Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Lost Girls: Sex and Death in Renaissance Florence

Review Number:
1090
Publish date:
Wednesday, 1 June, 2011
Author:
Nicholas Terpstra
ISBN:
9780801894992
Date of Publication:
2010
Price:
£26.00
Pages:
264pp.
Publisher:
Johns Hopkins University Press
Place of Publication:
Baltimore, MD
Reviewer:
Jonathan Davies

What was killing the girls of the Casa della Pietà? This is the question which recurs throughout Nicholas Terpstra?s study of the Pietà, a Florentine charitable shelter for orphaned and abandoned girls. According to Terpstra, the Pietà was ?the most unsafe place in Florence for a girl to live? (p. 144). Of the 526 girls who entered the Pietà between 1554 and 1568, 324 (62 per cent) died there. This mortality rate is far higher than those at other Florentine conservatories for vulnerable girls; just under 20 per cent died at S. Niccolò during this period and only 11 per cent died at S. Maria delle Vergine. Deaths at the Pietà were recorded in its *Libro Segreto* with a simple ?+?; there is no description of the causes, which are a mystery for Terpstra to solve.

When the Pietà opened its doors in 1554, it was located in the old hospital of S. Maria dell?Umilità in Borgo Ognissanti, near the River Arno. There were often 160 girls jammed into the hospital and the two adjacent houses. Of the 361 girls who entered between 1554 and 1559, the average age was just over 12 years old. About 60 per cent of the girls came from families which had lived in Florence for no more than a generation. Of the girls who survived their stay in the Pietà, the average leaving age was 17 years. A handful married. A few returned to their families. Nearly 70 girls became domestic servants. Seven ran away.

Apart from the high death rate, the Pietà was unusual in other ways. During its early years the Compagnia della Pietà which supported the Casa had almost 400 members drawn from across the city. With the

exception of a friar of S. Croce, the members of the Compagnia were all women and ?There is no parallel [for this] in any other home in Florence, and few examples in Italy? (p. 111). Many of the members were widows and most of the pledges were for small amounts, less than 2 lire. Although a significant number of members came from the Florentine elite (three Medici, four Antinori, six Ricasoli, seven Ridolfi, and eleven Capponi), Terpstra notes that their names were recorded in an untraditional way. Instead of including the names of their fathers or husbands, these women simply used family names, e.g. ?Maddalena of the Antinori?. Terpstra points out that ??the only women in Florentine society who regularly failed to identify themselves by the names of either husbands or fathers were nuns and prostitutes? (p. 112). Rosalia Manno Tolu has shown that many members of the Compagnia della Pietà belonged to the *piagnone* movement of followers of the religious reformer Girolamo Savonarola.(1) He continued to divide Florentine society decades after his execution in 1498 and the members of the Compagnia della Pietà were the wives, daughters, sisters, and widows of leading *piagnone* men, and had suffered for their beliefs. The location of the Pietà in one of the poorest areas of Florence and its reliance on small pledges can be seen as characteristic of Savonarolan teaching.

The administration of the Pietà is also distinctive. Most homes run by men had statutes but the Pietà did not while it was located in Borgo Ognissanti. The members of the Compagnia della Pietà met in an informal council of prioresses and took decisions collectively. The process of admitting girls was easier than those at other homes; the prioresses of the Pietà interviewed girls and they decided immediately. In contrast to procedures elsewhere, they did not check the girls? backgrounds and reputations, they did not order physical examinations to confirm virginity and attractiveness, and they did not take repeated votes on each case. According to Terpstra, the Pietà?s support for the most vulnerable girls in Florence was an exceptional experiment in compassion.

