Nefarious Crimes, Contested Justice
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Incest is a behavior more readily denied than acknowledged. When Freud controversially suggested that some of his patients’ disclosures were true, the discussion made his colleagues uncomfortable. The psychodynamics of incest rattled the contemporary idealization of patriarchal benevolence and sagacity. Several decades later, across the Atlantic in the United States, women activists insisted the public take notice of crimes against the family, paving the way for sympathetic health professionals to define and treat a range of dysfunctional behaviors from a new, feminist perspective. Among the pioneers were the psychiatrist Judith Herman and her associate Lisa Hirschman, who concluded that the numerous incest disclosures they were analyzing were instances of human emotions and behavior that hinged on power and control. Beyond the therapeutic environment, however, the incest narratives that reached the general public and the courts were greeted with skepticism, particularly when women claimed to have recaptured repressed memories. Without corroboration, there was no absolute proof. The same limitations circumscribed criminal investigations in the early modern Republic of Venice. Unless prosecutors could obtain actual confessions from fathers who had committed such sexual transgressions, incest was a difficult crime to prove.

Less concerned with proving whether incest was real, imagined, or an unconscious fantasy, fiction writers have long kept the theme alive. Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* (1955) is cited by Herman and Hirschman as a celebrated modern depiction of the seductive daughter, but there are medieval and early modern examples as well. Shakespeare was the quintessential author forcing audiences to grapple with father-daughter sexual tension. Yet his postmodern interpreters, echoing the controversies
Freud’s theories triggered, disagree on whether it was fathers or daughters whose fantasies and passions sparked the incest. Jane Ford exposes the psychological problems that the betrothal of daughters generated in fathers, finding three patterns in Shakespearean plays: the father who reluctantly relinquishes his daughter (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*; *Othello*); the father who retains his daughter for himself (*King Lear*; *Pericles*); and the father who assumes an active role in procuring a suitor to resolve the potential incest threat (*Romeo and Juliet*).\(^2\) In contrast to Ford, the folklorist Alan Dundes adheres to one of Freud’s theories as a heuristic device, asserting that *King Lear* is a girl’s fairy tale told from a father’s point of view. Dundes contends that folktales about paternal desires for incestuous relationships are really projections of daughters’ disguised incestuous love for their fathers. Thus Cinderella, he argues, is a child’s fantasy.\(^3\)

Casting the spotlight on either fathers or daughters exclusively, however, is a false dichotomy. Incest occurs as a result of a range of unwitnessed experiences, which may include mutual consent, seduction, subjection, coercion, or some combination of these. Whatever the circumstances, the unbalanced power relations between father and daughter are implicit in the transgression.

Historians, like literary scholars, also differ in their treatment of the incest theme. Lauro Martines has argued that closed domestic space in Italian Renaissance cities encouraged incest, whether real or imagined. Most of his examples, however, are based on fictive tales of genetic mothers and sons, or of young wives and their stepsons. He found not a single story about incestuous relations between father and daughter dating from before the mid-sixteenth century. Martines explains the dearth of fatherly transgressions by underlining that household space did not confine men, and so was unlikely to suggest their involvement with their daughters.\(^4\)

I suggest, rather, that male writers of the Renaissance were reluctant to expose men’s incestuous desires, and that their omissions do not constitute evidence of social experience. Criminal records are more likely places than literature to find clues to sexual transgressions, although admittedly incest and other hidden crimes are not abundantly evident in them.\(^5\) Moreover, most accusations were accompanied by denials, rather than admissions, making the crimes difficult to prove. It is possible that women enclosed in domestic space, particularly those with meager living accommodations who commonly shared a bed with several people, were
prone to seduction. Catholic confessors routinely asked parishioners whether they had had impure thoughts or had acted on carnal wishes. What went on in the family bed in early modern times was far less private than modern-day arrangements, where parents and children have separate beds. In the past, there was no tangible wall partitioning off scenes of fondling and intercourse or muffling the sounds of sex. Children witnessed and heard sexual relations from an early age. This may have resulted in fewer intimate boundaries than societal norms call for today, at least in prosperous postmodern communities. Still, father-daughter incest required secrecy and denial, because it was among the gravest of crimes against the institution of the family.

Historians of early modern Italy do not have to rely on the high drama of Shakespeare’s England to find literary forms that develop the incest theme. The Venetian printing industry disseminated a wide range of folklore that takes up the issue of sex among kin, including the works of two major authors of Italian fairy tales, Giovan Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile. The motif, which spread from Italy to northern Europe, is often set in circumstances that mask the father’s incestuous wishes by giving either his wife or his daughter responsibility for developing the fantasy. A wife about to die, for example, makes her husband promise he will only remarry someone exactly like her. (Another way of reading this is that he wishes for a replica of his dying wife.) The widower searches in vain, until he realizes no one but his daughter fits his wife’s specifications. Sometimes it is the daughter who brings him to this realization. For example, in Straparola’s version, Doralice voluntarily tries on her mother’s ring and it fits, encouraging her father, Tebaldo, Prince of Salerno, to make her his wife.

Doralice is not a passive woman, nor do Oedipal wishes paralyze her. She has no intention of marrying her father; instead, she flees to England, where she eventually weds a prince. Her jealous father pursues her, however, and kills her two children, a severe punishment for rejecting paternal authority. But here Straparola creates an ending that is highly unusual for European folktales: the incestuous father is executed. The tale was first published in Venice in 1550, and the punishment accords well with the death penalties the city’s Council of Forty imposed on fathers convicted of what magistrates termed a nefarious crime.

The incest theme also appears in the writings of Giambattista Basile,
a Neapolitan author who used oral traditions believed to have been collected in Crete and Venice to compose his *Pentamerone* (1634–36). “The Girl with the Maimed Hands” involves a sister struggling with the sexual desires of her brother, while “The She-Bear” tells of a princess threatened by her widowed father. The princess turns to an older woman, and to magic, for help. The old woman gives her a magic chip that, when placed in the girl’s mouth, turns her into a bear. When the father summons his daughter to his bed, she places the chip in her mouth and turns into a ferocious animal. The father-king is frightened to death, and the daughter manages to escape, a remarkable example of power inversion.

