

**Title: Linking real-life female dramas in Early Modern Birgu to
costumed enactments**

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Abstract

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Abstract	
<p>Research on women's lives in Malta is on the rise, however, to date a study that focuses on female narratives specifically linked to the town of Birgu in early modern times is lacking. An animated costumed tour based on this study offers a creative educational and entertaining experience where elements of our cultural and historical heritage can be revisited and shared through drama. This study merges select biographies of early modern women with a study on period female clothes and drama. The research and subsequent dramatized tour emerging from this research will be offered to schools, travel agencies and destination management companies as an addendum to the classical Birgu tour or as a unique stand-alone 1.5-hour animated tour. This study explored some facets of women's lives in early modern Birgu. The question guiding this research is, can the real-life dramas of some women in early modern Birgu be dramatized and used to inform people on the lives and times of some past females?</p>	
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Declaration of Authenticity



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Research Title : Linking real-life female dramas in Early Modern Birgu to costumed enactments

Declaration:

I hereby declare that this research study is based on the outcome of my own research. I, as the author, declare that this research study is my own composition which has not been previously produced for any other qualification.

The research study was conducted under the supervision of Dr Christine Jones

16th October 2023

Date

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. Briffa', is written over a horizontal line.

Student's Signature

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Historic Context of Hospitaller Birgu	1
2. Literature Review	2
2.1 Witchcraft	3
2.2 Female Religious	4
2.3 Married life	5
2.4 Working Women	6
2.5 Sourcing information on Female Early Modern Attire in Malta.....	7
2.6 Conclusion.....	7
3. Methodology	8
3.1 Limitations	10
3.2 Conclusion	10
4. Results, Analysis and Discussion	11
4.1 Joanna - A Sixteenth Century Public Woman	11
4.1.1 A Public Woman’s Experience	11
4.1.2 Location Where the Drama will be Performed.....	12
4.1.3 Actress in Costume	12
4.2 Isabetta Caruana – An illiterate midwife tried for witchcraft and heresy.....	14
4.2.1 A sixteenth Century Witch’s Experience	14
4.2.2 Location Where the Drama will be Performed.....	15
4.2.3 Actress in Costume	15

4.3	Suor Maria de Dominici – A seventeenth century Maltese female artist	16
4.3.1	A Tertiary Nun’s Experience	16
4.3.2	Location Where the Drama will be Performed.....	17
4.3.3	Actress in Costume	18
4.4	Donna Elisabetta Moscati Testaferrata Dorell – An Eighteenth Century Marchesa.....	19
4.4.1	An Eighteenth Century wealthy Married Woman’s Experience’s	19
4.4.2	Location Where the Drama will be Performed.....	20
4.4.3	Actress in Costume	21
4.5	Conclusion	22
5.	Final Arguments and Conclusions	23
	References: In-Text and End-of-Text.....	24
Appendix 1	: Women of Early Modern Birgu - Tour Itinerary	26
Appendix 2	: Enactement Scripts	38

1. Introduction: Historic Context of Hospitaller Birgu

“To the living we owe respect, but to the dead we owe only the truth” – Voltaire.

The Knights of the Order of St John established themselves in Birgu in June 1530, transforming it into a fully-fledged fortified city in less than forty years. In honour of the role Birgu played in the victory of the Great Siege in 1565, the city was given the name of “Citta Vittoriosa”. In 1571 the Knights moved to Valletta, but Birgu remained the base of the Order’s fleet up to the end of the eighteenth century and was therefore an active hub of maritime activity. During the hospitaller period it became the center of trade, commerce, and entrepreneurship in Malta. Women were inevitably part of this effervescent scene and were involved in different scenarios at different levels in the city’s economic and cultural growth.

The responsibility of women in Hospitaller Malta went beyond the traditional notions of domestic work, homemaking, and childbearing. Publications reveal that some women gainfully ran taverns, owned mills, knitted socks, and even managed quarries and blacksmith shops. Female migrants mostly from the hinterlands, the South of Italy and beyond moved to Birgu in search of a better life, indicating that opportunities for women in the harbour district during this period of time increased.

This essay aims to explore real-life dramas of four women who resided in early modern Birgu and develop enactments with period costumes on real-life locations. The study seeks to link these stories to the locations where they were likely to have taken place, select the kind of attire these ladies would be wearing by consulting images in contemporary illustrations and paintings, and communicate a snapshot of these ladies’ lives through drama. A tour based on this research will be created and marketed.

2. Literature Review

Melitensia publications, unpublished dissertations and academic papers by contemporary scholars provided insight into various facets of the lives and times of women in Birgu in Hospitaller Malta. Most of the research material consulted was based on secondary sources. Through these literary works, female experiences linked to witchcraft, religious life, matrimonial life, and women's work in Birgu 1530-1798 were explored and analysed.

Works by Carmel Cassar and Amanda Schembri provided useful information about witchcraft. Witchcraft was considered a religious crime and fell under the jurisdiction of the Roman Inquisition. Stories on female religious were mainly sourced from works by Christine Muscat and Nadette Xuereb. The spiritual marriage, (*matrimonium spirituale*) in counter reformation Europe was perceived as the highest status for women. Publications by Giovanni Bonello, Carmel Cassar and Victor Bonnici offered insights on married life during the period under study. Works by Joan Abela, Emmanuel Buttigieg, Christine Muscat and Yosanne Vella were consulted to source information on working women. Information regarding female period costumes for enactments was primarily sourced from *Costume in Malta* by Nicholas de Piro and Vicky Ann Cremona.

Every writer presented an analysis of case studies pertaining to certain protagonists to explain social norms during the period under study, however none of these scholars looked at this material from the point of view of producing dramatised street performances. This research aims to address this gap by creating an animated costumed tour based on real-life female dramas. In view of this, the biographies of four women living in early modern Birgu, were picked from the scholarly writings of the above-mentioned academics. These women represent different facets of the realities of female life in Birgu in early modern Malta. Their stories are researched and analysed in the Research, Analysis and Discussion chapter.

2.1 Witchcraft

Carmel Cassar, who published numerous books and papers in peer reviewed journals, studied trials on witchcraft in early modern Malta recorded in the archives of the Roman Inquisition. His book *Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition*, shows that accusations of witchcraft kept inquisitors busy in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Inquisition's *raison d' être* was to reform society according to the guidelines of the Council of Trent. The tribunal kept a watchful eye on magical practices. Cassar explores some of the most popular rituals which included healing remedies, *maleficium* and love magic. *Maleficium*, ranging from enchantments to "impotence-causing ligatures", were counteracted by ecclesiastical exorcism, which was considered as a helpful remedy for "preserving oneself from the injuries of witches" (Cassar, 1996, p. 39). Love magic was often linked to prostitution. Women were denounced to the inquisitor for having resorted to 'enchanted' potions meant to be mixed with food and for uttering 'magical' words to attract their lovers.

In his book *Daughters of Eve*, Carmel Cassar highlights the importance of the male protector (*mundualdo*) in early modern times. Females were normally less educated than males, and perceived as vulnerable or suspicious if they lacked a male guardian. The relationship with their *mundualdo* determined their respectability. The likeliest targets of denunciation were prostitutes, widows, and spinsters.

While focusing on the female role during the decades following the Great Siege of 1565, Amanda Schembri's Masters' Degree dissertation titled *Women in Hospitaller Malta: 1565 – 1610*, provided further insights on witches. Schembri suggests that superstition in early modern Malta was rampant. Some women were accused of being witches, often by other women, because of vendetta, feuds and jealousies typical of face-to-face living. These women had to appear in front of the Inquisitor to answer their accusations. The aim of the Inquisitors' court was not to harm these women but rather to instigate a confession and bring the person back into the Catholic fold. Penalties included reciting the rosary, going to church, or attending holy processions. The severity of the prescribed punishment depended on whether the accused was deemed to be a superstitious person or manipulated by the devil (Ciappara, 2000).

Cassar and Schembri write about several witches. The protagonist selected for the purpose of this study is Isabetta Caruana. Caruana was a late 16th century Gozitan illiterate midwife. Cassar explored her biography in a chapter published in 2023 in *Proceedings of History Week*. Isabetta's life story embodies most of the facets of witchcraft that led to her denunciation, making her an ideal candidate for dramatization.

2.2 Female Religious

The establishment of the Knights of the Order of St John on the Maltese islands coincided with the reforms brought about by the Council of Trent. Christine Muscat's book *Magdalene Nuns and Penitent Prostitutes*, shows how Catholic Counter Reformation theology valued female monastic life over marriage or single status. Cloisters and homes for women in need were aimed at controlling women and reinforcing patriarchal norms. The Magdalene monastery was primarily conceived to be a religious monastery for penitent prostitutes, but it housed females from all walks of life, including young girls. Muscat revealed how notwithstanding the strictures and structures that controlled female religious, nuns engaged in various forms of entrepreneurial activities (Muscat, 2013). Some lay females led a religious life outside matrimony and the cloister. These were tertiary female religious spinsters who opted for the ascetic life without joining an Order, to live as lay sisters. These religious ladies were known as *bizocche*. Tertiary nuns linked to a religious order who wore a habit but did not live in cloisters, were known as *pinzocchiere*. This kind of 'in-between' lifestyle suited several females who were not inclined to be cloistered or married.