But this situation did not last. During the 1560s the Pietà underwent major changes. By 1567 the membership of the Compagnia had collapsed to 36 and the numbers continued to fall thereafter. Unsurprisingly the Pietà?s income from donations also dropped dramatically. It is likely that particular factors were present here. From 1563 there were plans to relocate the Pietà and in 1568 it moved to Via del Mandorlo (?Street of the Almond Tree?) near the friary of S. Marco in the less populous north of the city. Following the move, the average age of those admitted dropped, the death rate fell, and fewer girls married or worked as domestic servants. Statutes suitable for a convent were produced, a small executive council was established, and admissions became more formal. There were fewer places for the most vulnerable girls and more for the illegitimate daughters of courtiers, clerics, and civil servants. Over the following decades the membership of the Compagnia della Pietà altered to include priests and friars, members of the Medici court, and the grand duchess herself. Terpstra sees Alessandro Capocchi as the moving force behind the changes. He was a Dominican friar and the chaplain of the Pietà from 1558 to 1568. He was also a *piagnone* keen to strengthen ties between his house of S. Maria Novella and Savonarola?s old house of S. Marco. Terpstra suggests that debates broke out within the Pietà over the future of the home though he notes that each change was approved by the women. But wider factors were also at work during this period of general reform. In Venice the Convertite shelter for former prostitutes and the Casa delle Zitelle for abandoned girls were both relocated to the remoteness of the Giudecca. In 1568 and 1569 the archbishop of Florence surveyed all of the city?s churches and hospitals and in 1569 he held a diocesan synod which formally adopted the decrees of the Council of Trent.

So why did so many of the girls of the Pietà die between 1554 and 1568? Terpstra puts forward a series of hypotheses which he considers across four chapters. The first possibility is that the girls were worked to death. Much of their time was spent preparing food, washing laundry, and cleaning floors within the Pietà. In addition, as mentioned, nearly 70 girls entered domestic service. About 20 girls worked outside the Pietà with weavers or tailors or others in the cloth trade. But girls working outside did not increase the revenue of the Pietà. As donations did not cover its expenses, of which food was the largest item, other income had to be sought. Therefore, within weeks of the Pietà opening, it organised itself as a factory. In 1555 two female wool weavers were given room and board in the Pietà so they could train the girls in weaving. It is likely that they brought looms, making the limited space even more crammed. By 1559 cloth work earned the Pietà

over 3,800 lire a year, its largest single source of income and the equivalent of the annual earnings of about 15 professional weavers. The girls worked in every part of the Florentine textile industry - wool, silk, and hemp ? and performed different operations in each one. In most cases they worked for textile masters but sometimes they worked on their own. Since the 15th century silk had been a growth industry and by 1650 over 14,000 Florentines out of a population of about 70,000 were making silk; the percentages of the populations of Bologna and Venice were even higher. Terpstra notes that silk merchants administered the Florentine foundling hospital, the Ospedale degli Innocenti. There was a similar situation in Bologna where the magistracy in charge of the silk fair ran the city?s workhouse, the Ospedale dei Mendicanti. Terpstra argues convincingly that ?their charity was good business ? the shelters and institutions that silk merchants so generously launched and supervised were convenient solutions to their own labor problems? (p. 77).

Sex could also have been a cause of the girls? deaths. The Pietà?s volume of accounts for *Cloth Manufacturing and Pledges, 1554?79* includes seven pages with the heading *Del Ricettario*. This comprises 15 medical recipes. Terpstra accepts that many institutions kept collections like this but he points out that this one is hidden away with no indication on the ledger?s spine, cover, or opening pages that it is there. 54 ingredients are listed of which nine are abortificants. This fact leads Terpstra to wonder whether the Pietà was helping girls to terminate pregnancies. He accepts that this question is complicated but he asks why we might shy away from this conclusion and he considers ancient, medieval, and Renaissance views of pregnancy and abortion. Terpstra thinks it unlikely that the Pietà was a brothel as this would have been recorded in a variety of fiscal, legal, and literary sources but ?Adolescent girls working as domestic servants were the most vulnerable women in Florence to sexual assault? (p. 100). The threat to the girls was also increased by the Pietà?s location in one of Florence?s red-light districts; their neighbours were streetwalkers and courtesans. Terpstra concedes that whether or not abortificants were given to the girls is a moot question and in any case it is unlikely that they would have killed them. Another possibility is that the girls contracted the pox but Terpstra accepts that this suggestion is also problematic. No contemporary source links the pox to the girls of the Pietà and circumstantial evidence proves nothing. None of the recipes listed in the *Del Ricettario* contains either mercury or guaiacum, which would suggest they were being used for the pox. Instead the recipes are mundane treatments for apostemes, fistulas, scrofula, ulcers, scabies, and sore eyes.