One way to interpret these fairy tales is as examples of patriarchal resistance to sharing power or material assets with outsiders, either symbolically or materially. Incest negates exogamy, a mechanism employed to foster community cohesion, in favor of a kind of patriarchal absolutism within one’s own family. In Nancy Canepa’s analysis of Basile’s “Penta of the Chopped-Off Hands,” where the recently widowed king of Dry Rock tells his sister she will become his wife, the incest becomes not so much “erotic longing” as “economic calculation.” The king will spare himself the expense both of marrying outside his own family and marrying off his sister. “My sister, it is not the act of a judicious man to let anything of value leave his house,” he says. Canepa characterizes this as “a system of exchange gone awry, in which the give-and-take of two-sided transactions is substituted [for] by a dream of a self-sufficient ‘countersystem’ based on the accumulation of economic and sexual resources.”

Other examples of incest in the artistic imagination abound, serving as powerful reminders of the connections between creative representation and social reality. Medieval clerics were prolific authors of tales that involved the nuclear family and parent-child relationships. Plausibly, they drew their narratives from private confessions, drafting their stories to caution against transgressing kinship boundaries. Among the more popular themes was that of daughters escaping incestuous fathers. There are also rich examples from baroque Italy in the shape of the numerous paintings of *Lot and His Daughters*, a subject almost every contemporary artist of note included in his portfolio.

As in the *Susanna and the Elders* paintings, so in the *Lot and His Daughters* imagery, the focus in the present analysis is on how these biblical stories, which provided artists with an excuse to depict nudity
for male patrons, were portrayed. To begin, as in the story of Genesis 19:30–38, the father is exculpated of any wrongdoing. It is the daughters who commit incest, albeit for a noble cause. Lot’s family is escaping the sinful city of Sodom. His wife, ignoring God’s warning not to gaze upon the burning city, is turned into a pillar of salt. Here, the daughters, fearful that the human race will die out, anesthetize their father with alcohol and seduce him.

Orazio Gentileschi (1563–1639), *Lot and His Daughters* (ca. 1622). Oil on canvas. 59¾ × 74½ in. (151.8 × 189.2 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Orazio Gentileschi (1563–1639), *Lot and His Daughters* (ca. 1622). Oil on canvas. 59¾ × 74½ in. (151.8 × 189.2 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
that will found the tribes of Moab and Ammon has occurred. Guido Reni (1575–1642) also recalls the incest theme in his painting of Lot and His Daughters (ca. 1615–16), although without illustrating the seduction. Instead, father and daughters are shown fleeing the sinful city of Sodom.12

Were the “Lot” paintings of the baroque period an admonishment against a sexual taboo or yet another excuse to encourage voyeurism? Whichever the case, there was no reason to portray fathers as the active initiators of forbidden unions. In a patriarchal age, that role was bestowed on daughters, while male viewers could remain safely in denial. However, the possibility of paternal culpability did intrude into the baroque spotlight now and then, as it did in the last decade of the sixteenth century, with the infamous trial of the Roman noblewoman Beatrice Cenci. Guido Reni or his followers were reputedly already pondering the consequences of father-daughter incest in painting Cenci’s portrait.

Only six years after the investigation of Sebastian and Mattia Stanghelin in the small Veneto town of Cittadella (presented below), Beatrice Cenci allegedly plotted with her stepmother and her two brothers to have her father murdered. Beatrice was 22, just a few years younger than the farmworker Mattia Stanghelin, when Pope Clement VIII had her and her alleged collaborators arrested and tortured to get them to confess to murder.13 In the course of the investigation, Beatrice’s lawyer, the renowned jurist Prospero Farinacci, argued that her father, a reputedly violent Roman noble who had terrorized both family and community, had raped her. Farinacci admitted that Beatrice had promoted her father’s death, but said that he had kept her imprisoned in a dark room, where he had abused her and dared to violate her chastity. According to Roman law, the lawyer continued, Beatrice should not have murdered her father but rather have accused him of criminal behavior. However, her father had robbed her of her freedom to make such accusations by keeping her under lock and key. Beatrice did seek help, writing her relatives about her mistreatment, and eventually her stepmother and brothers assisted her.14 Her father’s alleged abuse of her did not, however, persuade the court to pardon the murder. Farinacci was suspected of fabricating the alleged incest, and Beatrice was condemned to death in February 1599. Her spectacular decapitation in a Roman square drew an enormous crowd, including perhaps the baroque painter Caravaggio (1571–1610).15

Beatrice’s dramatic story of incest and parricide has continued to spark
creative work in literature and theater over the past four hundred years. It is a story of extremes: a tyrannical father who abused his power and a daughter whose refusal to submit to his excesses led her to murder. In 1819, Percy Shelley dramatized the trial in his tragedy *The Cenci*, and his wife Mary, famous in her own right as the author of *Frankenstein* (1819), wrote a novel about father-daughter incest, *Mathilda*. Alberto Moravia
produced a novel on the Cenci in 1958. Stendhal, Alexandre Dumas père, and Antonin Artaud also wrote about Beatrice. Berthold Goldschmidt and Alberto Ginastera based operas on the Cenci story. Rome continues to have exhibits of the Cenci crimes, sustained by documents, prints, and paintings. Reni’s portrait of Beatrice still hangs in the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica in Rome’s Palazzo Barberini. Myth or reality, the painting is a reminder of the powerful emotions underlying incest, and the flood of artistic production is testimony to a public awareness of the phenomenon and the dangerous feelings it arouses, despite the reluctance to report it.

The Cenci story has also continued to inspire artistic production because in this unusual instance, a woman not only refused to submit to the tyranny of her father but responded to his violence with violence. This was not the usual gender expectation for women. Two women in the Venetian criminal investigations explored below, Marieta Negro and Mattia Stanghelin, who complied, are at the other end of the spectrum, perhaps more appropriately fitting the sixteenth-century gender norms set down by male prescriptive writers. Conversely, the young Vicentine spinner Anna Maria Bonon denounced her father to authorities.

There was, however, an entire middle range of responses to enclosure and patriarchal power by women of early modern Europe. My book Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice (2001) illustrates one aspect of feminine resistance to patriarchy, rejections of arranged marriage. Mature women turned to the Venetian ecclesiastical court well after their fathers’ deaths to claim that they had taken their marriage vows under coercion. Stories about fathers putting knives to their daughters’ throats so that they would consent to wed abound. This kind of violent imagery was not confined to the betrothals, marriage rites, and wedding nights described in Marriage Wars but is also found in the stories of forced monachization that Jutta Sperling has studied. In the Venetian criminal investigations Mattia Stanghelin, Anna Maria Bonon, and Anna and Antonia de Vei also adduced their fathers’ violent tendencies to explain their submission to incest, and the kin and neighbors who testified corroborated that the daughters had been subjected to violent intimidation.