In her 2017, B.A. Masters' Degree dissertation, Nadette Xuereb analyses the biography and artistic legacy of Maria de Dominici, the first known Maltese female artist. She describes her as: "*a pinzocchera, who held the vows of chastity and obedience, without poverty, and she could live outside of the convent*" (Xuereb , 2017, p. 7). Xuereb writes that de Dominici hailed from a family of Neapolitan artists residing in Birgu. She was strong-willed and from a young age expressed interest in drawing. Xuereb says that Dominici professed as a Carmelite tertiary nun in Malta, before leaving for Rome c.a. 1682. As a female artist in a society constrained by "*educational and legal barriers*" (Xuereb , 2017, p. 29), De Dominici worked alongside Mattia Preti, the most celebrated artist in Malta during her lifetime.

In Malta she also worked independently, both as a sculptor and as a painter. Her artistic style can be singled out, and currently there are six paintings and a heavily amended religious statue attributed to her in Malta. Xuereb refers to some significant developments in Maria de Dominici's artistic career as they were documented by De Dominici's own nephew, Bernardo de' Dominici. Her life and her achievements, make her another enactment protagonist.

2.3 Married life

In his book, *Daughters of Eve*, Carmel Cassar, argues that marriage legally controlled a woman's sexuality, guaranteeing her honour and that of her originating household (Cassar, 2002, p. 9). Single status was negatively perceived. Hence, most females were married as soon as they came of age or remarried shortly after being widowed. Marriage granted women prestige and social status. The alternative was to become *bizocche*, *pinzocchiere* or opt for the cloister. Giovanni Bonello and Frans Ciappara wrote that marriage deeds in the period under study required the female's parents' or the *mundualdo's* consent to be valid. Marriage arrangements were contracts drawn between males, where the bride was often absent (Bonello, 1958; Ciappara, 2021). Girls were eligible for marriage at just twelve years old! Moreover, the dowry with which the eligible female was endowed, dictated the social standing of the spouse to whom she would be betrothed.

Marriages of convenience were commonplace. Vincent Zammit and Susanna Hoe both refer to the life struggles of 18th century noble woman Elizabetta Dorell. In a radio feature on Campus FM entitled *Nisa Maltin fl-Istorja*, Vincent Zammit spoke about the life and times of Bettina Dorell and the locations associated with her. He described biographical anecdotes and referred to her beneficiary works (Zammit, 2005). In her book *Malta - Women, History, Books and Places*, Susan Hoe also details Elizabetta Dorell's biography and delves into her personal real-life dramas. She writes about the resentment between husband and wife, and disputes over their offspring. Hoe also explains how Elizabetta Dorell's intimate friendship with Inquisitor Angelo Durini, caused scandal (Hoe, 2015). Of all the women that Hoe writes about, Elizabetta Dorell stood out because her real-life dramas resonate the challenges faced by women caught in unhappy or abusive marriages. Elizabetta Dorell's ability to face her challenges with courage and determination, made her life-story an exciting choice for an enactment drama scene.

2.4 Working Women

Paul Cassar wrote that the church disapproved of females who worked alongside males in the 16th century. Females working in the construction industry when Valletta was being built, were admonished, and labelled as low lives (“*baxxi*”) by the parish priest of Żurrieq during a sermon (Cassar, 1977). Nonetheless, in Notarial Archives dating 1543, there is mention of a certain Clara la Spatra, a female blacksmith specialising in sword manufacture (Muscat, 2021). Muscat shows that women were engaged in various forms of remunerated labour in both formal and informal networks.

Muscat’s study corroborates Yosanne Vella’s research on working women in 18th century Malta. Vella studied an 18th century register that showed that a quarter of the labourers toiling away in the fields of Marsa were females (Vella, 2017, p. 29). In a chapter published in *Costume in Malta*, Thomas Freller mentions a stylish Moorish lady called Louise, who owned a hostel in 16th century cosmopolitan Birgu (De Piro & Cremona, 1998).

Prostitution offered some women advantages and opportunities. In her book *Public Women, Prostitute Entrepreneurs in Valletta 1630-1798*, Christine Muscat writes that prostitution in Hospitaller Malta was tolerated, and that like other services provided at the time, it was perceived to be a way to face life’s struggles and challenges. Muscat explores the entrepreneurship of various women working as prostitutes during the 17th and 18th centuries. Muscat writes that “*Prostitution was not a criminal activity*” as opposed to “*soliciting, procuring, living off immoral earnings, and incitement to prostitution*” (Muscat, 2018, p. 24). Some high-end prostitutes supported their families and sponsored religious institutions. In a study entitled “*Growing up in Hospitaller Malta (1530-1798): An Overview*”, Emmanuel Buttigieg, shows how a 16th century lawyer depicts a prostitute called Joanna, holding her bleeding 13-year-old son Josepho in her arms, after an incident with one of her clients (Buttigieg, 2006). This indicates that children were sometimes in the house where prostitutes practised. Details in the notarial documents consulted by Buttigieg reveal that Joanna lived in an area of Birgu notorious for prostitution. Joanna’s dramatic misadventure stood out due to the vivid details documented by her client’s lawyer. Her story, which will be explored in the Research, Analysis and Discussion chapter, has the dynamics for a short performance.

2.5 Sourcing information on Female Early Modern Attire in Malta

According to Joseph C. Sammut, in his chapter “Historical notes on costume in 15th and Early 16th Century Malta” published in the book *Costume in Malta*, Maltese peasants could only afford simple garments made of coarse homespun material and a mantle made of cotton (De Piro & Cremona, 1998, pp. 26-27). This attire will be used for Isabetta, the witch’s dramatization.

Thomas Freller quotes the Scottish 17th century visitor W. Lithgow, who writes: that prostitutes had their “*head covered with blacke vayles, and much inclined to licentiousness.....often hapneth, that a foule and deformed carkasse hat a fair and rich wardrobe*” (Freller, 2018). Freller’s description was adopted for Joanna, the prostitute’s enactment.

Religious attire distinguishes one order from the other. Maria de Dominici was affiliated with the Carmelite Order. The Carmelite nuns’ habit consists of a brown tunic and scapular, a white toque worn over the head and shoulders, a black or white veil, a belt and rosary worn at the waist. A crucifix is worn concealed under the scapular, close to the heart. Carmelite nuns wore and still wear sandals and socks (Nadeau, 2017).

Females of higher social status like Elisabetta Dorell, would have been wearing clothes made of fine material. In her book, *Malta Women, History, Books and Places*, Susanna Hoe produces an image of a painting showing the Marchesa (Hoe, 2015, p. 127). Moreover, paintings by 18th century painter Antoine Favray (Fig 9) offer colourful reference into contemporary female attire.

2.6 Conclusion

Isabetta Caruana’s experience was selected to provide a snapshot on what it was like to be labelled a witch. Suor Maria de Dominici’s story will offer insights on women who led a religious life outside the cloister. Elisabetta Dorell’s experience offers a window onto married life. Joanna, a prostitute’s (*donna publica*) story will narrate an episode from the life of this working woman. These four women were chosen because of the dynamics of their real-life dramas in Birgu, and the logistic possibility of enacting a short episode of a snapshot of their life, on one of the ‘real life’ locations on the itinerary of a guided tour based on this study.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research method sought to explore the challenges faced by females of different social status during the period under study. Data was explored through a systematic approach based on bibliographic research on secondary sources.

The first step was to identify publications focusing on female narratives during the period under study. This exercise identified experiences, narratives and dramas of women linked to early modern Birgu. Through the bibliographic and referencing sections of these publications, further literature could be explored, which in turn shed more light on different aspects of female life. The focus fell on witchcraft, female religious, married life, and working women.

Four females; a witch, a nun, a married woman, and a prostitute living in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were identified. The potential of these real-life experiences to be logistically represented through drama on the streets of Birgu was explored and investigated. Their stories pointed to real life locations. This allowed for the establishing of suitable spots for dramatization to take place. Safety for the guests, accessibility and noise level of the chosen locations had to be taken in consideration when planning the dramatization. It was established that female monologues worked best to reach the objective of this research, in effectively informing and entertaining viewers on what it was like to be a woman in Hospitaller Malta.

The next step was to identify the kind of period attire these female protagonists could have possibly worn. This was done by looking at contemporary paintings, consulting historical illustrations in the books used for this research, as well as exploring literature about costume in Malta. The bibliographical research was not limited to local sources. Foreign sources were also consulted with the aim of consolidating the findings needed to fulfil the objectives of this essay and the creation of a tour. Costumes for the enactments were designed in line with these findings.

