



Larry Wolff. *Paolina's Innocence: Child Abuse in Casanova's Venice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. x + 315 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-6262-5.

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### Paolina's Case: Evidence of a New Sensitivity to Childhood?

In Venice, on September 8, 1785, Gaetano Franceschini was arrested for having had sexual contact with an eight-year-old girl whose name was Paolina. The former was a sixty-year-old libertine who had moved to Venice from Vicenza, where his family made their fortune in the manufacture of silk. His alleged victim, Paolina, was the daughter of a poor laundress from the immigrant Friulian community in Venice. The girl was recruited by Franceschini to become his servant, and she spent only one night in the man's house sleeping in his bed. This last detail was told to a priest by another servant in Franceschini's house, at which point the priest decided to take Paolina away and denounce the libertine.

As the title suggests, the whole book focuses on this single story that Larry Wolff reconstructs through criminal records. The trial is used by the historian to cast a light on Venetian society at the end of the eighteenth century. Apart from the descriptive purpose behind the telling of this story, Paolina's case is presented as evidence of a new sensitivity to childhood that emerged at the end of the century. According to Wolff, the case stands for an encounter between the values of enlightened libertinism and the new Rousseauist perspective on the innocence of childhood. Around this time, some limits started to be imposed on libertinism in order to protect children such as Paolina. Although the expression "child abuse" was not yet in use, the concept began to be recognized and Franceschini was named "pig" by most witnesses, who did not know the modern word "pervert."

Such a book should be received with favor by the scholarly community considering the paucity of historical research about violence against children. Nevertheless, the thesis is very striking and it would be interesting to check what Paolina's case suggests in comparison with other late eighteenth-century trials. Focusing on only one case study, Wolff describes every "character"

involved in the story in detail. This detail is not just reserved for the protagonists: Wolff is anxious not only to tell each individual's tale, but also to locate them within the broader context of the city of Venice. This emphasis on place enables the reader to imagine the exact location where the events described in the book took place, and brings vividly to life the many characters described in the records preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia.

The first chapter is dedicated to the priest of the church of Sant'Angelo, Father Fiorese, who removed Paolina from Franceschini's house and made a secret denunciation to the Blasphemy Tribunal. The latter was a distinctive Venetian tribunal created in 1537 by the authority of the Council of Ten with the task of judging crimes against religion and morality. During the centuries, this court broadened its remit and by the eighteenth century came to deal with "the vague but comprehensive charges of 'bad living' (mala vita) and 'scandal'" (p. 29). Although the tribunal had already persecuted men for having deflowered virgins, according to Wolff, Paolina's case was the first to focus on "child abuse."

After describing how the Blasphemy Tribunal worked, the historian introduces several characters involved in the story. The book is populated by individuals from very different social contexts: servants, patrician women, a *caffettiere* and his wife, a prostitute, and the so-called Friulians. As Wolff writes, "the case of Paolina Lozaro and Gaetano Franceschini was a tale of Friulian immigrants in Venice" (p. 101). Maria Lozaro–Paolina's mother–and Maria della Giana, the mother of another girl who was asked by Franceschini to go into his service, were both laundresses from Friuli. Both mothers regarded the man's proposal as "a stroke of providence." According to the historian, this hope for "a stroke of providence" made these women vulnerable to exploitation like many poor immigrant populations to great cities in many other times and places (p. 102). Giana was intro-

duced to Franceschini by a mysterious woman who sold ladles and spoons. The latter was from Friuli too, but—as was also the case with Paolina’s father—she did not appear at the trial. Possibly, they were absent because they moved back and forth between Friuli and Venice depending on the seasonal demand for labor. The woman who sold ladles and spoons was not the only person to procure girls for Franceschini; another mysterious man, also from Friuli, seems to have done so as well.