Having outlined in detail the various possibilities, Terpstra concludes that ?What was killing the girls of the Pietà wasn?t necessarily anything *in* the Pietà. It was the policies *of* the Pietà. The Pietà had a high death rate because it welcomed the dying ? girls in bad health and with little future? (p. 173). The other shelters in Florence had fewer deaths because they had entrance procedures which filtered out such girls. From 1566 the Pietà adopted similar processes and consequently its death rate fell during the following years. Apart from the mortality figures, it is telling that the Pietà spent over 220 lire on medications in 1567 but only 4 lire in 1571, and that was just for sugary syrups and a tonic water.

Whilst Terpstra praises the Pietà for its exceptional compassion during its early years, he can be critical of its exploitation following its reform and relocation. In the conclusion and in an appendix he tells the story of the Pietà girl known only as Giulia who was sent in 1584 to test the virility of Vincenzo Gonzaga prior to a marriage alliance between Mantua and Tuscany. After several attempts, described in detail, Giulia was finally deflowered and impregnated. The resulting baby was taken from her and Giulia was given a dowry. Ironically this episode was only possible because of the Pietà?s tighter admission procedures: ?It now had a better class of girl and healthier too, and the girls were still there to be used? (p. 174).

The deaths of the girls are not the only mystery about the Pietà. Almost no contemporary chronicle or later history makes any reference to a shelter for abandoned girls in Borgo Ognissanti. *The Chronicles of the Sisters of the Pietà* were only begun in the 1580s by the Pietà?s chaplain Friar Giovan Battista Bracchesi and they are a spiritual history whose purpose was to inspire and to instruct. They do not refer to the high death rate, to the Pietà acting as a textile factory, or to the collapse in the Pietà?s finances and administration following the relocation. In contrast to *The Chronicles*, Terpstra has sought to write a ?worldly history? (p. 178) pieced together from the surviving administrative and financial records of the Pietà and informed by the latest research on the cultural, economic, medical, religious, and social history of Florence. He argues that

the ?chronicle writers were not exactly writing fiction, but they were certainly inventive with some factors and economical with others. Yet were they to read this history, they would almost certainly make the same accusation of me? (p. 177). Is this self-criticism justified? Terpstra?s study is thoroughly based on primary and secondary sources. It is presented as a mystery, certain elements of mystery-writing are employed, and to an extent Terpstra is consciously acting as a detective. There are detailed physical descriptions of the manuscripts so the reader feels as though they are sitting next to Terpstra as he pursues his case. The reader also realises that information is often being withheld and released at particular points in the story. There is much speculation as Terpstra tries to fill the gaps and guess what was killing the girls. This is an attractive approach though one wishes that he did not reject his ?suspects? quite so quickly as this dissipates the tension. Terpstra wonders whether his interpretations ?may seem faddish, anachronistic, and even teasing; less like an historical investigation and more like historical novels ? Yet these are the best ways to read into the silences that cloak this story? (p. 10). The title of his conclusion, ?Friction in the Archives?, echoes Natalie Zemon Davis? *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*. (2) Like Davis, Terpstra is aware of how contemporaries and historians shape their stories. His study of the Pietà can be recommended highly not only to those interested in women?s history, social history, medical history, and economic history but also to anyone who cares about the historian?s craft.

Notes

1. Rosalia Manno Tolu, ?Echi Savonaroliani nella Compagnia e nel conservatorio della Pietà?, in *Savonarola e la politica*, ed. G. C. Garfagnini (Florence, 1997), pp. 209?24.Back to (1)
2. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA, 1987).Back to (2)

Other reviews:
Feminist Review
http://feministreview.blogspot.com/2010/07/lost-girls-sex-and-death-in-renaissance.html [2]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1090

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5517
[2] http://feministreview.blogspot.com/2010/07/lost-girls-sex-and-death-in-renaissance.html