Writing the script meant exploring the biographies pertaining to the selected females thoroughly. The background stories of the protagonists of the enactments highlight character

traits, which dictate the body language and interpretation that the actresses need to portray. For instance, the mannerism of a subordinate citizen, like a prostitute or a witch, would be different to those of a nun hailing from an upper-class family and a woman of noble background. Through the literature consulted, some expressions and words in Italian were identified. These will be included in the monologues. Some places will also be referred to with their early modern names. The Inquisitor's Palace can be referred to as *Il Palazzo del Santo Uffizio*, il-Mandraġġ as *il Manderaggio* and when reference is made to St John's Co-cathedral in Valletta it can be referred to as *La Chiesa Conventuale di San Giovanni*. When writing the scripts, it was also imperative to plan for each enactment to last around five minutes. This time frame is enough for the actresses to bring to life the historical figures that they are portraying in their local environment in an entertaining and educational manner, without taking too much time from the actual tour.

In addition to the female narratives identified for enactments, specific locations linked to the protagonists were established. Prostitutes and lower-class people would have resided on the fringes of Birgu. The area known as il-Mandraġġ offers an ideal setup for Joanna the prostitute's narrative, and a scenic pedestrian area was identified. Isabetta Caruana, a woman accused of practicing witchcraft, was detained in the Inquisitor's Palace, so her story will be enacted in the vicinity. Once more a pedestrian area was selected. Suor Maria de Dominici was a Carmelite tertiary nun, so her dramatization was linked to the chapel of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The road at the back of the chapel is a T-Junction. Moreover, there is a niche containing the statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel which offers a scenic background for the dramatization. The choice of location for the enactment pertaining to Elizabetta Dorell logically fell on Triq San Ġorġ, where the entrance to Palazzo Bettina is located.

The route of the guided walking tour was designed on practical considerations rather than chronological order. This was done to enable visitors to enjoy other important attractions and historical buildings in Birgu during the tour. This will allow for the possibility to use the enactments as part of a classic tour of Birgu and not simply as a standalone tour.

3.1 – Limitations

The main limitation was the fact that data regarding female narratives was sporadic and scattered. In the case of women belonging to the lower classes, information is scanty. The limitation was faced with determination, and important narratives were identified and used for designing a guided tour. Another drawback was the wordcount restriction predetermined for the essay. This limited the number of narratives that could be included.

3.2 - Conclusion

This chapter discussed the process how this research was constructed. The study started with bibliographic research and a selection process focusing on real life female dramas that represented a cross section of female experiences. This was followed by costume design, monologue constructions and the pairing of locations with the protagonists' experiences. This methodology enabled the successful achievement of the goals of this research.

4. Results, Analysis and Discussion

This chapter will address snapshots of real-life-dramas of four women who lived in early modern Birgu. The protagonists of this study lived in different epochs and hailed from different walks of life. In the last decade of the sixteenth century a certain Joanna was earning a living through prostitution, and Isabetta Caruana was an elderly woman who was accused of witchcraft. In the mid-seventeenth century Maria de Dominici was an artistically talented tertiary nun, and Elisabetta Moscati Dorell was an unhappily married woman living in Birgu in the eighteenth century. The objective of this chapter is to shed some light on female experiences and to share this knowledge through drama. The costumes worn by the actors seek to adhere to the type of clothes worn by women at the time when the stories happened, and will be sourced from the personal collection of the author of this study.

4.1 – Joanna – A sixteenth century Public Woman

In a paper entitled 'Growing up in Hospitaller Malta' published in 2006, Emanuel Buttigieg says that daily life was a constant struggle for poor young people. Besides facing hardships linked to poverty, like hunger cold and sickness, they also suffered the brunt of violence, fights, and beatings (Buttigieg, 2006). This was certainly the fate of Josepho, the son of Joanna, a prostitute living in Birgu in the sixteenth century. The story of Joanna and her son Josepho was discovered by Buttigieg in the notarial archives. Joanna, whose surname does not feature in documents, appears to have been a woman living on her own resources. She did not enjoy the support or protection of a *mundualdo*. In the 1590s Joanna experienced the horrors of seeing her 13-year-old son being gravely wounded before her eyes. She also faced the injustice of the courts denigrating the crime because she was a prostitute.

4.1.1 - A public Woman's Experience

Joanna was entertaining a man in her home when her son Josepho played a prank on him. He pulled out a chair from beneath her client just as he was about to sit down. The man drew his sword and slashed Josepho's left arm. Joanna's screams attracted neighbours who happened

to be in the area and ran to help her. The boy survived and the perpetrator was taken to court. He was defended by a lawyer who said that the defendant acted instinctively and accused Joanna of being a disreputable woman, a prostitute, and a dishonest courtesan "*meretrice, cortegiana, puttana, corteggiata inhonesta, donna et puttana pubblica*". Joanna retaliated by saying "*elli potte amazati a mio figlio*", meaning he could have killed my son (Buttigieg, 2006).

This story demonstrates that in the sixteenth century, some public women did not enjoy the same privileges and opportunities in court afforded to women of good repute.

4.1.2 - Location where the Drama will be performed

Buttigieg hints that Joanna lived in an area of Birgu notorious for prostitution. He does not specify which area; however, it is safe to presume that it was possibly on the fringes of Birgu, close to the sea. The site chosen for the dramatization of the scene is an area in Birgu known as the Manderaggio. Originally the Manderaggio was a sea inlet that sheltered small boats during storms or during maintenance works. When the knights built the Birgu fortifications, the area was filled in, transforming the sea inlet into land. Poor people built dwellings on the reclaimed land, transforming it into a face-to-face living labyrinth. This social setting was refurbished in the 1970s, when most of the historical buildings were replaced by modern apartments. The enactment can take place in the beginning of Triq l-Antika, a pedestrian area of il-Mandraġġ, safe enough for a group to stop for a short while. Being on the fringes, the group can also enjoy impressive views of the harbour and the Kalkara coastline.

4.1.3 - Actress in Costume:

Joanna is represented by a female actress in her 30s. Venetian Knight Fra Opizio Guidotti produced drawings (Fig 1 and 2) of a "*Chivala Maltese quando va fuor di casa*", a Maltese prostitute when she goes out of the house, and a "*Chivala quando sta in casa*", a prostitute when she is at home (Muscat, 2013, pp. 18,19). Such attire could be allocated to Joanna. The actress will be wearing period makeup, reproduced with the use of pale foundation, blusher, lipstick and eyeliner. Her attire will consist of a revealing blouse, colourful skirt, platform shoes and a cloak.



Figure 1 - Chivala Maltese quando va fuori di casa



Figure 2 - Chivala quando sta in casa

4.2 – Isabetta Caruana – An illiterate midwife tried for witchcraft and heresy

Isabetta Caruana was an elderly Gozitan midwife, who was well practised in natural healing. She also assembled girls and taught them prayers and Catholic doctrine. She alleged that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary's breast or of her side. In May 1599 she was summoned to the court of the Roman Inquisition in Birgu accused of heresy and incarcerated. Witnesses who were called to testify claimed to have seen her riding naked on a broomstick at night together with her prostitute daughter Romana. The elderly Isabetta was tortured using the *strappado*, a form of torture in which the victim is hoisted by a rope and dropped with a jerk. She was then questioned. She was locked up for five months. In September 1599 her sentence was read out inside the Tribunal Room at the Inquisitor's Palace. Her punishment included public humiliation, attending high mass on her knees at the Matrix church in Gozo while holding a candle, going to confession, and saying the rosary (Cassar, 2004).

4.2.1 - A sixteenth Century Witch's Experience:

Isabetta's case took four months for the inquisition to gather evidence supporting the accusation of witchcraft. She was then summoned to the tribunal room. She would have had to kneel or stand in the middle of the room facing court, accompanied by a lawyer. A scribe would be recording the minutes of the proceedings, and the inquisitor, or his representatives would be sitting facing the accused. Isabetta clearly did not admit to being a witch, because she was taken to the torture room. A physician prescribed the level of punishment and torture, that she, an elderly woman, could endure. The maximum daily torture time would have been thirty minutes divided by rest breaks. The next day the accused would be asked to re-confirm the truth of the confession, swearing on the bible. Isabetta claimed she was innocent, and never admitted to the crimes she was accused of. Punishment for witchcraft accusations included public humiliation, attending high mass on their knees while holding a candle in a church where everyone knew them, going to confession and saying the rosary (Cassar, 2004).

Isabetta's experience shows how elderly, poor, single mothers living in small communities in early modern Malta ran the risk of being labelled witches. The risk appears to have been higher for female midwives, herbalists, healers, and catechists.

4.2.2 - Location where the Drama will be performed

The building presently known as the Inquisitor's palace, was used as the Knights' *Castellania*. When the knights moved to Valletta and vacated this house in the 1570s, it was offered to Mgr. Dusina, the first resident inquisitor of Malta. Subsequent inquisitors kept buying adjacent properties, enlarging, and embellishing the place in the process. The premises served as residence, court, and prisons of the Inquisition Tribunal up to 1798, when the Inquisition was abolished during the French occupation.

The enactment can take place in Triq il-Kanonku Fenech, a pedestrian street flanking the Inquisitor's palace. Being on the outside does not limit the enactment to take place only during opening hours of the Inquisitor's palace. Moreover, this requires no extra payment for admission fee to the Inquisitor's palace.

