] alone or in company.’ To pin down the date, Caterina cited Pentecost, a religious holiday 50 days after Easter. Thirdly, she related the central incident with an elaborate framing in time: ‘on May Day [il giorno del mese di Maggio], that now it has been a year, and [...] in the evening, about the hours of four and five, while I was up above and Signora Settimia was below, chatting, with a Signor Frangipani and two

60 Ibid., fols. 982v–983v.
61 Ibid., fols. 986v–987r.
others’, the assault on the door occurred. Several of Caterina’s temporal details echoed those in the others’ depositions, and with these voluntary, rather than officially summoned, witnesses, some prior consultation was likely. Yet her mention of Pentecost, which came in mid-June in 1601, did not align with her subsequent references to early May. In such examples of inevitable error and inconsistency, we also see variety in the ‘times told’ of stories, even prepared ones.

Giulia Romana, a woman neighbor whose status and livelihood we do not know, backed Lochetti’s account, but from a slightly displaced local perspective and with different temporal language. ‘It could be two years that I have lived here in the street of the Babuino and near me lives also the Signora Settimia [...] [in the past] a week [ottom giorni] before the soldiers went to Hungary, one Sunday in the evening at four hours of the night approximately, as I was ready to go to bed and getting undressed, at that moment I heard a great noise[...].’ To position this house assault, Giulia first told how long she has lived in the location and then cited the much celebrated departure, a year earlier in the summer of 1601, of a large troop of soldiers dispatched by Pope Clement VIII to assist the Hapsburg defense of Christendom. Here an ordinary woman invoked a very public moment in the city’s recent history and very carefully, if perhaps impressionistically, situated the local crime as occurring a week before that landmark event. Then she spelled out the layered labeling of the moment that figured in other testimonies and added her own experience: on Sunday, in the evening, at around four or five hours, when she was getting ready for bed, then the noise and kicking began.

These efforts to tell, orally, everyday stories in this very distinct setting that valued truth and detail suggest that time was important but not easy to manage. Though some women were more skilled than others, gender did not, of itself, discount their testimonies. Being able to narrate and so to establish a sequence among events, especially about human transactions, was a key to trial proceedings, but also to the conduct of life itself. Women, and men, could and did remember and reconstruct, but often not with a tidy linearity that the judges, and historians, would desire. Everyday culture had multiple strategies for tracking and marking time, drawing on a medley of bells and different domains of daily activity from eating and work to religion. If expressions of time often carried approximation, everyone understood

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62 Ibid., fols. 990v–991r.
63 Ibid., fols. 992v–993r.
64 Hanlon, Twilight, p. 85.
and looked for means to give them force. The abstractions, precisions, and disciplines of official early modern time often gave way to murkier, more sinuous, but nevertheless reasonably functional practices of local time. Altogether, when women spoke to the Roman courts, their temporal rhetorics sometimes incorporated particular gendered circumstances. Often, however, women told everyday time in ways that drew on a rich, oral culture that they shared with men.

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