

SEXUAL RELATIONS BETWEEN ADULTS AND CHILDREN IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VENICE: THE RHETORIC OF DEVIANCE*Larry WOLFF*New York University, Department of History,
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ABSTRACT

This paper considers several cases that came before Venetian tribunals in the eighteenth century concerning sexual relations between adults and children. The paper will attempt to analyze the precise (or imprecise) nature of the criminality involved in such relations in the eighteenth century, and the particular concerns and procedures of Venetian law in addressing such cases. Analysis will consider to what extent modern terms such as "deviance" and "abuse" are relevant for understanding the meaning of such cases in their eighteenth-century contexts, and will address the significance of the Enlightenment for emphasizing particular categories of criminality. Further attention will be addressed to the concept of eighteenth-century libertinism, and its implications for sexual relations between adults and children, and also to the evolution of early modern ideas about the special significance of childhood. The disciplinary framework of the paper will consider the dimensions of legal, social, and cultural history.

Key words: Venice, childhood, child abuse, sex crime, Casanova, Don Giovanni

RELAZIONI SESSUALI TRA ADULTI E BAMBINI IN VENEZIA
DEL SETTECENTO: LA RETORICA DELLA DEVIANZA

SINTESI

L'articolo tratta di diversi casi riferiti ai tribunali veneziani del Settecento che riguardavano relazioni sessuali tra adulti e bambini. Si cerca di analizzare la precisa (ovvero imprecisa) natura della criminalità inclusa nelle relazioni di questo tipo nel Settecento, e gli interessi e le procedure particolari della legge veneziana per trattare tali casi. L'analisi considera quanto siano pertinenti termini moderni come "devianza" ed "abuso" per capire il significato di tali casi nell'ambito di quel periodo, e sottolinea il valore dell'Illuminismo per mettere in rilievo particolari catego-

rie di criminalità. L'articolo presta attenzione anche al concetto del libertinismo settecentesco e alle sue implicazioni per le relazioni sessuali tra adulti e bambini, e alla evoluzione delle prime idee moderne dell'importanza speciale dell'infanzia. Nella cornice disciplinare dell'articolo si analizzano le dimensioni della storia legale, sociale e culturale.

Parole chiave: Venezia, infanzia, abuso infantile, reato sessuale, Casanova, Don Giovanni

The great Venetian dramatist Carlo Gozzi served as a young man in Venice's military administration in Dalmatia in the 1740s, and he later described, in his *Memorie Inutili*, his Dalmatian adventures in Zadar, including his sexual adventures. These were related in a spirit that incongruously combined both the boastful libertinism of his youth and the more sober moral conservatism of his later life. Gozzi seemed to disapprove of the sexual promiscuity of Dalmatian women, even while he himself enjoyed having sex with them, and since he was young at the time – in his early twenties – he even suggested that it was they who corrupted his innocence. In fact, in the asymmetrical imperial context of Venetian-Dalmatian relations, one might suppose that the Venetian soldier was more likely to have been the sexual predator, but Gozzi, in his memoirs, shifted responsibility to his Dalmatian sexual partners. In one case, actually involving a thirteen-year-girl, Gozzi had no hesitation about labeling her as the sexual aggressor in their relations, declaring himself to be "horrified" at the conduct of this "thirteen-year-old Messalina" (Gozzi, 1962, 115–119; Wolff, 2001, 29–40). The rhetoric of deviance, in this case, involved emphasizing the extreme immorality of sexual activity involving someone so young. Gozzi did recognize this as deviance, but, curiously, as the child's deviance, not his own.