4.2.3 - Actress in costume:



Isabetta Caruana, the elderly woman tried for witchcraft, was a member of a lower-class community, so one can allocate peasant attire to this female who lived towards the end of the 16th century. Their clothes were made of coarse homespun material and were often barefooted. The drawing by Venetian Knight Fra Opizio Guidotti depicting a late 16th century bare footed "*Vilana Maltese*" (Muscat, 2013, p. 20) wearing a simple dress and a mantle, fits the idea (Fig 3). The actress will be wearing simple peasant attire consisting of a cotton shift, tunic, and a mantle.

Figure 3 - Fra Opizio Guidotti - Vilana Maltese

4.3 - Suor Maria de Dominici – A seventeenth century Maltese female artist

Born in 1645 in a family of artists based in Birgu, Maria de Dominici devoted herself to painting. Though initially her parents resisted, eventually they were compelled to provide her with a tutor (Hoe, 2015, p. 116). Maria de Dominici's work followed the baroque school of Mattia Preti, with whom she worked as an assistant, superseding his other pupils. Allegedly, the female figures depicted in the vault of St John's conventual church are her work (De Piro, 1839). The date of her *matrimonium spirituale*, when she took simple vows and became a nun of the Carmelite Order, is unknown, however it was before she left Malta at the age of thirty-seven. A tertiary nun affiliated to the Carmelite order (*pinzocchera*) held the vows of chastity and obedience, and poverty without enclosure, so she could live outside the convent. Cloistered nuns took vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, and enclosure (*clausura*). Supposedly females had to be at least forty years old before professing as *pinzocchere*. Maria was younger (Xuereb, 2017).

4.3.1 - A Tertiary Nun's Experience

In an epoch when female artists were overshadowed by male counterparts (Vassallo, 2020), tertiary nun Maria de Dominici, was credited for her artistic skills. Her family connections with high dignitaries may have eased her premature acceptance into the Carmelite Order. Her religious affiliation also meant that her works of art were set in a religious context. Allegedly encouraged by Mattia Preti himself, Maria de Dominici left Malta in 1682 to pursue her studies in Rome, where she died aged 58. Her nephew Bernardo de Dominici included the biography of Mattia Preti, and that of his aunt Maria in his 18th century book "*Vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti Napoletani*". He suggests that his aunt was a better sculpture than a painter, and in Rome she studied Bernini's works. In her Masters' degree dissertation, Nadette Xuereb suggests that Bernardo' de Dominici's writings might have an "*element of nepotism*" in favour of his aunt (Xuereb, 2017). Nonetheless, it is believed that Suor Maria de Dominici travelled with the entourage of the grandmaster's nephew and his wife Isabella d' Avalos d' Aquino d' Aragona, who were impressed by her works. Her surviving works of art in Malta are quite inaccessible, however the silver coated wooden statue of Maria Bambina attributed to De Dominici, heads the 8th December procession in Cospicua every year (Hoe, 2015, p. 117).

In the 17th century women had two main options: the cloister or marriage. Both options did not offer women the possibility of becoming artists. Becoming a tertiary nun was Maria De Dominici's path to pursuing her talent and ambition to become an artist.

4.3.2 - Location where the Drama will be performed

The Carmelites had a priory in Vittoriosa between 1582 and 1652. The original Carmelite Church, was built in 1611, hence may have been one of the places visited by Maria De Dominici. The church once held a sculpture of St Teresa's Transverberation¹ by Maria de Dominici. The original building was financed by the crews of the order's galleys, for whom religious services were regularly held in the church. The galleys making use of the slipway leading to the church had to pay 4 tari (Fig 4). This funding helped the Carmelite friars and the Tertiaries with maintenance and expenses, however, the Carmelite friars, living in the annexed priory had to relocate to convents in Imdina and Valletta due to lack of funds in 1653. The church and convent were occupied by the Congregation of the Oratorians of St Philip Neri, and later by the Franciscan nuns who established a convent and a school. Though destroyed in World War II, the present wall and facade are identical elevations of the original (Attard, 2006).

The enactment can take place near the corner niche of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel just behind the church of our lady of Mount Carmel. The road is called Triq San Lawrenz, and it is a T- Junction, making it safer for guests during the tour.



Figure 4 Copper Fiduciary 4 Tari (il-Patakka) Jean-Paul Lascaris Castellar (1636-57)

¹ The transverberation is a mystical grace wherein the Saint's heart is pierced with a "dart of love" by an angel. (St. John of the Cross writes that "It will happen that while the soul is inflamed with the Love of God, it will feel that a seraph is assailing it by means of an arrow or dart which is all afire with love").

4.3.3 -Actress in Costume:

Maria de Dominici (Fig 5.) is represented by a young woman wearing a habit like that of a Carmelite nun. The habit of Carmelite nuns has barely changed over the centuries, so the actress will wear a brown tunic and scapular, a white toque, and a black veil (Fig 6). She will carry a shoulder bag containing scrolls of paper.



Figure 5 - An artistic interpretation of Suor Maria de Dominici from L'Arte 1-51



Figure 6 – Modern Day Maltese Carmelite Nuns

4.4 - Donna Elisabetta Moscati Testaferrata Dorell – An eighteenth century *marchesa*

Elisabetta Moscati Testaferrata Dorell was the youngest of the four daughters born to Pietro Paulo Falzon Dorell and Ursula d' Amico Inguanez. Born in Birgu (Fig 7) in 1741 into one of the elite families of the time, at the age of nineteen, Donna Elisabetta was married to Diego Moscati, a Doctor of Laws who went on to become the second marquis of Xrobb il-Għagin. This marriage of convenience (Hoe, 2015, p. 125), typical of the concurrent norms of same social-class marriages, was unstable from its inception. Diego Moscati had already fathered other children with his mistress, one of whom was born the same year as his marriage to Elisabetta. His lady-wife was logically maladjusted, and allegedly had an intimate friendship with her confessor, Inquisitor Angelo Durini. Gossip mongers say that it was also a common occurrence for Donna Elisabetta and Inquisitor Durini to be seen strolling together arm-in-arm. Donna Elisabetta was a substantial benefactor of the Church of St Lawrence and the first Maltese Cardinal, Fabrizio Sceberras Testaferrata, appointed in 1818 was her nephew. Donna Elisabetta wanted to estrange herself from her husband and enjoyed travelling, especially to Naples. Amidst the rising of eyebrows, Donna Bettina as she is known today, lived her life gracefully through the years, amassing popularity, wealth and property along the way. She became a lady in waiting to Queen Caroline of Naples and the two Sicilies, and lived to the ripe old age of 88. She died in 1829.

4.4.1 - An eighteenth Century wealthy Married Woman's Experience:

Lady Bettina was a wealthy woman living the comfortable life of 18th century female-of-means of the Maltese nobility. She was a woman of substance who socialised in elite social circles. She was also a well-dressed woman described as a '*lady of fashion*' (De Piro & Cremona, 1998, p. 5). However, Elisabetta was also targeted for scrutiny and gossip. Letters written by Inquisitor Durini to the Pope Pius VI testify that her husband had a bad reputation. The marquis regarded his wife with disdain because unlike his mistress, she failed to give him sons. Rosolea, Diego Moscati's lover, gave birth to two sons. Moreover, when Bettina's daughter was born in 1764, it was Inquisitor Angelo Durini who held the child, acting as godfather, during the baptism ceremony that was held in the chapel of his palace in Birgu (Zammit, 2005). The infant was even named Angela, allegedly hinting to the infant's biological father.

Consequently, none of the Moscati family attended the ceremony. The inquisitor was summoned by the Pope following the scandal, and Grandmaster Pinto had to deal with the evergrowing resentment between Bettina and her husband. Diego Moscati placed Angela in a cloister. However, Angela was a resilient woman like her mother. She refused to stay in the cloister, or get married to men chosen by either of her parents.

In the eighteenth century, some women of high status could be tenacious and resist social norms. Notwithstanding predominant patriarchal ideologies, Elisabetta and Angela lived their lives the way they wanted to.



Figure 7 – Palazzo Bettina in Birgu, the house where Elisabetta Dorell was born

4.4.2 - Location where the Drama will be performed

Bettina was born in the recently refurbished 17th century *palazzo* in Birgu, round the corner on the left from the church of St Lawrence. The main entrance of the building is in St Ġorġ's Street. She resided there for some time and the marble plaques attest that her nephew, Cardinal Sceberras Testaferrata resided there as well. The historical building, subsequently served as residence for several distinguished personalities including St Emilia de Vialar, after she was shipwrecked on the island in 1842.

In the palazzo, St Emilia de Vialar established the Congregation of the sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition, who opened the first college for females in Malta. Later the building served as a British military hospital. Before World War II, the property also served as one of the seats for the Society of Doctrine established by St Ġorġ Preca. Having been damaged during the war, it remained vacant for some time. Neighbours have often claimed to hear strange noises coming from inside the building, hinting to the fact that the place might be haunted (Attard, 2006).

The enactment can take place in Triq San Ġorġ, near the main entrance of the palazzo. This is a quiet pedestrian area, where the drama can take place.