Was the paternal violence daughters described in this wide range of archival sources a trope or a social reality? My argument in Marriage Wars hinges on legal definitions, that reverential fear, the fear deriving
from deep respect of paternal authority, was insufficient to demonstrate that a marital union was coerced. Petitioners to the ecclesiastical court had to demonstrate that their consent to marry had been the product of grave fear, the kind of fear that issued from threats of injury. Daughters, not sons, and their lawyers seemed to think that the imagery of violent and tyrannical fathers was a plausible reflection of social reality, a reality that both elite and popular cultures shared. Franchesca Medioli’s recent study of forced monachization in seventeenth-century Italy provides further evidence of patriarchal coercion. She suggests the purpose of convents was not just to “avoid the dispersion of family patrimony” or affirm “women’s inferiority” but also to shelter women from domestic abuse. Medioli quotes the cleric Giovanni Boccadifero, who in his Discorso sopra il governo delle monache (1550) wrote that convents were of use “[so] that young ladies should not remain in their paternal homes, at risk of losing their honor not only with strangers but also with servants and (which is much worse) with their brothers and perhaps even with their fathers, which has occurred more than once (I tremble to say) in our times and of which old records are full.” The present book limits itself to studying revelations of incest in Venice’s criminal courts, but obviously other archival collections, such as those dealing with criminality in convents, would shed further light on the subject.

Incest as Social Reality

Incest is certainly more palatable as a fantasy, told in the form of a fairy tale than as social reality. It is more difficult to sift through the testimonies from Venice’s criminal courts, which reveal single women struggling with their subjection, at times becoming emotionally detached from reality, and then feeling shame. Many women submitted, conforming to the expectations of the age. One even suggested that the incest had happened while she was asleep. A few mustered the courage to denounce their fathers and express their anger. In other cases, outsiders with their own motives used the incest secrets as social currency, rescuing the women from sexual relationships, while their own families and communities stood by and did nothing.

How such criminal behavior was disciplined—through the state via established laws and the courts, through the community of neighbors and
kin, through the confessional and via the priest to the bishop and then the state—varies from case to case, depending on the underlying ambiguities in legal, social, and religious practice. Individuals called upon to testify unilaterally cooperated with state authorities but often simultaneously resisted them. Authorities aroused fear, threatening community solidarity and dredging up shame. If a Venetian governor exposed a collective secret, the entire community would be dishonored and held responsible for not putting a stop to the transgressive behavior. Yet why had community members not intervened? That is the most difficult knot to unravel. Which behaviors did neighbors discipline and control and which did they leave to fate? Perhaps secrets could be left to fate when they were not proven realities, while sinful crimes that were publicly exposed demanded a community response, however evasive.

The four stories recounted in the pages that follow and the one in the next chapter show that incest visited the daughters of merchants, agricultural workers, fishermen, river raftsmen, and patricians alike, although clearly noble fathers could defend themselves against such accusations better than ordinary people. What the characters in the stories disclosed clearly drives my reconstruction of the criminal cases. The reactions of people in the community whom the Venetian authorities pressed to think about the unthinkable, sex between fathers and daughters, are highlighted. Only one case concerns a girl who by postmodern standards would be considered a youngster, at age 13; childhood was much shorter for early modern people, usually ending for girls with menarche. In Veneto law, prior to 1586, children were legally minors until the age of 12. After 1586, girls were minors until the age of 14 and boys until age 16.22 The other four cases involve women in their late teens or twenties. Venetian authorities as well as neighbors would have expected the older women to resist the incest and denounce their fathers. They particularly condemned women in long-term relationships. The latter responded to questioning in sleepy states of denial, slowing admitting to shame. Their omissions, together with those of other family members, are as instructive as their admissions for what they reveal about popular mentalité.

Still, a few stories do not constitute a master narrative. Historians can only write about what is known, not about what went unreported, and incest was a well-kept secret. Given the dearth of evidence, I would prefer to characterize it as a rare exception; an aberration, not the norm. The
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five reconstructions of once-hidden crimes do have a place within the major themes of early modern European historiography, however, particularly those of enclosure and female honor. Sleeping in common beds and incestuous relationships may require an addition to the reasons why the enclosure of women was standard practice in Catholic territories. Historians of patriarchy have characterized this practice as a means of protecting both women’s chastity and the honor of their families. Church authorities, with the support of secular states, made strenuous efforts to prevent women from having sex outside of marriage by creating asylums that housed pretty orphans, battered wives, and reformed prostitutes. These “conservatories of virtue,” as Angela Groppi has called them, gave homeless women what, presumably, domestic space provided to more fortunate females: protection. The dangers of sex and pregnancy have always been characterized in the historiography as external: fathers, brothers, uncles, and cousins feared that their female kin were vulnerable to outsiders. The stories retrieved from Venice’s criminal records suggest, however, that restricted, domestic space also implicitly created internal dangers, including those of loss of virginity, pregnancy, and sin, all incentives to removing single women from the domestic hearth, provided one could afford the spiritual dowry convents demanded, or one could obtain the charity of Catholic welfare institutions.

A second major historiographical theme that these stories help develop is the growing role of the Catholic state in regulating private life. Venetian state attorneys, governors, and their respective functionaries worked alongside parish priests and bishops to cleanse communities of public scandal and sin and to punish “crimes against nature” and “crimes against God.” Marriage and family came increasingly under the secular arm in early modern Europe, as the state endeavored to curb the powers of the Church. By the eighteenth century, in matters such as divorce, for example, the Venetian secular authorities shared jurisdiction with the Church, asserting that their clerical predecessors had been too lenient.