In fact, instances of sexual relations between adults and children could be prosecuted as criminal cases in the Venetian republic in the eighteenth century, and the rhetoric of deviance surrounding such cases suggests that there was already coming to exist some rudimentary modern consciousness concerning such conduct. A number of these cases came before the blasphemy tribunal of the Bestemmia in the eighteenth century, since that court, originally created in the sixteenth century to monitor cases of blasphemy, had come to be responsible for a variety of other criminal charges, including the defloration of virgins. Guido Ruggiero has demonstrated that in the Renaissance the defloration of virgins was viewed as a matter of family honor violated, and it was therefore possible to demand in law the compensation for that violation, according to the sexual logic of the ancien régime. This logic still persisted

in the eighteenth century, but the Bestemmia also prosecuted such cases as matters of "scandal" – the scandal of sexual relations between adults and children – which encouraged a perspective that came somewhat closer to the modern conception of child abuse. In this perspective, sexual relations between adults and children were not only a matter of honor violated, but also of "innocence" violated, and the concept of innocence was both cultivated and publicized under the aegis of the Enlightenment (Ruggero, 1985; Povoletto, 1997; Derosas, 1980; Cozzi, 1991).

According to the ideology of innocence and its violation, such sexual relations involved the abuse of the child and the crime of the adult (Wolff, 1988; Wolff, 2004, 141–144). In modern language, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sexual relations between adults and children would be classified as matters of crime and deviance. The intimations of this perspective, just emerging in the eighteenth century, may be studied through the contemporary rhetoric of deviance surrounding some of these cases that came before the tribunal of the Bestemmia.

In 1772 (that is, January 1771 m.v. by the Venetian calendar) there came before the tribunal the case of Iseppo Franceschini, a mason (*Murer*), accused of sexually assaulting a nine-year-old girl. He encountered her while she was walking home from school, and supposedly took her to an osteria at the Rialto where he tried to have sex with her, and almost – but not quite – deflowered her. This last qualification meant that he could not be charged with rape or defloration, but could be cited for "scandal." The denunciation by the girl's father made use of a rhetoric of deviance, condemning Franceschini as an "inumana persona." He was inhuman because: "tentó violar all'innocente il proprio onore." This denunciation thus combined the rhetoric of the violation of honor and the rhetoric of the violation of innocence. Yet, the father's demand before the court was entirely traditional: "che sia castigato e che debba dotare la detta mia figlia" (ASV, 1). A dowry was the conventional compensation for the violation of honor.

Because this case stopped short of intercourse, defloration, and rape, the charge had to be made more vaguely, and precisely for that reason the issue of childhood and innocence became more focused. The child herself testified that "tutta quella notte mi ebbe a tormentare nelle mie pudende, ne so cosa mi abbia fatto, so che mi fece del male assai" (ASV, 1). Though the child did not know herself, Venetian law and, more broadly, Venetian culture, had to try to determine precisely what harm had been done to a child who had not actually been deflowered. In the end, Franceschini fled, and was condemned in absentia.

In 1779 the Bestemmia considered the case of a Roman barber, Giuseppe Terzizzo, going by the name of Serafini, who was accused of pimping young girls to

adult men in the Piazza San Marco. He had reassured their mothers that he could administer a potion to restore their virginites afterwards: "colla quale impostura ha strascinate molte povere donne a sacrificare l'onore delle loro figlie". This was the traditional rhetoric of honor. According to the tribunal, Terrizzo/Serafini faced this particular accusation: "che aveva fatto avere una ragazza di circa 13 anni all'avvocato Settini, che gli aveva tolto l'onore, e che gli aveva dati soli soldi 50." The loss of honor was emphasized again, and it was not clear from the rhetorical phrasing whether the tribunal was more scandalized by the girl's young age or by her low price. According to a witness: "fu il passato carnevale e Quaresima una ragazza di nome Agnesina dell'età di circa 15 anni e questa ebbe a raccontarmi che il detto Serafini l'aveva condotta dall'Avvocato Settini il quale l'aveva deflorata e gli aveva data la miserabile paga di soldi cinquanta del che mi sono stupite" (ASV, 2). This would seem to be the same girl sold to the same lawyer at the same price, but there was evidently some uncertainty about her age, whether thirteen or fifteen. What the witness found shocking was the miserly amount of the payment.

Yet another witness stipulated that Terrizzo/Serafini was pimping a girl named Agnese, presumably the same one, this time estimated to be twelve years old: "sembravami incredibile tal casa e per l'età tenera della ragazza, e per la sua povertà che la rendeva assai impolita" (ASV, 2). It is not clear whether the witness meant that the girl was "ill-bred" (*impolita*) or whether the word was wrongly chosen or recorded; the witness might have meant to say that she was "imprudent" (*impolitica*). In either case there was clearly a rhetoric of deviance being employed here (*sembravami incredibile*) that was at least partially related to the girl's age (*per l'età tenera della ragazza*). It was her young age that made the pimp's conduct particularly nasty.