4.4.3 - Actress in Costume:

Noble women like Elisabetta Dorell, would have shown their prosperity and well being through fashionable attire made of fine delicate material. (Fig 8) Lady Bettina is represented by a woman in her late 40s, wearing 18th century attire, consisting of a skirt and doublet made from damask and a sheer veil.



Figure 8 - Marchesa Elisabetta (Bettina) Moscati Dorell, (Hoe, 2015, p. 127)



Figure 9 – The visit by Antoine Favray {Muza}

4.5 Conclusion

We have seen how research and analysis on these four women shows how some prostitutes in the sixteenth century suffered injustices in the hands of the law. They did not have equal rights at court. An elderly single unsupported mother, who was both a physical and a spiritual healer could easily be targeted as a witch, whilst being a tertiary nun could offer the independence needed by females to be able to pursue a profession. We have also seen how, notwithstanding hardships faced in marriage, an upper-class woman could overturn social conventions and reach her goals. These four female figures represent a general overview of some women's lives in early modern Birgu that can inform and entertain visitors.

4. Final Arguments and Conclusions

“Historians are gossips who tease the dead.” – Voltaire

When we're looking at the past, we're looking at people like us who often faced challenges and responded to them with the knowledge and skills that they had within their social, economic, and political environment. Whether its witchcraft, religious matters, married life, or the working environment, both men and women dealt with daily life hurdles, sometimes successfully and sometimes less so. Much has been written about the history of Birgu. Literature on female life in early modern Birgu is growing but still limited. This long essay seeks to raise awareness on the need to delve further into women's histories in the oldest maritime city in Malta's Grand Harbour. It seeks to achieve this goal by merging history and drama, and creating enactments that aim to portray female experiences and provoke thought. The current historical enactments on offer largely pertain to knight investitures and military parades. Enactments focusing on female narratives are lacking. Considering this, documented real-life female dramas can be enacted with period costumes on real-life locations or in the vicinity, for both educational and entertaining purposes. The tour that compliments this research will entice schools, travel agents, the Birgu Local Council, Heritage Malta, and other organizations to consider theatrical historical tours focused on female narratives. This additional market strategy promotes tourism, attracts visitors to Birgu, and ultimately informs about what it was like to be a woman living in the harbour area in Hospitaller times, in an animated way.

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Appendix 1 :

Women of Early Modern Birgu – Tour Itinerary

The tour's objective is to create awareness of female life in Birgu during hospitaller times. During this tour we will get acquainted with the real-life dramas of four select women and revisit episodes of their lives through enactments.

Itinerary

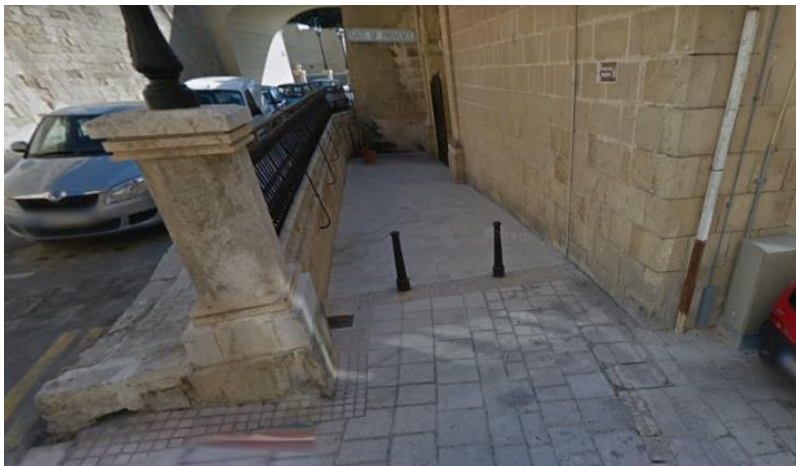
Meeting place: Open pedestrian area near Malta at War Museum.



The tour starts with a brief introduction of Birgu and its role as a maritime city during early modern times. The guide points out that the tour's itinerary will follow a specific route within Birgu focusing on female narratives.



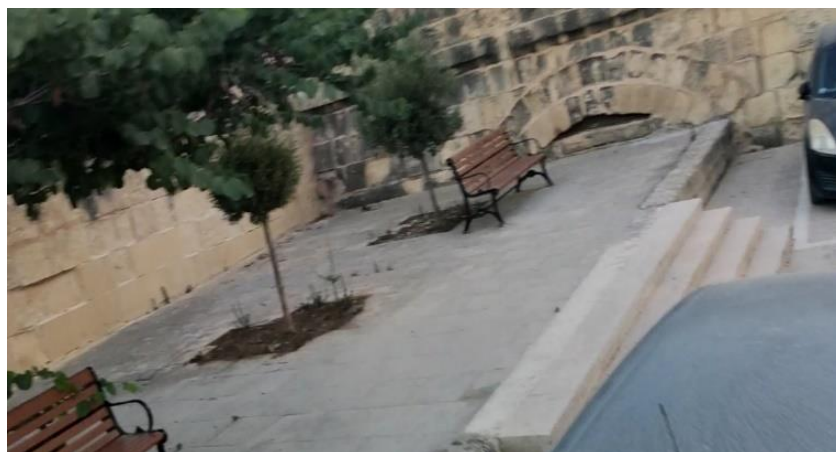
First Stop: Pedestrian Area just before stepping out into Triq il-Vittmi tal-Polverista

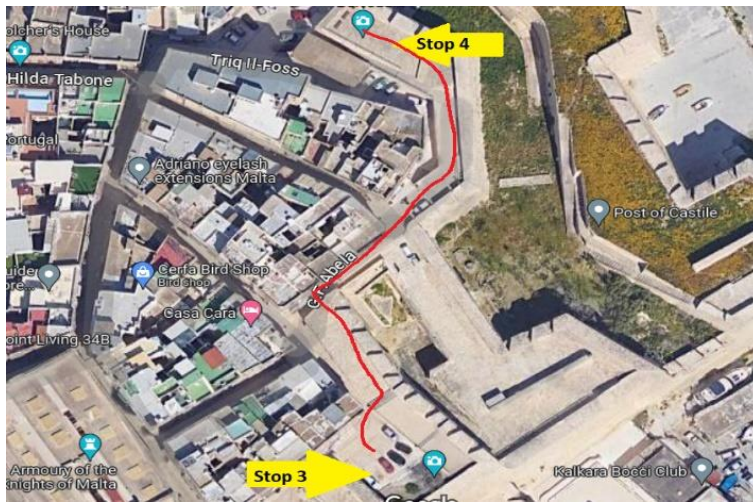


Second Stop: Suq tal-Kurdara (Triq it-Torri ta' San Ġwann) near steps close to armoury

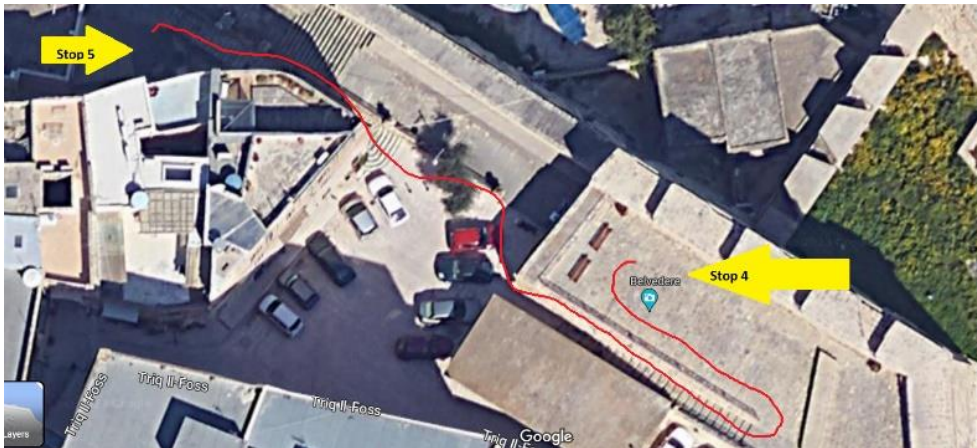


Third Stop: Il-Breccia / Post of Castille





Fourth Stop: Birgu Belveder – quick photo stop



Fifth Stop: Il-Mandraġġ / Triq l-Antika (Here we watch the first enactment)



Scene Narrative:

Joanna is leaning against a wall. When the tour-group approaches, she straightens herself and proceeds by relating her story. She tells how her husband went out to sea and never returned, leaving her to raise her son on her own resources. She talks about the difficulties she faced to ensure they would have a roof over their head and food on the table. She resorted to entertaining men at home to make ends meet. She talks about her terror and despair when one of her clients slashed her son with his sword in rage and escaped. She explains how neighbours responded to her cries for help and took her son to a physician who saved his life. She goes on to relate how she reported the matter to the Castellan who sent his guards to arrest the man, and the subsequent humiliation and injustice she suffered when his lawyer defended his client's actions. He alleged that the accused's action was instinctive and that the mother was a prostitute, hence suggesting to the court that her son was not deserving of justice. The scene ends with Joanna saying: "God will judge the righteous and the wicked. Yes, there will be a time for every case to be settled before God".