Finally, these stories elaborate on the role of the community in the early modern regional state’s system of justice. Prosecutors relied on villagers and neighbors to provide the valuable clues necessary to convict those guilty of unwitnessed crimes such as incest. Reading through their investigations offers us vivid snapshots of neighborhood and village life.
In the autumn of 1557, a man named Antonio Solfin wrote the Venetian state attorneys to denounce the “impious case of the iniquitous father Alvise Negro.” A woman living in the environs of San Barnaba had confided in Solfin that in her old neighborhood, Sant’Angelo Raffaele, her former neighbor of forty years was having sex with his daughter. This shocking bit of gossip was a lucky break for Solfin, who was a fugitive from the Venetian state, living on the margins with a bounty on his head. Fortunately for this criminal, Venice had more fugitives than its policing structures could handle; state magistrates invited outcasts to lend them a hand in apprehending others guilty of greater crimes in exchange for commuted sentences. If Solfin could convincingly expose Alvise Negro, whose deviance was both sinful and wicked—that is, inspired by the Devil—as well as detrimental to the institution of the family, the fugitive could win his exoneration. Solfin got to work, naming a woman called Valeria as his informant. The avogadore (state attorney) sent his deputy to question the prospective witness the next day. Valeria readily confirmed that her friend’s husband and daughter were carrying on with each other. With this, the state attorney introduced the case to the Council of Forty, who in turn authorized apprehending Negro for questioning.

The accused father was held in jail while functionaries collected depositions from his immediate family and more than twenty neighbors in the working-class neighborhood of Sant’Angelo Raffaele, where they lived. Solfin had even drawn up the witness list for the state attorney, taking pains to secure his own exoneration. Beyond Alvise Negro’s immediate family, the list included people who were central to the neighborhood’s communication network: grocers, transportation workers, artisans, domestics, and cloth merchants. Solfin named Samaritana, a baker’s wife, who taught the neighborhood children to read; Sebastiana, whose husband was the neighborhood water bearer; Vincenzo Passarini, a raw silk merchant, and Lucia, his wife; the widow who sold spices at the foot of the Maddalena bridge; the wife of the hemp weaver Zuan Lesser, who had been a servant in Alvise Negro’s house, and her daughter; the wife of Felipo the boatman; Barbara Revedin, a native of Brescia, and her daught-
ter Carmena, who had both been domestic servants of the accused; and Gasparina Caviliter, her mother Zuana, and her daughter in-law.29

It was Sebastian Negro, Alvise’s father, who had spread the scandalous talk in the neighborhood, grumbling about his son to shopkeepers and other acquaintances. The functionaries taking depositions thus sought out his confidants. Among them were Madra, the wife of a fisherman, and her daughter Anzola; the weaver Domenico Mazon; and Alvise, the barber at the Delle Guerre bridge in Sant’Angelo Raffaele.30 Alvise’s father had lamented frequently to these folks that his son was having an immoral relationship with his granddaughter. Solfin also urged the state attorney to examine the entire neighborhood of Sant’Angelo Raffele to arrive at the truth, especially one Piero Minoto, who had been overheard saying that he had known Alvise Negro was committing this wicked crime for seven or eight years.

All those deposed were asked the same questions: Do you know Alvise Negro? In what capacity? Do you know why he is in prison? Most knew Alvise and why he was confined, but they said they had only learned of the incest from gossip after the arrest. This may have been true. However, admitting prior knowledge would mean having refused to take responsibility for the moral welfare of the community, if not for the victim. Almost no one was willing to state the source of such sensitive information, though all said the knowledge was universally available throughout the community, especially after Negro had been arrested. Vincenzo Passarini, a silk weaver, remarked, “I heard he was in prison because he made children with his daughter. I heard this from many people. People are saying this publicly.”31 Several of those questioned, on the other hand, showed some bias.32 In particular, the women whose wages depended on working as domestics in Alvise’s house volunteered that they had known the merchant, whose nickname was “Cordellina,” Italian for “fine, braided silk,” to be a good man. Other witnesses were clearly uncomfortable talking about the incest. Samaritana had taught Alvise’s children to read but had never been to his house.33 She told the deputy who questioned her that she knew nothing about the incest. However, her neighbor Lucia contradicted this, telling the deputy that she had learned about the incest from Samaritana, who had remarked to her, “I don’t know what the world is coming to. . . . Alvise is doing it with his daughter.”34
Neighbors and shopkeepers were more inclined to name Sebastian, Alvise’s father, as their source of information. Barbara, an apothecary’s widow, recounted how Sebastian had visited the shop and complained that his son led a bad life. The inquisitive functionaries received their most concrete tip from one Alexander Carobuta, who had heard from the footman Marin, who had overheard his employer Piero Minoto gossiping with a certain Simon, whom Minoto had known for seven or eight years, that Alvise Negro was having sex with his daughter and that he deserved to be burned. Piero Minoto was the man to question. He was Alvise’s close chum (compare) and the godfather of one of his children. When questioned, however, Minoto said his source was Sebastian, Alvise’s father, who would come and complain that he was being mistreated at home. One day, Sebastian had confessed that his son Alvise was committing incest with his oldest daughter, Marieta Negro. Sebastian could not remember when he had learned this, perhaps two years before.

Clearly, no one had bothered to verify Sebastian’s complaints. It seems that his age, his incoherence, and his grumpy personality worked against him, or perhaps no one wanted to be involved with such sordid accusations. Alvise, the neighborhood barber-surgeon, raised doubts about the old man’s wits. People would come into his shop and chatter. Many gossiped that Alvise Negro had had sex with his daughter Marieta, but the barber-surgeon would not simply take Sebastian’s word for it. He told the deputy:

“The old man is senile. I never heard him say this. However, I heard lots of people in the neighborhood say that Sebastian was one of the worst men ever around. So I would not believe him. As for the daughter, I think she is crazy or possessed. I saw her last about sixteen months ago. She walked by my shop, sloppily dressed in reddish-yellow velvet [provocative colors for women going about Venice], and she lifted her dress to allow people to see underneath, and men followed her to her house. She let them screw her when her father was not home. Her father left their house in the morning and did not return until evening.”

“Do you know who screwed her?” the deputy asked.

“Yes, a certain Zuane, and Tony the apothecary who works near the Maddalena bridge, and others whose names I do not remember.”

“How do you know they had sex?”
“Zuane told me so a thousand times, and the whole neighborhood knows.”