Just as these figures are pivotal to the story, the building where Franceschini lived plays an important role. This building was on Calle della Cortesia, near Campo S. Angelo, an ordinary Venetian neighborhood in the heart of the city. Wolff defined it as “a sort of social microcosm with different levels on different floors” (p. 131). On the ground floor, there was one of the two hundred coffeehouses of Venice. The “Caffetteria” was a site in which people from different social classes chatted about both public and private matters. On the one hand, this place made Franceschini’s private life more visible; on the other hand, it gave him the opportunity to meet many people useful to his own business. The owner of the coffeehouse lived together with his wife on the top floor of the building. On the second floor, there was the apartment of a patrician widow, Antonia Bon. Franceschini lived upstairs. Moreover, servants of the lower classes were employed in each apartment. The building where Paolina’s story took place really was a cross section of Venetian society. The authorities of the Blasphemy Tribunal were aware of this reality and they used people from the lower classes to enter into Franceschini’s apartment. They interrogated a former servant, a prostitute, and an employee from the coffee shop who used to bring Franceschini his coffee.

The interaction among these individuals as well as their testimonies leads the author to discuss meaningful historical categories. First of all, he examines gossip. The historian Joanne M. Ferraro has already underlined the importance of gossip for Venetian judicial investigations of illicit sex in *Nefarious Crimes, Contested Justice: Illicit Sex and Infanticide in the Republic of Venice, 1557-1789* (2008). Wolff suggests something more. In the case of Franceschini, he notes that gossip was gendered: on the one hand, the gossiping male society of the coffeehouse, the domain of the *caffettiere*; on the other hand, the gossiping female company dominated by the *caffettiere*’s wife, who kept a close eye on the whole building of Calle della Cortesia from her internal balcony on the top floor. Both were finally transformed into legal testimony proving how evanescent the boundaries were between private and public. As Domenico Rizzo has re-

cently proved (*Gli spazi della morale: Buon costume e ordine delle famiglie in Italia in età liberale* [2004]), also during the liberal era, one century later than Paolina’s story, the *vox populi* would play an important role in the practice of justice, although the liberal governments considered this interaction as a sign of weakness of the Italian penal system.

The main content of the gossip in Paolina’s story was the behavior of Franceschini. The *caffettiere* Ravasin testified: “universal concept of him is certainly that he is a man extremely devoted to women” (p. 70). Ravasin’s wife defined him as “a sensual man” (p. 85). One of his former servants testified that Franceschini used to bring home girls of “tender” age (p. 120). The patrician widow, who lived downstairs from Franceschini’s apartment, stated that his reputation was universally bad despite a respectable first impression. As the historian carefully notes, it should be taken into account that this last testimony was pronounced by a woman belonging to the same class as the judges. Basically, Franceschini was a man able to provoke “scandal,” a key word of the story. Indeed, the defendant was first accused of scandalous behavior, and second of having had sex with a child. How does one define “scandal”? As Patrizia Guarnieri has written, scandal is a fact that can shock human sensitivity and a bad example that can be followed.[1]

According to Wolff, Franceschini’s behavior toward Paolina was seen as “scandalous” at the end of the eighteenth century because of modern ideas about childhood: “without the idea of childhood as something absolutely distinct from adulthood, without the notion of the child as an individual with a particular and childlike character, there could be no modern conception of child abuse” (p. 239). Philip Aries’s famous thesis (*L’enfant et la vie familiale sous l’ancien régime* [1960]), which Wolff uses, has been challenged by a growing body of evidence suggesting that the concept of childhood has always existed. The immaturity of children is a biological fact of life. Culture influences the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful.[2] Therefore, a different definition of childhood might have led also to a new perception of violence against children. Nevertheless, this does not mean that children in the past were mistreated. It means that what is regarded as violence, tolerance of violence, and the ways in which societies deal with violence are historically and regionally variable.