Sixth Stop: Near Church of St Anne / Santa Scholastica Area



Seventh Stop: Triq San Lawrenz - Near Niche of Our Lady of Mt Carmel (this is where the second enactment takes place)



Scene Narrative:

Maria de Dominici is returning from the priory, smiling distractedly. She drops something. The guide interacts with her by drawing her attention. After a courtesy bow, prompted by the guide, de Dominici speaks of her latest commission. She talks about the meeting she just had with a noble man and an ecclesiastic, recounting how happy she is that she has been trusted with the work. She tells how she has always loved art, her gratitude to her parents for art tuition and her pride for being part of Mattia Preti's bottega. She argues that regardless of her low salary, compared to her male counterparts, she loves being an artist. She speaks regardless of the social pressures of getting married, and how becoming a tertiary nun offered her opportunities she could not enjoy in the cloister. Being a tertiary nun granted her independence and the possibility to fulfil her ambitions to travel and study the great artists in Rome. She ends by saying: Where there is divine will, there is always a way.



Eighth Stop: off Victory Square – near BOV Atm



Ninth Stop: Church Close

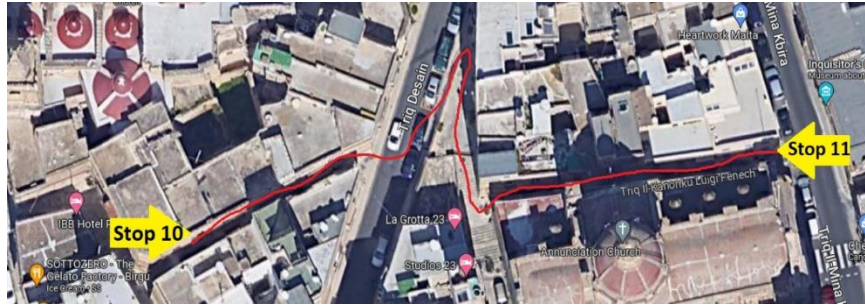


Tenth Stop: Triq San Ġorġ / near Palazz ta' Bettina (third enactment)



Scene Narrative:

The Actress introduces herself as the Marchesa Elisabetta Moscati Dorell. She hints to her carefree infancy, as her father's favourite daughter and how benevolent her parents were towards her. She mentions some of the properties she owned around the island and how charitable she was, especially to the church of St Lawrence. She talks about her troubled married life, and how her friendship with the Inquisitor helped her spiritually. She denies the rumours of her infidelity to her husband and reminisces the disputes for custody of her daughter. She recounts the history of the palazzo where she was born, including its' fate after her ascension to lady in waiting to Queen Carolina. She emphasises how she managed to rise above the tide of times and never gave in to social pressures or gossip. She used her charms and connections to prosper, always facing her life-hurdles with grace and pride. She ends by saying strong women aren't simply born, they are made of the storms they go through.



Eleventh Stop: Triq il-Kanonku Fenech near Inquisitor's Palace (fourth enactment and conclusion)



Scene Narrative:

The enactment starts with Isabetta walking towards the audience saying that she is not a witch. She proceeds by relating the injustice she suffered when she was arrested and incarcerated in the Inquisitor's prisons. She says that she dedicated her whole life to helping neighbours and friends in need, delivering babies, and preparing natural remedies to cure maladies. She also explains how religious she was, and how she used to teach young girls catechism. Then she goes on to talk about the man who accused her and her daughter of flying on a broomstick and other false accusations that she never committed. She describes the tortures she suffered at the hands of the Inquisition and the fact that she never confessed to any of these crimes even under torture. Yet she was punished and now she was on her way back to her hometown in Gozo where she had to face her humiliating punishment. She ends by saying that being a good woman did not always pay in the 16th century. It could lead to being labelled a witch.

Conclusion

In the sixteenth century, Joanna was a prostitute and Isabetta Caruana was an elderly Gozitan midwife labelled as a witch. Their real-life dramas portray the condescending social attitude towards single women who lacked a male protector. The privileges enjoyed in court by women of good repute were denied to them, moreover the risk of being labelled a witch was higher for prostitutes and midwives. On the other hand, Maria de Dominici, a tertiary nun and Elisabetta Moscati Dorell, a wealthy married woman who lived in the seventeenth century used their connections and social class to resist social norms. Their resilience and social status were assets easing the pursuit of their ambitions. Though we are separated from the women whom we learnt about during this tour by hundreds of years, their stories resonate modern time stories to a certain extent, and this makes us feel close to them.

Appendix 2:

Enactment Scripts for Birgu Dissertation Tour

1. Perils of the Trade - Joanna, a 16th century prostitute

Location: Il-Mandraġġ – Triq l-Antika

Joanna is leaning against a wall. When she sees the tour group, she stands and speaks of her woes. She immediately tells the audience that her son is gravely wounded and proceeds by relating her story. She tells how her husband went out to sea and never returned, leaving her to raise her son on her own resources. She talks about the difficulties she faced to ensure they would have a roof over their head and food on the table. She resorted to entertaining men at home to make ends meet. She talks about her terror and despair when one of her clients slashed her son with his sword in rage and escaped. She explains how neighbours responded to her cries for help and took her son to a physician who saved his life. She goes on to relate how she reported the matter to the Castellan who sent his guards to arrest the man, and the subsequent humiliation and injustice she suffered when his lawyer defended his client's actions by saying that the accused's action was instinctive, that the mother was a prostitute, hence suggesting to the court that her son was not deserving of justice. The scene ends with Joanna saying that God will judge the righteous and the wicked.

2. Defying Stereotypes - Maria de Dominici, a religious 17th century artist

Location: Near niche of Our Lady of Mt Carmel in Triq San Lawrenz

Maria de Dominici is returning from the priory, smiling distractedly. She drops something. The guide interacts with her by drawing her attention. After a courtesy bow, prompted by the guide, de Dominici speaks of her latest commission. She talks about the meeting she just had with a noble man and an ecclesiastic and recounts how happy she is that she has been trusted with the work. She tells how she has always loved art. She speaks of how she enjoys her art tuition and how proud she is to be part of Mattia Preti's bottega. She argues that regardless of her diminutive salary, compared to her male counterparts, she is better talented than most of them. She speaks of the social pressures of getting married, yet she was adamant on becoming a tertiary nun. Such status granted her independence and the possibility to reach her ambition; that to travel and study the great artists in Rome.

3. Rising above the Tide of Time - Elisabetta Dorell, a 18th century marchesa

Location: Triq San Ġorġ near main entrance to Palazz ta' Bettina

The Actress introduces herself as the Marchesa Elisabetta Moscati Dorell. She hints to her carefree infancy, as her father's favourite daughter and how benevolent her parents were towards her. She mentions some of the properties she owned around the island and how charitable she was, especially to the church of St Lawrence. She talks about her troubled married life, and how her friendship with the Inquisitor helped her spiritually. She denies the rumours of her infidelity to her husband and reminisces the disputes for custody of her daughter. She emphasises how she managed to rise above the tide of times and never gave in to being cloistered. She recounts the history of the palazzo where she was born, including its' fate after her ascension to lady in waiting to Queen Carolina.

4. The Broom Riding Mid-wife - Isabetta Caruana, a 16th century witch

Location: Triq il-Kanonku Fenech (near the Inquisitor's Palace)

The enactment starts with Isabetta walking towards the audience saying that she is not a witch. She proceeds by relating the injustice she suffered when she was arrested and incarcerated in the Inquisitor's prisons. She says that she dedicated her whole life to helping neighbours and friends in need, delivering babies, and preparing natural remedies to cure maladies. She also explains how religious she was, and how she used to teach young girls catechism. Then she goes on to talk about the man who accused her and her daughter of flying on a broomstick and other false accusations that she never committed. She describes the tortures she suffered at the hands of the Inquisition and the fact that she never confessed to any of these crimes even under torture. Yet she was punished and now she was on her way back to her hometown in Gozo where she had to face her humiliating punishment. She ends by saying that being a good woman did not always pay in the 16th century. It could lead to being labelled a witch.

1. *Perils of the Trade - Joanna's worst client*

Period: late 16th century

Location: Il-Mandraġġ, Triq l-Antika

Actress in Costume: Joanna, a woman about 30 years of age wearing 'peasant' attire, a white blouse, a waistcoat, skirt, platform shoes, and a cloak.

Joanna is leaning against a wall. When the tour group approaches, she straightens herself.

Joanna:

Elli potte amazati a mio figlio, elli potte amazati a mio figlio! He could have killed my son! There was so much blood! And all he could say was, "*Be quiet woman! You will draw all the neighbours out of their hovels!*" Why are men so cruel? Why? Why did he have to hurt my son? My son never hurt anyone! Josepho was just playing around! But the man didn't want anyone to know that he was here, visiting a *puttana!* So, he wanted me to be quiet! *Disgraziato Assassino!* He kept calling me *puttana, e donna dishonesta!* I am a *puttana! Così io campo!* But *donna dishonesta* no! I have never been dishonest in my life. *Scusatemi signori.* I have not even introduced myself. I meant no disrespect.