In 1785 a much more explicit and detailed investigation by the Bestemmia focused on a sixty-year-old man of means, Gaetano Franceschini (no apparent relation to the mason Iseppo Franceschini), who was accused of trying to have sex with an eight-year-old girl. The child was the daughter of an impoverished, immigrant Friulian laundress working in Venice, who had entrusted her daughter to Franceschini as a servant to live in his apartment. She only spent one night there, in his bed, and was then removed from the apartment in the morning by the concerned parish priest of Sant'Angelo, who had heard about the situation. According to medical testimony, intercourse had not occurred, so Franceschini could not be charged with either defloration or rape. The crime that was actually committed, in modern language, was sexual molestation or sexual abuse, but those were not crimes according to law in eighteenth-century Venice, and the concepts of molestation and abuse only barely existed in eighteenth-century culture, in relation to the ideology of innocence. The tribunal had to try to decide what, if any, criminal act occurred in Franceschini's bed during the night, and that question was actually difficult to articulate in the conceptual vocabulary of the eighteenth century (Wolff, 2005, 417–440).

In testimony before the Bestemmia, Franceschini's neighbors described him according to epithets and formulas that suggested a very tentatively emerging rhetoric of deviance. One neighbor described him as "un uomo sensualissimo," because he had sex with women of all ages, including prostitutes. Another neighbor called Franceschini "un vecchio porco," while yet another, in a more explicit rhetoric of deviance, referred to him as "una bestia in linea di senso." The neighbors for the most part did not connect his implicit deviance – in extreme or bestial sensuality – to a particular interest in young girls. The indictment formulated by the tribunal, however, did very cautiously take this rhetorical step toward the modern discourse of sexuality:

"[...] ti costituisti uno specchio di turpitudine nel render a commun vista la tua sensuale dissolutezza col prostituire senza riserve la stessa tua casa accogliendo il giorno e trattenendo anche l'intera notte libertine donne con sommo scandolo ed universal commossione. Ne qui restringendo le tue dissolutezze, piu oltre spingendole ti dasti perfino a procurarti tenere innocenti fanciulle [...] togliendo loro [...] quella innocenza che formar doveva il piu valido presidio all' loro onestà [...]" (ASV, 3).

The rhetoric of deviance could be identified in the formula, "not restricting your depravities" [to libertine women] but "pushing them still further" [to young girls]. This rhetorical formula – "ne qui restringendo [...] piu oltre spingendo" – was furthermore connected to a rhetoric of innocence, such that the girls were specified as "tenere innocenti fanciulle" and the crime was defined as "taking away" their innocence, "togliendo loro [...] quella innocenza." He had neither raped nor deflowered the girl, but he might be said to have taken her innocence: that is, in modern language, to have molested or abused her. In this indictment, the rhetoric of innocence was clearly related to a conception of particular depravity in the sexual pursuit of young girls, that is, a rhetoric of deviance.

Franceschini's defense, which began with the ringing phrase "io sono uomo libero", affirmed his freedom from family obligations and, therefore, the privacy of his private life as an aspect of his personal freedom. This line suggests that Franceschini's sexual ethos was related to the context of eighteenth-century libertinism. Casanova was Franceschini's Venetian contemporary, born in 1725 and therefore roughly the same age as Franceschini who was described by the tribunal as a man of sixty in 1785. An examination of Casanova's memoirs suggests that, since libertinism affirmed a general freedom from moral or religious prejudice and romantic or sexual constraint, there was not necessarily a sharp conceptual separation between libertinism and sexual criminality in the eighteenth century. Neither could the modern categories of sexual psychopathology or sexual deviance be clearly distin-

guished within the world of the libertine, as was evident in the pornographic fiction of the marquis de Sade. Sexual relations between adults and children were difficult to recognize as deviant, not only because the concept of childhood was just emerging in its modern aspects, but also because enlightened libertinism blurred the outlines of sexual criminality and psychopathology.