As this last testimony demonstrates, Solfin’s list of neighbors hardly provided conclusive evidence. Marieta’s promiscuity was certainly plausible; it is a behavior some abused women adopt. On the other hand, painting a picture of promiscuity would also help the accused father, if a witness was so inclined. If the neighbors were vague and unhelpful, the state functionaries had better luck in drawing conclusions from the Negro family, whose testimonies help us reconstruct a story. Marieta Negro, aged 18 and unmarried, had already given birth to a son, who had died, and she had miscarried twice. Although the informants were vague, the young woman appears to have been sexually active for six years. Her cousin Andriana testified that Marieta had first had sex with an uncle who had lived with the family, and then she had taken up with her own father. Marieta’s mother, Chiara, corroborated this as well. The series of neonatal deaths sustains the incest accusation: a high incidence of stillbirths and early infant deaths is associated with inbreeding.

Marieta’s parents, Chiara Zorzi and Alvise Negro, had been married for twenty-two years. Alvise was a silk merchant, with his own workshop on the lower level of the family’s home. He lived with his wife and four daughters, a son by a previous wife, aged 25, and his elderly father, Sebastian. His brother Bartholomeo had also lived with the family until he married and moved out of the neighborhood, to Santa Marina. Marieta was the eldest daughter. The second daughter, Cornelia, was 15; Zomira was 9; and Ludovica was 7.

Domenico Negro, Marieta’s stepbrother, explained the family’s sleeping arrangements. His stepmother and father slept with the two smaller children in one room, while he and his grandfather slept in another. His stepsisters Marieta and Cornelia slept on the terrace during the summer, but when it was cold, Marieta slept with the smaller children in their father’s workshop. Cornelia had another niche.

Marieta and Alvise’s relationship as it emerged from the various testimonies had been long but not seamless. Her mother Chiara’s testimony is notable, because we learn she had known of the incest for at least two years before the investigation, if not longer. She told her interrogator
that Marieta had miscarried two years before, and had then admitted to having sex with her father “once or twice.” The notary wanted to know what Chiara did when she learned of the incest. Chiara replied that she had admonished her husband, calling him an “assassin,” contemporary slang for a man who deflowered a virgin. Alvise had denied the incest, saying it was not possible, since the entire family slept together. However, Chiara claimed that Alvise’s own father, Sebastian, had also witnessed the incest and had reproached him. It was clear to the state deputy that the family had known what was going on.

Marieta had complained to her mother, and Chiara confirmed that the girl had wanted the sex to stop. Marieta had run away from home several times, staying with a cousin. Chiara also volunteered that her husband was not the first to have sex with Marieta; it was the girl’s uncle, Bartholomeo, who had taken her virginity (an important point, because taking a girl’s virginity forcibly and without her consent was punishable by death). Chiara had confided to her neighbor Valeria that father and daughter were having sex early in the morning. The mother was upset about it, and told Valeria that Marieta intended to denounce her father to judicial authorities. (The Venetian deputy had already verified this with Valeria, who commented, “I was stunned by this information, and I asked Dona Chiara if this was the truth.” The mother confirmed it and began to cry, saying, “I asked her how this was possible, and she said they did it early in the morning.”)

The state attorneys now turned to Alvise. Unsurprisingly, he denied the allegations and claimed that he had behaved as a “true father, not as a true ass.”

“What does that mean?” his interrogator asked.
“My God, I do not know. I do not know how to read and write.”
“Why did you say that?”
“I don’t know. I am out of my mind.”
“No, you are not out of your mind.”

The following month, November, Alvise was tortured by having a rope tightened around his naked body. By then his interrogators were convinced of his guilt but would force him to admit his transgressions, because it was necessary for a conviction. Had he robbed his daughter of
her virginity? Had he impregnated her? Had he beaten and kicked her to cause her to miscarry?

Alvise continued to deny the accusations, complaining that his son Domenico had sold him out for money, and that he had robbed him, but the interrogators ignored this and brought him back to the subject of sex. As they tightened the rope, Alvise blurted out in Venetian dialect that maybe he had had sex with Marieta once or twice, down below in his workshop, and that only his wife knew this. She had admonished him, but he insisted that Marieta had wanted to have sex with him (her having consented could potentially absolve him of the capital crime of involuntary *stupro*, essentially rape). Had she been a virgin? Alvise said he did not know. Marieta had told him she had had sex with his brother. The interrogator wanted to know if anyone else had seen him having sex with Marieta, and Alvise thought perhaps the smaller children had. In the end, he confessed that he had had sex with his daughter for two or three years but was certain that her most recent pregnancy was not his doing, because he had not had sex with her for more than a year.

Marieta had been questioned the first time just a few days before her father’s first interrogation. She was questioned once again just prior to his sentencing. She explained she had been out of the house for months but had voluntarily denounced her father after he had tried to have sex with her once again. In her second testimony, she also revealed that incest was a familiar behavior in her family.

“Dear Sirs, I told my uncles, but since they did not watch out for their own sisters, they were not going to watch out for me.”

“Were you happy to have sex with your father?”

“No. My father told me not to tell or he would drown me, or cut me into a thousand pieces.”

“Well, if you were not happy that he was having sex with you why didn’t you come to Justice sooner?”

Marieta claimed ineptitude, that she had not known how to contact the judicial authorities. “Those are thin excuses,” the interogator replied. “You ran away from home, and you stayed away for months. You were free. You could have told Justice if you were not happy in that relation-ship.”
Marieta swore she had not been happy in the sexual relationship. Refusing to accept culpability, she blamed her parents, who “did not want to govern her.”

“Well, it is necessary to punish you, too, severely, for such an abominable sin, especially seeing that you consented for so long and you did not come to Justice when you could have, since you left the house many times and were out for many days and many times!”

“My cousin Andriana said I would be a beast to denounce my father. And I have not been outside. I have been very sick at my cousin’s house.”[Perhaps she had been pregnant again, or had miscarried.]

“Why did you continue to sin for so long?”

“I told my mother, and my mother shouted at him and said she would tell her brothers when they returned from the regiments.”

“You have been ill for six years continuously?”

“Yes, and I am ill now. Just think of it. They made me sleep nude on the terrace.”

“Do you want to call any witnesses to your defense?”

“Dear Sirs, everyone in my house knows, and my father also wanted to do it with my sister.”

“Look, think about defending yourself for your errors.”

“Sirs, I do not have any one to take my side, if not God. I have not erred; my father has. He deserves to be burned.”

“Is that all?”

“I have no one to defend me.”