My name is Joanna. I was happily married for a few months and my husband provided for me. We were poor but we had a roof on our head and always had bread on our table. Josepho was only a year old when my husband decided that the real money lay out at sea. He found work on one of the galleys of the *Ordine di San Giovanni*. In all the 12 years he has been away, he sent us money only once! That is how I knew that he was still alive, because we never saw him again. The money soon ran out and I was out on the street with a toddler. I tried to look for work as a cleaning lady. I thought maybe they would let me sleep in the stable with the goats. But no-one wanted to employ a woman with a clingy baby, crying all the time. I begged for food, but it was not enough to feed both me and my son. Josepho is all I have, and for him I was ready to do anything.

So, when a neatly dressed man offered me a *grano* for my (pause) company I found the courage to accept his offer. It became easier with the passing of years. I could feed my son every day, clothe him and eventually rent this hovel. Some men visited me regularly and they did not mind that Josepho was in the room with us. Sometimes he played quietly in a corner and sometimes he seemed to have the seven devils in him. But that is what children are like and many of my friends were used to him.

But one day a *sconosciuto* knocked on my door. I never refuse new clients. He was neatly dressed and was joking with me from the start. I offered him some wine and when I handed him the goblet, I offered him a chair. But when he was about to sit down all hell broke loose! Before I could say anything, he was on the floor! Josepho was laughing holding the chair! He had pulled the chair from beneath the man's bottom just as he was about to sit down, making him fall on the floor, knocking off his goblet of wine. I don't know what compelled Josepho to do that. I always told him not to disturb my friends!

The evil man did not like the prank and was quick to take out his sword and slash at Josepho! If my son was not as agile as a monkey, he could have killed him. I am sure he aimed for the heart because he slashed at his left arm, the *assassino*! There was so much blood! and I was so scared! I screamed so much that the ladies living in this *camerata* all came out. Even their men friends came running. That *disgraziato* was so angry and would have finished us both with his sword hadn't the men come. When he saw all those people looking at him, he ran away with his sword still dripping with blood.

A few good men took my son to a physician and the good women of the *camerata* helped me in my darkest hour. I am eternally grateful to them because my son was saved even though he lost a lot of blood.

My neighbours and the men were witnesses to this tragic event and this gave me the courage to report everything to the *castellano*. The guards of the *castellano* arrested the man but his lawyer defended the *assassino*'s aggressive behaviour. He said that he acted instinctively. He insisted that because I am *meretrice, cortegiana, puttana, cortegiana inhonesta, donna et puttana pubblica*, my son was not deserving of justice.

It was very humiliating. I am suffering this injustice because I am a woman, because I am poor, and I have no *mundualdo* to protect me! *Amici miei*, I need money to pay for a good lawyer. I need money to pay for the physician to keep tending to my son's wounds. *Donne pubbliche* like myself do not enjoy the same privileges and opportunities in Court afforded to women of good repute. So, I need to work. *Cosi io campo*. Clients will keep away if they see such a crowd in my corner. God will judge the righteous and the wicked. Yes, there will be a time for every case to be settled before God.

(She courtesies and walks away)

2. *Diverging from stereotypes – Maria de Dominici*

Period: 2nd half of the 17th century

Location: Near niche of Our Lady of Mt Carmel in Triq San Lawrenz

Actress in Costume: Maria de Dominici: A young woman wearing a linen shirt, waistcoat, skirt and a veil, carrying a cloth shoulder bag with scrolls of paper.

(Maria de Dominici is returning from the priory, smiling distractedly. She drops something. The guide interacts with her by drawing her attention. After a courtesy bow, prompted by the guide, de Dominici starts her monologue, speaking enthusiastically).

Guide: *Signiorina Maria, stia attenta! (indicates the object dropped with a smile)*

Maria: *Oh! Grazie!* (Picks up the object and courtesies). *Buon Giorno Signiora.* Forgive my clumsiness this morning but my life is about to change for the better and I am very happy!

Guide: I am glad to hear that! But do share with us the good new so we can rejoice with you!

Maria: My latest commission is one that I am very excited about. I have just left the Sacristy of the Carmelite Church. I had a meeting with a wealthy *nobiluomo* and the prior of the *convento*. There was also a notary, and we signed a contract. I am so happy that I have been entrusted with the making of this statue of St Teresa's transverberation.

Guide: Transverberation? That is a difficult representation to make signiorina. How will you do that?

Maria: Let me show you! I have the designs right here! *(takes out a scroll and shows a painting of St Teresa's transverberation to the guests)* The transverberation is a mystical grace wherein the Saint's heart is pierced with a "dart of love" by an

angel. St. John of the Cross writes that “It will happen that while the soul is inflamed with the Love of God, it will feel that a seraph is assailing it by means of an arrow or dart which is all afire with love”. This happened to St Tereza and that is how I intend to sculpt her. We discussed my ideas; I showed them my sketches and they liked them. I always loved art. I thank the lord that I was born in a family of artists, who understood my passion. My father is a very talented goldsmith, and all my brothers are artists. I was always fascinated by how a thought could be reproduced on parchment. I cherish the tuition that I received, and I bless every scudo that my father spent. My master Don Mattia Preti is the best artist in Malta, and I am proud to be part of his bottega. Compared to my male counterparts, my remuneration is rather diminutive, but my master trusts me. I have been up on the scaffolding alongside with the males, working on the nave of the *cattedrale* in Valletta.

Guide: What an honour! You must be very talented!

Maria: My master often trusts me with painting female figures because he says that I can depict them better than the others. I love painting but I love to sculpture better. My dream is to study the great artists in Rome. Donatello, Michelangelo, Bernini. Amazing pieces emerge from the marble at their touch! I want to leave Malta and see their work with my own eyes and touch the statues with my own hands. It is not going to be easy, because a woman’s destiny is to get married, have children and keep house. But that life is not what I desire! I have never been inclined to a domestic life! I don’t want to give myself to any man and spend my life at home. Like St Tereza d’ Avila I was pierced in the heart by the arrow of love, the love of God. And like Santa Tereza d’ Avila I want to wear the colours of the Carmelite nuns.

Guide: Are you sure that is what you want? You are still young. If you locked yourself up in a cloister you will never see the work of the artists that you mentioned!

Maria: I am a *pinzocchera*, a tertiary nun because I don't want to be cloistered. I want my independence. I want to travel and see the work of the great masters. That is what I will do! I must run home and tell my mother of my decision! My mind is made up! I will be known as Suor Maria de Dominici, the *artista* from Malta.

Guide: But, females usually must be at least 40 years of age to become *Pinzocchere* or *bizocche*.

Maria: The lord works in mysterious ways. I am already a *pinzocchera* as you see. Where there is will, a divine will, there is always a way. *Buona Giornata signiori.* (*she courtesies and leaves*)

Guide: *Buona giornata Suor Maria.*

Once Maria leaves, the guide continues her narrative about Maria De Dominici on site before moving on to the next stop.



3. *Rising above the tide of time - Elizabetta Dorell, an unhappily married marchesa*

Period: 2nd half of the 18th century

Location: Triq San Ġorġ near main entrance to Palazz ta' Bettina

Actress in Costume: Lady Bettina: Woman in her late 40s (played by the guide herself), wearing 18th century attire, consisting of a skirt and doublet made from damask and a lace veil.

(The guide, who had introduced herself at the beginning of the tour and explained that she was in costume because she was representing an 18th century woman called Elizabetta, finally, discloses the full name of the character she has been representing all along).

Bettina:

Dear guests, now that we have stopped near a place that is very at heart to me, I cannot but help myself and reveal the identity of the character I am representing. I could talk about the women encountered so far during the tour because they lived before my time. My name is Donna Elizabetta Moscati Dorell. Daughter of Pietro Paolo Falzon Dorell and Ursula d'Amico Inguanez. I am the youngest of four daughters and this is the house where I was born in 1741. This used to be our family home. Oh, how elegantly glorious it was at the time! I remember playing with my sisters in the *salagrande*, getting dressed for parties and the dinners....(*sighs dreamily*) Oh the dinners we used to have, and the knights and noblemen that joined us! Such good times! Such happy memories! My mother used to call me Bettina and eventually so did my closest friends. Even the common folk addressed me as Donna Bettina, and I didn't mind because it reminded me of their adoration for myself.

I was born in the age of elegance and my family was part of the *alta societa'* of the islands. I was the pride and joy of my parents, and I had a very happy childhood, sheltered from the evils of the world. I knew nothing but love in my family. I was brought up according to strong Christian values and my family wanted nothing but the best for me. My marriage was arranged when I

was still young and when I married Diego Moscati before my 20th birthday, I was the happiest bride in Malta. Diego was a Doctor of Laws, coming from one of the wealthiest families of Malta. He was soon to become the 2nd Marquise of Xrobb il-Għaġin, hence a very good *parti*.

