

## **Nefarious Crimes, Contested Justice. Illicit Sex and Infanticide in the Republic of Venice 1557-1789**

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Alexander Cowan

It is most unusual for a historian to go into print in the introduction to their latest book and to wonder aloud whether it should ever have seen the light of day. Joanne Ferraro has a point. This study of early modern Italy enters territory in which any historian would wish to tread carefully. It deals with taboos which contemporaries scarcely spoke about or recorded, and which entered the written record almost by accident: incest, domestic abuse and infanticide. Ferraro's hesitations, which were driven as much by her difficulty in standing back dispassionately from the sources as by the unpleasantness of her subject matter, are entirely understandable. There is something visceral about the evidence given to the authorities investigating these crimes: bedclothes soiled with blood, washing hanging out to dry from which blood stains had been unsuccessfully removed, a formerly pregnant women kneeling in her own blood at Mass, a new-born baby girl whose cries could be heard from a sewer. Records of birth cease to be a statistic. Ferraro and her publishers are to be congratulated on having overcome them and made available a fascinating and stimulating study which will provoke a great deal of further research. The book spans almost two-and-a-half centuries and uses on material from different parts of the Venetian Republic to examine the nature of illicit sexual behaviour and the ways in which this was perceived by the Venetian state, the Church and above all by local communities.

The book is organised around a series of case studies grouped into two major themes, father-daughter incest and the murder of newly born children by their mothers. The cases of incest under consideration illustrate its presence at all levels of society. The perpetrators were a farm worker from the Vicentino with a violent reputation in his own community, a migrant labourer working in the Brenta valley, a river raftsman on the

Piave, a silk merchant in Venice, and the Venetian patrician, Piero Capello. The mothers accused of infanticide, as might have been expected, came from a much narrower social range, a servant, two unmarried women from poor backgrounds, and an adulterous wife on a Dalmatian island. The case of Bianca Capello, the daughter of a Venetian patrician, is given a chapter to itself, in part because of the weight of documentation around it, but also because it reveals some of the complexities of understanding the interpretation of testimony. Bianca, it would seem, was the victim of sexual attacks by her father, her step-brother and a local priest. Sent on several occasions to convents by her family, she displayed serious symptoms of abdominal pain and fever which might have been the effect of syphilis, poisoning, pellagra, or a combination of illnesses. In the end her case was dismissed by the Council of Ten through lack of evidence, and probably in order to avoid public scandal around a leading family. The accusations of incest, pregnancy and abortions were not made by Bianca, but by her mother and her maid and may have been made because they lived in a dysfunctional household in which power had shifted from Bianca's parents to her step-brother and his wife.

Priests recur throughout these cases, sometimes as confessors who chose not to report incest or infanticide until the authorities became involved, but more often as the suspected fathers of illegitimate children. The final chapter is devoted to several of these relationships, including a woman who was seduced by her first cousin, a priest with an economic hold over her family, another who lived together with a priest for many years and bore him three children, and a woman widowed at 17 who stayed on in her late husband's house with his clerical brother and moved with him to a new parish. The varying behaviour of these priests suggests that communal attitudes were only partly influenced by the Tridentine rules banning concubinage, even in the 18th century. Some priests were open about their relationships, but the fear of disapproval or discovery led several to attempt abortions or infanticide, or to remove the evidence by placing new-born children in foundling institutions.

This is microhistory at its best, and as such illustrates some of the strengths and potential weaknesses of this methodological approach. The book belongs to a growing historiographical tradition and Ferraro's approach can not only be traced to the work of her mentor, Guido Ruggiero (1), and to the publications arising from the Italian church courts project (2), but has already been explored by the same author in her earlier work on cases of dysfunctional marriage considered by the church courts in early modern Venice.(3) The field now has its own online journal, the *Journal of Microhistory*, based in Iceland (4), and while the richness of sources from pre-industrial Italian secular and church courts has facilitated a substantial body of work on that area, the microhistorical approach has been used in studies over a much wider geographical and chronological range. As Ferraro openly acknowledges, the cases which she has chosen to investigate in detail in her book, such as the sexually abused Mattia Stanghelin of Galliera, Margherita Serena, accused of having thrown her unbaptised newborn baby into a Venetian canal, or Antonia Locatelli, whose relationship with the priest Giacomo Antonio Sala led to abortion and infanticide, may well not have been typical. Without detailed statistical analysis of such sources, it is difficult to assess the frequency of incest, abortion or infanticide and the book makes no claims to do so. In any case, because of the nature of these crimes and the complicity of many in the community, who wished to avoid any public involvement for fear of the consequences, their very appearance in the records was often accidental. Frequently, it was an outsider who set the legal process in motion. In the case of Mattia Stanghelin, the case was brought before the authorities by a Venetian bounty hunter travelling through the region in search of opportunities to be rewarded for bringing criminals to justice. A doctor treating the patrician, Bianca Capello, in later 18th-century Venice, was so alarmed by the state of his patient that he contacted the Council of Ten. Marieta Todesca, a maid, was arrested for infanticide after suspicions were roused when a servant in a neighbouring house heard cries from a sewer. A Venetian living illegally in the city after having been banished, chose to contact the authorities about a case of incest in the hope that this act of civic duty would help his own position.