Marieta faced prison for not having denounced the incest, as well as for having participated in it for so long. After menarche, girls who “did not tell” faced serious consequences under the law. There is no indication in the exchange between Marieta and her interviewers that the authorities were sympathetic to her or grasped the unbalanced power relationship between a daughter and her father. They were attuned instead to the pleasure the daughter might have felt at her father’s attentions, for could it be demonstrated that Marieta had seduced her father, or consented to the incest, Alvise would not be guilty of involuntary stupro. The length of the relationship and Marieta’s failure to contact authorities worked to her disfavor, casting doubt on her having been coerced into having sex.

In the end, Alvise was sentenced to be decapitated and burned, the
most severe punishment the Venetian state could mete out, and a dra-
matic and public affirmation that the state contested excessive claims of
patriarchal power and would punish “crimes against nature and God.”50
Taking one’s own daughter was harmful to both family and society, for
it violated the rules of kinship, which encourage the dissolution of the
nuclear family in favor of forming new families and alliances outside the
domestic sphere. There was also no question from a religious perspective
that incest was a morally grave sin. Alvise’s brother Bartholomeo appears
to have gotten away with his alleged transgressions, because Marieta was
not forthright early on. Nor were her mother, her cousin, or her grand-
father admonished as accomplices in the wrongdoing. The family’s se-
cret had quickly spread across the neighborhood when Marieta’s mother
confided in a neighbor. This apparently lent more credibility to the story
that the old and disgruntled Sebastian had been spreading for some time.
But the neighbors did not act. It was only when Valeria’s chatter reached
a fugitive eager to be exonerated that the state was alerted to the crime.
It took an outsider whose motives were less than altruistic to expose this
family secret, one of the rare few preserved in the historical record. An-
tonio Solfin, who had been condemned for murdering a wool carder, was
rewarded with absolution.51 Did the neighbors not think incest important
enough to alert the authorities? Where did they stand? Marieta’s own
suggestion that incest was not new to her family circle is intriguing, but
there is no document trail. Instead, we must turn to other families’ secrets
to gather further insights.

A Farmworker’s Family: Galliera Veneta, 1593

“Your Majesty,” the bounty hunter Agostin Bornella wrote to Giovanni
Valier, the Venetian governor of Cittadella, in November 1593,

it has come to my attention through public chatter and acclaim that
Bastian Stanghelin of Galliera is a bad man, of the worst nature that
one could fear. Disdaining Divine and Human Laws with his diabolic
spirit, he has known his daughter Mattia carnally for five or six years.
He has taken her virginity and also procreated children, whom he then
hid and brought to harm. This is very serious for a Christian, such that
every fellow Christian and even God would find this horrible monster
hateful and worthy of death. I hadn’t managed to catch him [before], because he is both a clever and terrible person whom both kin and friends fear. But today with the help of God I found him in Jan Maria Faltrini’s hostelry, and I captured him. I went immediately to the Villa in Galliera, and I also apprehended Mattia, Bastian’s daughter. When she heard that her father had been detained, she tried to flee to her neighbors. She hid under a bed. Nonetheless, I caught her and took her to Your prisons. Thus father and daughter are in the hands of the Justice of Your Signoria. Monstrous delinquents and abominable sinners.

Let Justice bring to full light what I have exposed of these two. Examine Girolamo Carraro, the cook for the Most Noble Piero Capello in Galliera, and his wife Oliana so that the truth be known and Justice might punish such a serious crime. It would be best to remove that peasant from the world. May the benign Most Serene [Republic] bestow on me the rewards that I deserve as a faithful servant and captor, the one who exposed this serious crime. Let the reward be at the pleasure of the Illustrious and Excellent Council of Ten.

A sordid story unfolded in this rural hamlet of northeast Italy in the winter of 1593. If not for the criminal record registered with the Venetian state attorneys, Galliera Veneta would probably have gone unnoticed, lost in the shadow of the celebrated history of Venice. Before turning to the incest story whispered in Galliera’s fields, it is well worth examining the daily lives of the farmworkers who lived there, for rarely do the archival documents give us such a vivid picture of history’s forgotten people.

A rural hamlet in the upper Po plains, thirty-three kilometers from the city of Padua, Galliera Veneta was a tiny satellite of Cittadella, a walled town built north of Padua in 1220–21 as a military command post to control the region. Galliera Veneta held no special significance under Venetian rule until the aristocratic Cappello family constructed a magnificent villa there, over the course of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The founder of this patrician dynasty, Giovanni Capello (1497–1559), traded in Asia until he entered Venetian political life in 1534. His family holdings in Galliera Veneta were still modest in 1518, consisting simply of a farmhouse, stall, loft, garden, and orchard of about nine campi run by a farm manager. Construction of the villa began some time after 1530. Giovanni’s successors, typical of many Venetian patrician dynasties, devoted great economic energies to landed investment from the late six-
teenth century onwards. They reclaimed marshland and used the Brenta River for irrigation in large-scale agriculture.

Rural laborers like the Stanghelins and their neighbors flocked to the Capello estate, where building projects provided employment for skilled craftsmen of all sorts. Most important, the Capellos’ lands promised at very least subsistence. They were planted with millet, sorghum, barley, and, above all, maize, a lifesaving staple introduced from the New World in 1540. No less important were pigs, which to this day sustain the Veneto.

Modest dwellings to house the agricultural workers were built beside the farmhouses and mills. Few peasants in the Veneto were wealthy enough to own a farmhouse and barn, agricultural tools, and a granary to store the harvest and dry and save seed. Most of those on the Capellos’ estate were laborers and lived in the villa’s humble annexes, which they normally rented annually, depending on their contracts. Some of these annexes were casoni, one-room structures made of brick and lime, with pointed straw roofs and earthen floors. The six Stanghelins who are the subjects of this story had a house of this kind, but with two rooms to sleep in, each with one bed.

