

“And if I Could, I Would Leave Her More”: Women’s Voices, Emotions, and Objects from the Venetian Ghetto in the Seventeenth Century

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Addressing the contexts of both the Jewish Mediterranean and the Italian ghettos, this essay concentrates on the voices of two Jewish women—Sara Pappo from Salonica and Pacientia Mora from the Levant—who were servants in the houses of Sephardic families in mid-seventeenth-century Venice. When Sara and Pacientia each became aware of their extreme illnesses—we do not know their respective ages—they decided to dictate their wills and dispose of their modest patrimonies consisting of a few objects, ducats and clothes as bequests mainly to the members of their household families. Both women lived in the ghetto *vecchio* and turned to the same notary, the Venetian Andrea Calzavara, active from 1638 to 1686. Pacientia Mora dictated her will to Abram Tedesco, a co-worker in the ghetto. The texts of the two testaments are transcribed and translated below for the first time.¹

Sara, daughter of Jacob Pappo from Salonica and servant in the house of the late Salomon Tobi, decided to make her own testament in July 1659. She had clearly spent many years of her life in Tobi’s house. In folio 4v of the will Calzavara defines her as “nicknamed of (*detta di*) Salomon Tobi.” Perhaps, within the society of the Venetian ghetto, Sara was considered a sort of adopted daughter of Salomon. Or, it can be also the case that as was frequently the custom among the slaves, she took her master’s name as her own to strongly identify herself with the family. In any case, this attestation has a perfect counterpart in Sara’s

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1 Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Fondo Notarile, Testamenti, busta n. 260, Notaio Andrea Calzavara, pratica n. 838, “Testamento di Sara quondam Giacob Pappo da Salonico detta di Salomon Tobi,” July 3, 1659 and pratica n. 739, “Testamento di Pacientia Mora hebraea levantina,” September 9, 1664. Pages are not numbered. If not otherwise referenced, the citations are from the two wills transcribed and translated at the end of the chapter. Two summaries of the wills were published some decades ago: Carla Boccato, “Aspetti della condizione femminile nel Ghetto di Venezia (Secolo XVII): I Testamenti,” *Italia X* (1993): 105–135, 124–125 and 132–133.

direct words, which express a familial attachment to Salomon and the other members of the Tobi family, in particular Colomba and Oro, Salomon's wife and daughter respectively.²

Pacientia Mora, servant in the house of Rachel Aboaf, a well-to-do Sephardic matron, dictated her last will in September 1664, leaving her small patrimony to her householder and friends in the ghetto. She appears to have been more destitute than Sara. We do not know Pacientia's origins except for self-declaration as "a Levantine Jewess," something that together with her family name—Mora, "black or Moorish"—suggests roots from North Africa and possibly also a past as a slave and a conversion to Judaism—Jonathan Schorsch has recently suggested that Jews who had been persecuted because of the Inquisition might have named their slaves with a specific reference to sufferance and endurance.³ Thus quite probably, when she referred to her dear companion Simcha as "*una mia compagna mora serva da Mugnon Tomas*" (to a companion of mine, a black servant at Mugnon Tomas'), she meant a black Jewish woman since "*mora*" is not capitalized. Pacientia, unlike Sara, appears reluctant to express her emotions. Rather, hers is often a sort of tacit affection expressed through bequests rather than words. Listing her bequests to Simcha, Pacientia, for example, adds in the Venetian dialect that she regrets having nothing else to donate ("*ne atro ghe*").

In what follows, I will analyze, through the lens of microhistory and material culture, the rapport that existed between these Jewish women, their social groups, the items listed in their wills and, most importantly, the ways in which affections, sentiments, and sufferance were objectified in these goods.⁴

For a general introduction to the life of servants (mainly Christian) in Venice during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Dennis Romano, *Housecraft and Statecraft: Domestic Service in Renaissance Venice, 1400–1600* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

- 2 On the fact that in the notarial register she is considered "related to Salomon Tobi" and the misreading of the recto has in my opinion initiated the misinterpretation of some passages in the document such as a supposed extra conjugal relation between Sara and Salomon, a sort of pregnancy by proxy of Sara, and the adoption of her children by Salomon and his wife, Colomba, as their own. See Boccato, "Aspetti della condizione femminile" and Howard Adelman, "Jewish Women and Family Life, Inside and Outside the Ghetto" in *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, eds. Robert Davis and Benjamin Ravid (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 154. On slaves in Venice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the custom of adopting their master's name, see Romano, *Housecraft and Statecraft*, 206.
- 3 Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 245, 247. Schorsch indicates as examples of this trend names such as Esperansa, Fortuna, Vittoria, and Paciencia.
- 4 I have followed Renata Ago's definition of material culture conceived as the discipline that allows us "to understand, through the patrimonies of the type of rapport that existed between