There is always the possibility that these cases come to our attention because they were particularly extreme and might in some way be invalidated as a result. On the other hand, the detail of the testimony surrounding them and the actions of the community and the authorities which this reveals enables us to gain access to patterns of cultural behaviour in a way closed to quantitative analysis. These cases have a much wider

resonance. They draw attention not only to the kind of circumstances in which incest, abortion or infanticide took place, but also to the divergent attitudes of those close to the people involved. These were not taboos to which everyone shut their eyes, but, when faced with questioning by the authorities, it is evident that many acted out of fear, either of a man who was physically violent, or of an individual in a position of relative economic and social power. All of this was overlaid on the potential weakness of women in the face of sexual abuse and the more subtle pressures of having engaged in illicit sexual relationships. As Ferraro points out, the domestic hearth, which was generally celebrated by contemporaries as a place of safety for women, could facilitate abuse and discourage outside concern.

Structurally, the final chapter on priestly involvement leaves something to be desired. The case studies are as rich as those on incest and infanticide, but here the focus has been moved from the specific crime to some of its perpetrators and while the widespread presence of priests in cases involving illicit sex deserves detailed consideration, some of the power and momentum of the analysis has been lost in the process. Nor is the involvement of priests the only thread which runs through this book and would have benefited from more discussion. The unorthodox behaviour of the protagonists in these stories aroused much gossip. This, in turn, acted as the mechanism by which what was intended to remain secret within the family, or the wider community, particularly in isolated rural areas, might escape and come to the ears of the authorities. Speaking of incest or the unexpected disappearance of a new-born child reflected an awareness that certain moral barriers had been breached, a willingness to engage in moral judgements at a safe distance from the individuals concerned, and a form of camouflage behind which individuals called to testify hid in order to prove that they were not guilty of keeping material facts from the authorities. By claiming that behaviour was widely known and that they had only heard about this from others, witnesses believed that they were safe from prosecution. The ubiquitous presence of gossip networks was also something of which the investigators were quite aware and which they used frequently as a way of finding out what had happened and who was responsible. As the officials investigating the case of Laura Garsaglio in Treviso told her, 'Everyone in the community has noted your intimate relationship with the priest Giuseppe Scotto. The entire city knows about this' (p. 2). Following the denunciation of her father for incest by a girl of 13, the investigators first tested the local gossip network. Gossip around a case of infanticide in the city focused on a priest who frequently visited the house of a grocer with unmarried daughters, ate there and had his clothes repaired by the women of the household. The potential damage from gossip about pregnancy to a single woman's reputation led some of them to use gossip networks to spread alternative rumours suggesting that an illness rather than pregnancy had caused missed periods or a swollen stomach. The value of gossip testimony, for all the dangers of inaccuracy or malign intent, was so high that the Venetian authorities gave it considerable weight to compensate for difficult cases where even the victims were unwilling to testify.

A further thread running through these discussions is the way in which the victims of rape and the women who killed or abandoned their babies received aid and support from those around them. The wife of a river raftsman who had raped her elder daughter first arranged to remove her from the house by marrying her to a man of 60, and when the latter was unable to pay for her continued support, she was sent for safety to work as a servant in Venice. A shoemaker gave refuge to a single mother after she had given birth. An employer gave money to a female servant in a similar position and encouraged her to leave the city by gondola. In several cases where the fathers were priests, mothers were given support by other members of the clergy who disapproved of their behaviour. A final theme considers the role of the foundling hospitals in Venice and the Veneto, not only as recipients of the fruits of illicit sexual relationships but also as the temporary destination for children whose legally married parents could not afford to maintain them. Although admission to the foundling hospitals was on the principle of anonymity, local clergy often acted as intermediaries in order to facilitate the entry of babies into these institutions, and surviving records tell tales which underwrite Ferraro's conclusion that the foundling hospitals were established as much to hide scandal as for humanitarian reasons. This is a book which repays careful study and illuminates a world which most of its inhabitants would have preferred to have kept hidden.

## Notes

1. G. Ruggiero, *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage and Power at the end of the Renaissance*, (Oxford, 1993); *Microhistory and the Lost People of Europe. Selections from Quaderni Storici*, ed. E. Muir and G. Ruggiero (Baltimore, 1991).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The project and its early fruits appear in *Coniugi nemici. La separazione in Italia dal XII al XVIII secolo*, ed. S. Seidel-Menchi and D. Quaglioni (Bologna, 2000). There are three other volumes in the series.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. Ferraro, *Marriage Wars in late Renaissance Venice*, (Oxford, 2001).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. <<http://www.microhistory.org/> [2]> [accessed 16 November 2009].[Back to \(4\)](#)

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