Casanova in the 1740s, in the seduction of the castrato Bellino – who turned out to be a young woman – first had sex with both of Bellino's younger sisters, Cecilia age twelve and Marina age eleven. According to Casanova, "Les deux petites filles étaient de vrais boutons de rose vivants, et tres dignes d'être préférées à Bellino [...]. Malgré leur grande jeunesse, on voyait la marque de leur puberté précoce sur leurs blancs poitrines." (Casanova, 1960a, 4; see also Wolff, 2005). The mark of puberty meant that for Casanova the girls were not altogether children, but he was obviously well aware of their "grande jeunesse." Without any qualms, he had sex with the twelve-year-old Cecilia, and then he was approached by the eleven-year-old Marina. At first he resisted her advances: "Tu es trop enfant." She insisted, however, and so he surrendered, and did not regret it: "elle se montra effectivement supérieure en tout à sa soeur" (Casanova, 1960a, 8 and 11). If it is possible to speak of a rhetoric of deviance in Casanova's memoirs, one might argue that his initial hesitation – "tu es trop enfant" – marked the threshold of deviance, describing a young girl who might actually be too young for sex, but clearly that threshold of deviance existed for Casanova only in order to be crossed. Any intimations of "deviance" were immediately "normalized" in libertine sexual relations with the eleven-year-old child.

Indeed, Casanova went on to celebrated his sexual pleasures with Cecilia and Marina as the antidote to pessimism and unhappiness in the world at large. Regarding pessimistic people, Casanova philosophized:

"Ces gens-là n'écrivirent pas, ayant une bonne santé, la bourse pleine d'or, et le contentement dans l'âme, venant d'avoir entre leurs bras des Cécile, et des Marine, et étant sûrs d'en avoir d'autres dans la suite. C'est une race de pessimistes [...] Si le plaisir existe, et si on ne peut en jouir qu'en vie, la vie est donc un bonheur" (Casanova, 1960a, 12).

Casanova's affirmation of philosophical optimism was also an affirmation of radical libertinism. All was for the best, in this best of all possible worlds, but "the best," for Casanova, included sexual relations with children. Here there was no hint of any rhetoric of deviance, and the libertine simply accepted that Cecilia and Marina were placed in this best of all possible worlds in order to provide for his own pleasure and contentment. In the 1760s, in Russia, Casanova purchased a thirteen-year-old peasant girl as his sexual slave, and, like Gozzi in Dalmatia in the 1740s, relished the encounter as a Slavic adventure in Eastern Europe (Wolff, 1994, 50–62).

If Casanova remains the most famous libertine of the eighteenth century, the most celebrated cultural representation of the libertine was Mozart's Don Giovanni. The

opera was first performed in 1787, roughly contemporary with the case of Gaetano Franceschini in Venice, and set to a libretto by the Venetian writer Lorenzo Da Ponte. For Don Giovanni, it was explicitly stipulated that libertinism involved sex with women "of all ages." Consider the lyrics to Leporello's "catalogue" aria of Don Giovanni's sexual conquests (act I, scene V; Da Ponte, 1981, 522–523; see also Wolff, 2005):

*"V'han fra queste contadine,
Cameriere, cittadine,
V'han contesse, baronesse,
Marchesane, principesse,
E v'han donne d'ogni grado,
D'ogni forma, d'ogni età."*

The model libertine engaged in sexual relations with all women: "of every degree, of every form, of every age." Though Mozart and Da Ponte (act I, scene V; Da Ponte, 1981, 522–523) did not specify the range of ages, the lyrics of the catalogue aria seem to emphasize the younger end of the age scale:

*"Delle vecchie fa conquista
Pel piacer di porle in lista:
Ma passion predominante
É la giovin principiante."*

Though he does not disdain older women, Don Giovanni explicitly prefers, indeed predominantly prefers, "the young beginner" (*la giovin principiante*). How young is the young beginner? If Don Giovanni were comparable to Casanova, the young beginner could be as young as Marina, age eleven.

Discussing women "of every form," Leporello sings about Don Giovanni's varying and seasonal interests in the fat woman (*la grassotta*) and the little woman (*la piccina*).