Galliera Veneta, with its provincial parish, and the Capello estate gradually became a tightly knit association. In 1530, the bishop of Treviso, Francesco Pisani, made the Capello family patrons of the parish. The estate and the parish became almost one unit, with the same social and economic base. Everyone knew everyone else. If the Stanghelin criminal case is any indication, the inhabitants practiced endogamy. Many workers on the estate, male and female, were related to one another. They were part of two main social units contemporaneously: the family, in both its nuclear and extended forms, and the collectivity. This was the result of the way their work was organized: raising pigs, and planting, harvesting, drying, and grinding grain all required collaboration. Although they lived under separate roofs, the nuclear families housed in the patrician villa’s annexes were not really isolated from one another; in practice, they were a unit. They shared animals and tools and divided their labors. They worked to the rhythms of a common calendar, marked not by months and days but by the events of the agrarian cycle. Planting season. Harvest season. The time when newborn colts finished weaning and were ready to run free. These were the descriptives the protagonists
used to mark time in their depositions. The men gathered at the local hostelry after work to drink and play cards. The women shared domestic and field chores together, and exchanged information about life-cycle events, such as pregnancy, birth, miscarriage, and death. Knowledge circulated through gossip. Together, the folk on the Capello estate formed a collective mentality, with some homogeneity. But in 1593, an intruder would disrupt the quiet rhythms of their farming life, exposing their secrets and their vulnerabilities. It was their own gossip that brought them to the attention of the wandering bounty hunter who invoked Venetian justice.

As illustrated in the case of Alvise Negro, Venice relied on volunteers, whether fugitives seeking exoneration or bounty hunters out to make a living, to help it capture its criminals and police its territories. Whether these men had any moral commitment to justice is difficult to say. In the rural hamlet of Galliera Veneta in 1593–94, an entire community had been aware of grave moral wrongdoing for five or six years, yet no one had come forward, not even the parish priest. This is a curious problem in itself.

Then, a bounty hunter, motivated perhaps by a reward, broke the conspiracy of silence: Sebastian Stanghelin was having sex with his daughter and murdering the babies that issued from this forbidden union. The investigation that followed the bounty hunter’s denunciation to Venetian authorities was under the competency of the patrician Giovanni Valier, podestà of Cittadella, who was puzzled at the parish priest’s failure to intervene in the Stanghelin family’s affairs. Robbing a daughter of her virginity and infanticide were crimes against society and injurious to the state, but they were also sins and the work of the Devil, and this priest had been involved in the Stanghelin family’s travails. Surely he had heard the confession of Mattia Stanghelin? Yet it was not the priest but the podestà who summoned the Stanghelins and their neighbors to court to expose their darkest secrets and judge their intimate behavior, and it was the state that punished the father’s horrendous crimes.

Valier summoned the Stanghelins’ immediate neighbors and kin to testify about their knowledge and perceptions of what had transpired. Mattia’s siblings were also required to give depositions before she and her father were interrogated. Both women and men were called to testify. The first witness was Alessandro Siricon, the first cousin of Mattia’s deceased
Clearly, he had known of Sebastian’s wrongdoings, but did not want to interfere in another man’s house.

“I know Bastian Stanghelin as the worst kind of man. He works the fields as do the men around here. People murmur here around the Villa that Bastian knows his daughter Mattia carnally. I have heard it in many places around the Villa. I can’t tell you for certain, I can’t remember who told me. But around the Villa people talk about this publicly.”

“What about his other daughters? Are they good girls?” asked the podestà.

“Yes. People only talk about Mattia. She’s probably around 26 or 27. You could go around the Villa and examine other people. You could examine Iseppo Drelai and Zuan della Donà of Galliera Veneta. Those two talk about this affair. Sir, I don’t see Bastian much, but I know he has kept his daughter in a locked room for around five months. You could examine the priest of the Villa and find out a lot of things, if you have the authority from your superiors to examine him. Around the Villa, this is public knowledge.”

Alessandro’s wife, Dona Marieta, testified next:

We all live under the same roof, Bastian Stanghelin and us. He has been widowed twice, and he has five children, four girls and a boy. He works in the fields with the men of the Villa. I go to his house now and then and do some work. Once I asked Orsola what the matter was with Mattia, because no one saw her around. She told me she was in bed. I told her what I had heard, and she said it was not true. All around the Villa, it was public knowledge that Bastian Stanghelin had known his daughter Mattia carnally. People have been talking about this for a long time. I heard about it many times, but I don’t remember from whom.

The podestà then summoned Oliana, Mattia’s aunt, the wife of the Capello family’s cook:

“Bastian is my brother-in-law. He works in the fields, as do all the men of the Villa. He is a widower who has been married twice. His first wife was my sister. He has a son and four daughters, Mattia, Orsola, Menega, and Antonia.”
“It is rumored that Mattia has had three pregnancies with her father,” the podestà prodded.

“Yes, sir. Once, but I don’t remember when, I swear, her father came to get me, because I live nearby. He got me out of bed one night and asked me if I had any gold. I said no. Shortly thereafter, he asked me to go and see Mattia, whom he said felt so bad that she wanted to die. So I got up and went to Mattia’s house. I found her in bed tightly holding the baby girl to whom she had just given birth. I took the baby and gave it to her father, who put it in the garden. The baby was alive. I think I heard it cry once or twice. This was about three or four years ago. I stayed a while [that night] and then went home.”

“When [Sebastian] was in the garden, did you not speak to Mattia?” asked the podestà.

“Yes, sir. I said to her, ‘Woman, [why] are you doing this?’ ‘My dear,’ she replied, ‘He put his foot on my throat and told me he would suffocate me, and I cried out.’ Bastian returned at that point and told me to go home. But I had been in the room twice that night. When the priest came, I had to go outside, but when Mattia was finished confessing I went back into the room and saw the child, as I said. Her father asked her if she felt any better. I don’t know who else was in the room, but I think the middle child, Menega, was there, too. I can’t tell you anything about the last time she was pregnant, because she did not allow anyone to see her for around five months. Sir, I did talk to my husband about this. He chided me.”

“Why not resort to Justice and denounce this nefarious thing?” the podestà queried.

“I did not think to come. . . . And when I gave [Bastian] the baby, he remarked that she had to be baptized. I replied I was not a priest and could not baptize her. He said we could say what one says at a baptism. He said ‘I believe’ and other words that one says at a baptism. He kept the baby in his arms all the while. After he had me say those words, he took the baby to the garden, and he buried it, as I said before.”

“Who in the house heard all this?” the podestà continued.

“Perhaps some heard it and would not say. It was during Lenten Season. When it was time for me to confess I told the priest about this, and he did not want to absolve me. I also told my husband that the priest would not absolve me. He responded that when the priest came
around to wanting to confess me, he would show me a way to do it. On the Saturday before Easter, the priest called for me, and he confessed and absolved me.”