However, my happiness was not to last! (*She grimaces and takes out a fan from her bag*). I soon discovered that he had an *amante*, a *donnaccia*, who came from a family of *corteggiane della Nobilta' Europea*. Rosolea Mompalao, *figlia di una donna di malaffare* who sang at the Manoel theatre in front of Grandmaster Pinto. Her mother married a *barone* here in Malta but that does not make her *una nobil' donna*. *Quella Rosolea!* She had the audacity to birth a daughter to my husband the same year that we were married! (*She fans herself*)

Diego preferred that *meretrice* to me! He did not respect me and when our daughter was born, he was infuriated because I was not able to give him a son. He even accused me that *nostra figlia* Angela was *figlia del Inquisitore Angelo Durini!* (*She crosses herself*). *Sua Eminenza* was my *confessore*, and my most intimate friend. I confided in him my woes and sorrows and he always gave me sound advice in line with the Christian doctrine. But the *malalingue* made up stories about our friendship. It broke my heart when Diego and his family did not come to the Christening of our daughter. Blessed be the Lord that *Inquisitore Durini* stepped in and acted as godfather to my baby. He even offered to have the baptism ceremony in his personal cappella in his palace here in Birgu and threw a big party for my daughter's christening. Inquisitor Durini himself summoned Diego's family to attend the ceremony and the party, but they never showed up on the day! Grandmaster Pinto himself had to intervene and deal with the fall out between our families and the scandal that it was causing.

My Diego accused me of not being able to give him sons, while his *puttana* had produced two! He wanted to divorce me and marry Rosolea which he had set up in a house in Valletta, but for once his family put their foot down and did not give their blessing to this scandalous wedding! Diego wanted revenge and my beloved friend, the *inquisitore* was reported to the pope. Our friendship was a genuine one! We walked arm in arm because that is how close friends walk. We visited each other in our country residences because that is what friends do, and he took me to Gozo on 17th August because I was feeling sad and lonely, and he wanted to cheer me up. Inquisitore Angelo Durini was my best friend, an old friend of the family who even helped

me financially at my parents' request. The pope wanted me thrown in a nunnery and divest the *Inquisitore* from his *mantellata*, his official clerical robe denoting his rank!

Two years after the birth of my daughter, my friend the *Inquisitore* was sent away to Poland and my husband Diego wanted to take away Angela from me. When I placed Angela in the nunnery of Santa Scholastica here in Birgu to receive her education, Diego used his power to take her away to St Catherine's nunnery in Valletta. He said that he wanted her to be away from my influence, but I know he did it to spite me because my daughter was 12 years old and that is an age when a young lady should be close to her mother.

He made marriage arrangements for Angela to which I did not agree and moved her to St Ursula's in Valletta to wait for the husband he had chosen. My Angela married neither of the men we chose for her eventually, but I know she lived a happy life because she got married twice and outlived both husbands!

As for me, I had to put on a brave face and mend my broken heart through *beneficenze*. The lord was generous with me, and I flourished in health and in wealth. I donated much of my finances to the Christian church and my properties were prospering. I even offered to donate money for new a church bell for my beloved church of St Lawrence. I followed in the footsteps of my father and was a beneficiary of the church which is so close to our house. I donated so many precious works of art!

We were always a religious family, in fact my nephew, Fabrizio Sceberras Testaferrata, who was also born in this house, was appointed the First Maltese Cardinal in 1818! My family was always an influential one in Maltese Society as you see, and I had the honour to become a lady in waiting to Queen Caroline of Naples and the two Sicilies. I saw these islands changing hands. I saw Malta under the rule of 3 different rulers, the knights, the French and the British and I was always respected by all. And I can tell you my dear friends that the secret to living distinguishably into old age is to be able to adapt to changes and always keep your head held up high! Strong women aren't simply born, they are made of the storms they go through.

My childhood home, sheltered St Emily de Vialair, served as the first female college in Malta, was used as a military hospital, was a seat of the Society of Christian Doctrine established by St Gorg Preca and survived WW2 bombings. Urban legends and ghost stories surround it with an aura of mystery and yet today it still shines in all its glory as a boutique hotel. And from this glorious palace let's proceed to another glorious palace that has been recently restored to its former glory.

4. *The broom riding mid-wife - Isabetta Caruana, a 16th century witch*

Period: 2nd half of the 16th century

Location: Triq il-Kanonku Fenech (Near the Inquisitor's Palace)

Actress in Costume: An elderly woman wearing simple peasant attire consisting of a cotton shift, tunic, and a mantle.

(The enactment starts with Isabetta walking towards the audience seemingly grumbling to herself).

Isabetta:

Treating an old lady like that! I am not a witch. The injustice that I suffered is humiliating! They arrested me! I was getting on with my life in the *Cittadella di Gozo*. Always helping everyone! Living the life of a good Christian and then I was summoned here to Malta to the *Palazzo dell' Sant Uffizio!* I suffered so much when I was arrested and incarcerated in the Inquisitor's prisons. Detained with *gente di malaffare!* I dedicated my whole life to helping my neighbours and friends in need. I went out of my home at all hours of the day delivering babies and looking for herbs to prepare natural remedies to cure their maladies. And this is how they repay you! Lying about you! Making up stories and calling me a witch. They even accused me of worshipping the devil (she crosses herself). How can anyone say that about me? I even taught catechism.

When I was a little girl myself, I studied the teachings of the church in the *citta vecchia* of Imdina. We were always thought that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. It was a miracle. Like when God created men! Like when God made Adam and Eve. He made Eve out of a rib that he took from Adam's side. This is the same! Jesus was born from the Virgin Mary, so he must have been born from her side, or being a woman from her breasts. They accuse me of being a heretic whenever I say this! But I birthed so many babies that I know where they come out from. But Jesus's birth was a miracle because Our Lady was a virgin before birth, during birth and after

birth, so he could not have come out of there! And that is why I was summoned in the first place because when I assembled little girls in the *Cittadella* to teach them prayers and tell them about the stories from the bible, they said that I was saying heresies.

And then there was that Valerio Cauchi. He invented all sort of lies and messed with the neighbour's heads as well! He turned everyone against me! He said to have seen me flying with my hair undone and bearing out my breasts. He testified to have seen me flying around the *Cittadella*. He said I was flying on a broom stick, at night! And some of our neighbours backed his story! How can people be so cruel to an old woman? After all I have done for them!

I am old and sometimes I use a stick to help me walk! I go out at night if I am called for a delivery. A mid-wife's is not just a day job! Valerio should be ashamed! After all I did for his family. He accused me of dishonouring his stepdaughter by soliciting her! I would never do that! I love that girl! It was me that delivered her! I taught her prayers and saw her growing up into a young woman! I helped her find a job, cleaning for a wealthy family. I would never help anyone to a life of prostitution! My own daughter used to work as a prostitute for some time when her husband was out at sea and though it pays well it is not an honourable occupation. I did not approve of what my Romana did, but she is my daughter, and I will never abandon her or do anything that might harm her!

The bad tongues even brought Romana into the story. They accused her of being a witch as well. They said they saw both of us riding broomsticks naked at night. When I was sick, it was Romana that came to help me. She came at night because she did not want to get people gossiping about me because of her bad reputation. But I am her mother, and I will never be ashamed of having Romana as a daughter. We were incarcerated together, me and my brave daughter. None of us confessed to anything because we are both innocent. They tortured us with the *strappado*. A physician visited us and said that we were strong enough to live through torture. They tied our hands behind our backs and pulled us off the floor. The pain I felt was out of this world. It felt like my shoulders would break and I couldn't contain myself from screaming. This lasted until the sand in the hourglass all fell to the other side. It seemed like an eternity! A scribe was writing everything that I said but I don't know what he wrote because I never

confessed to anything. Why would I lie? I am innocent. I am only guilty of having helped people. Come rain or shine! They even accused me of dressing up like an infidel male!

What they said was a turban wrapped around my head, was only my veil which I wrapped around my head and tied it so that it would not be taken away by the wind! Because I must go out in all kinds of weather if a woman has the pains and needs to give birth! My envious neighbours had accused me of such crimes mainly because I do not have a husband to protect me. I have been a widow for so long I cannot remember now, but if my poor husband had been alive, no one would have dared to do this to me! During my months of detention in the palace, I came to realise how much mid-wives and women who know how to heal with plants are in danger. Our knowledge and wisdom are regarded as sorcery.

I never confessed to any of the false accusations that I was summoned here for. I never committed any of those crimes. I never admitted not even under torture which proves my innocence. Yet I have been punished and now I am on my way back to my hometown in Gozo. It is there that I have to face humiliation where everyone knows me. People will think that I am a witch because I have been punished, but I am not!

I must attend high mass on my knees while holding a candle in the church at the *Cittadella*. I must make sure that people see me going to confession and saying the rosary. I am a good woman and I do not deserve this. But that is the *grazie* you get from people you think that are your friends. Being a *donna sola*, that makes a living out of helping others could lead to being labelled a witch. *(She sighs)*. Holy women sometimes adorn themselves by being submissive and that is what I did. I accepted the will of God and offered my suffering to Jesus. Hope there is a place with him in heaven for me at the end of this *valle di lacrime*.

I'd better get going now because I don't want to miss the boat!

(She walks off grumbling to herself again)