*"Vuol d'inverno la grassotta,
Vuol d'estate la magrotta;
É la grande maestosa,
La piccina è ognor vezzosa."*

Da Ponte (act I, scene V; Da Ponte, 1981, 522–523) provided the verse, but, anyone who knows the aria, knows that Mozart took the word "piccina" and repeated it over and over again in an unusually emphatic, elaborate, and archly playful musical setting. The hypnotically driven repetition, consisting of sixteenth notes, dotted rhythms, and staccato emphasis, leads to an almost complete collapse of articulation: La piccina, la piccina, lapiccinapiccinapiccinapiccinapiccinapiccina. The musical effect is to suggest, comically and obscenely, that the little woman is getting littler and littler with each repetition of the word. In fact, however, the women "of every form" become confused with the women "of every age," so that "la piccina" appears not

only as a little woman, but also as a young girl, the young beginner, getting younger and younger with each repetition. Mozart's setting of "la piccina" could be considered the eighteenth-century musical rhetoric of deviance.

Casanova, writing his memoirs in the 1790s, told his own story up to the year 1774, when he himself was not yet fifty. He was in Trieste in 1774, on the Adriatic, when he met a former lover, an actress named Irene, who was accompanied by her nine-year-old daughter. Casanova was interested in both mother and daughter:

"Elle vint quelques jours après, avec sa fille qui me plut et qui ne me refusa pas des caresses. Un beau matin, elle se rencontra avec le baron Pittoni, qui aimant autant que moi les petites filles, prit du goût pour celle d'Irène" (Casanova, 1960b, 238).

Casanova seemed to accept that the taste for "petites filles" was not uncommon among libertine men in the 1770s, but was something distinct – if not actually deviant – from the more general taste for adult women.

Pittoni was, for a while, actually accepted as the lover of the child, in some unspecified sense, but then Irene had to leave Trieste, and Casanova himself had to postpone his own satisfaction for a later date.

"Au commencement du carême elle partit avec toute la troupe, et trois ans après je l'ai vue à Padoue ou j'ai fait avec sa fille une connaissance beaucoup plus tendre" (Casanova, 1960b, 238).

These were the very last lines of Casanova's multi-volume memoirs. The libertine episode in Trieste thus concluded the story of Casanova's life. His epic recollections came to an end as he was caressing a nine-year-old girl, and looking forward to having sex with her when she would be twelve, three years later. Don Giovanni would sing, "Viva la liberta!" – but the judicial texts, as well as the literary works, of the late eighteenth century suggest at least the beginnings of the emergence of a modern rhetoric of deviance concerning sexual relations between adults and children.

SPOLNI ODNOSI MED ODRASLIMI IN OTROKI V BENETKAH
V 18. STOLETJU: RETORIKA DEVIANTNOSTI

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POVZETEK

Avtor v prispevku predstavi nekaj primerov, ki so jih v 18. stoletju obravnavala beneška sodišča in so zadevali spolne odnose med odraslimi in otroki. Cilj prispevka je analizirati jasno (ali nedoločno) naravo tovrstnega kaznivega dejanja v 18. stoletju ter posebne intervencije in postopke beneškega prava, s katerimi so se lotevali obravnave takih primerov. Avtor skuša skozi analizo odgovoriti na vprašanje, do katere mere so moderni termini, kot na primer "deviantnost" in "zloraba", uporabni za razumevanje takih primerov v kontekstu 18. stoletja, ponazori pa tudi pomen razsvetljenstva pri izpostavljanju določenih kategorij kaznivega dejanja. V nadaljevanju prispevka se avtor posveti konceptu libertinizma oziroma razvratnosti družbe v 18. stoletju ter posledicam, ki jih je le-to imelo za spolne odnose med odraslimi in otroki, podrobneje pa obdeli tudi razvoj zgodnjih novoveških idej o posebnem pomenu otroštva. V okviru svoje disciplinarne usmeritve prispevek predstavi elemente pravne, družbene in kulturne zgodovine.

Ključne besede: Benetke, otroštvo, zloraba otrok, spolni zločin, Casanova, Don Giovanni

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