Wolff also writes: “without the cultural conviction of the fundamental innocence of childhood, the adult violation of that innocence could not be constructed as a crime” (p. 239). With reference to this assertion, it should

be kept in mind that in the last centuries the expression “child abuse” has been formulated and the innocence of children has been stressed more and more, yet “modern” societies should not be evaluated as “better” than the past ones. Indeed, innocence is a double-edged sword. First, what is the meaning of “innocence,” the other key word of this story? Being innocent meant first of all being ignorant about sexual matters. This explains why Paolina’s mother did not want to ask her daughter what exactly happened in Franceschini’s apartment, and why a noble woman close to her was concerned about the possibility that Paolina might speak with her own daughters. As Wolff writes, “the chimera of innocence” with regard to childhood is still in force (p. 246). Today as in eighteenth-century Venice, a sexually abused child is supposed to have been robbed of his/her childhood, which consists of an asexual time. Such a perspective has another consequence, not really remarked on in this book. As Jenny Kitzinger points out, “if the violation of innocence is the criterion against which the act of sexual abuse is judged then violating a ‘knowing’ child becomes a lesser offence than violating an ‘innocent’ child.”[3] This idea allows abusers to defend themselves on the grounds that their victims are not especially “innocent.” In the case of Paolina, Franceschini’s defense was based on the girl’s virginity and the assumption that her testimony had been manipulated by adults close to her. For judges, the proof that Paolina was innocent seemed to be her childish language: she used very simple words that proved she did not understand sexual matters. Is it unbelievable that she used this language intentionally to show her innocence? Possibly, but Wolff does not take into account the role that Paolina might have played, probably because he is concerned about being accused of supporting the long-tradition of victim blaming, which views abused children as active participants or even “aggressors.” Nevertheless, considering that Paolina’s choice of vocabulary might have been intentionally selected to appear “innocent” does not equate to accusing her, but rather recognizes that children are not passive subjects; conversely, they are actively involved in the construction of their own social lives and relationships.

Finally, Franceschini was ordered to pay the sum of two hundred ducats to Paolina’s family. This amount of money was picked up by her father and was not provided for her dowry, probably because she was still virgin and therefore not compromised as a marriageable woman. This was the sentence of the tribunal. What about Wolff’s judgement? According to the historian, this case study stood at the threshold of modern history airing “those troubling concerns that later centuries would explore as trauma in child sexual abuse and psychopathology in

adult sexuality” (p. 43).

Wolff compares Franceschini to such well-known characters as Giacomo Casanova and Carlo Gozzi who, unlike him, had no qualms about admitting that they had had sexual relations with young girls. Conversely, Franceschini realized that having sex with children had become “scandalous” and this explains why he denied having contact with Paolina. Nevertheless, it should be taken into account that Franceschini was speaking when on trial. Casanova was much more open about his relationships with young girls in his memoirs: did he repeat these facts when he was arrested for his scandalous conduct? The historian does not pose this question. Might not Franceschini have been more candid in a piece of writing telling of Paolina, if he were not facing criminal investigation? Long-term and wider-ranging research on criminal records is required to establish whether Paolina’s case was really an exceptional and revealing turning point. Gabriele Martini, not mentioned by Wolff, wrote that at the end of the seventeenth century, the Venetian law had already showed an increasing interest in childhood.[4] Equally it should be remembered that cultural changes, such as altering perceptions of child abuse, generally happen gradually and over a long time: “turning points” are hard to establish. Indeed, in the same period as Franceschini was being tried for having had sexual contact with a servant, some fathers, who were not libertines, believed it more convenient to have sex with their own daughters rather than other women.[5]

#### Notes

[1]. Patrizia Guarnieri, “L’incesto scandaloso: Legge e mentalità nell’Italia unita,” *Passato e Presente*, no. 58 (2003): 58.

[2]. Alan Prout and Allison James, “A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems,” in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, ed. Prout and James (London, Falmer Press, 1990), 7.

[3]. Jenny Kitzinger, “Who Are You Kidding? Children, Power and the Struggle against Sexual Abuse,” in *Constructing and Reconstructing*, 164.

[4]. Gabriele Martini, “Rispetto dell’infanzia e violenza sui minori nella Venezia del Seicento,” *Società e Storia* 9, no. 34 (1986), 793-817.

[5]. See Joanne M. Ferraro, *Nefarious Crimes, Contested Justice: Illicit Sex and Infanticide in the Republic of Venice, 1557-1789* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 65-115.

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