The podestà pressed, “When the officials went to Sebastian’s house and yours why did you hide under the bed?”

“As far as I know, my dear sir, I was afraid. I did not know what so many officials would do.”

Next came Girolamo Carrara. He was Oliana’s husband and Mattia’s uncle, and he worked as the Capello’s cook:

“Bastian is my brother in-law, but I don’t go over to his house very often and I don’t know anything about his life.”

“Are people not talking about him and his daughter?” asked the podestà.

“Yes, unfortunately, [they are saying] that he has had sex with his daughter Mattia. I can tell you one thing, that about two years ago, Bastian called the priest of the Villa around 1 AM, asking him to confess Mattia. When he confessed her, Mattia told him she was pregnant. She gave birth to a baby in the presence of the priest. The priest called me and Zuanne Burichella, who lives with the priest. He asked us to have a look at Mattia in bed, and then he told us she had just had a baby. Then we all left the house. Her father was not in the house then. It was said that he was out looking to borrow some gold. When I told my wife about this, she said Mattia had told her her own father was the father of the baby, that he had forced her to have sex, placing his hands on her throat. Bastian took the baby and put it in the garden. It is also true that during the Lenten Season, the priest did not want to absolve my wife after her confession. Bastian had gone to Treviso and brought back a gold wedding ring, and then the priest absolved my wife. I’m not sure why the priest did not want to absolve her. . . . This past summer, Mattia was not seen for four or five months. People began to talk, saying that Bastian Stanghelin was having sex with his daughter Mattia. This is public knowledge, that’s all I know. When my wife told me about this I did not follow up because if the priest did not do anything, and that is his office, I don’t know what we can do. So I did not think about it any more. I’ll bet she was pregnant again.”

Giovanni Bozzato, who ran a river barge, followed Girolamo:
I worked in Galliera Veneta for six months. Bastian lives near me. I've heard the chatter about him and his daughter. In Monsignor Rastallin’s house, people were talking about this. So was his servant Antonia. Rastallin was saying, both in his house and publicly around the Villa, that this Bastian was having sex with his daughter. I think they were talking about his oldest daughter, but I don’t know any of the children’s names. I’ve heard people saying publicly that he has been making children with his daughter. Everyone is saying that, that I know as a fact.60

Giovanni’s wife, also a cousin of Mattia’s mother, testified next.

Mattia’s legs were hurting, sir, but she was wrapped up in a sheet so that I could not see if her stomach was growing or not. I’ve heard that she was having sex with her father. I went there on purpose to see if she was pregnant, because people were saying bad things about her. I could never tell, because she was covered up, as I said. After the time of the colts [the season when they were weaned], I heard that her father had dealt her many blows. He beat the other children, too, because he is a bad man. I know his daughter Orsola to be a good girl. I don’t remember who told me, but once [Mattia’s] father wanted to kill her. People say she had babies from him. That’s all I know.61

Domenico di Donà, Giovanni Cichini, Catherina Boario, and Gaspar Barbossa confirmed the same rumors.62 The gossip was always the same. So were the words of the witnesses. Was it the deputy taking depositions or the people who chose the same words? They all knew that Mattia had been bedridden and that she had had children with her father. Some said Bastian did not feed his children and that he beat them. When he did not permit Mattia to go out and work in the fields, the peasants assumed she was pregnant.63 Only one witness denied hearing that Mattia had had sex with her father.64 Only one mentioned that someone he knew wanted to tackle Bastian.65 The others, it seems, did not want to interfere with a father’s prerogative to rule his own house, even though they knew what Sebastian was doing was wrong. They also feared Sebastian’s violent temper. They pretended not to notice, but notice they did, and they gossiped about it. The podestà was now ready to summon the members of Mattia’s immediate family. Her sister Orsola was deposed on November 23:
“Do you know why your father is in jail?” asked the podestà.
“No . . . I heard it had something to do with my sister Mattia.”
“Where did you hear that?”
“Here, around the Villa, when I went to work. They told me my sister was doing bad things with my father. In many places where I labored at the Villa, the women who also worked there told me this. . . . We are three sisters and one brother with one mother, and the other little girl is from my father’s second wife. Everyone told me my father was making love with Mattia. I never realized that. My father did not let Mattia go out, except to work. When the colts stopped suckling, my sister began to feel bad and stay in bed. For about four months, she never left her room except to do her private business. I don’t know that anyone visited her, neither women nor men, only Giulia the wife of Zuanmaria Siricon. I never knew what was wrong with her. I never heard her complain. Except, maybe two months ago, she felt some strong pain, but she did not tell me what was wrong. She called my sister Menega and asked her to light a candle. I warmed up a fur for her, and Menega put it over her.”
“Why did she call Menega and not you?”
“Because she loves Menega more than me.”
“Tell me, since Menega sleeps with Mattia, why didn’t she sleep with her that night?”
“Because Mattia did not want Menega to sleep with her. My father wasn’t in the house yet, but he came after a while. Sometimes he stays out all night playing cards. I did not tell Menega what I heard my father and sister Mattia talking about. I didn’t go too near Mattia because she forbade me to. But Mattia let Menega go wherever she liked, and she commanded her. . . . Everyone, everyone says it, and unfortunately I believe it is as people say, because many days and months ago, about a year ago, one night, Mattia was not in the house. She had gone to the Villa to shuck beans. I had gone to bed. I began to fall asleep. My father came to my bed and wanted to sleep with me. Immediately, I jumped up and asked him what he wanted of me. He replied, ‘Dear daughter, don’t have any doubts, let me come and stay with you a little while.’ I told him to get out, that I did not want him to do with me what he had done with the other one, that is, with Mattia. I pushed him away with my sharp words. As he left, he told me to be quiet and not to tell anyone. He never approached me again. I did not confess my father’s
Mattia’s brother, Francesco, was the angriest of the witnesses:

“I have three good sisters, and another from my stepmother. My father is a widower. Sir, I’ll tell you the truth. My father does some things he should not do. We have two beds. One where Mattia and Menega slept. In the other, I slept with my father, Orsola, and the little girl. My father and I slept at the head of the bed, and the little girl and Orsola at the foot. Many, many times I heard my father get up from our bed and go over to Mattia. He would stay there an hour, sometimes two. I would hear him open the door to her room and go in and stay with her. This has been going on for about four years.”

“Have you ever seen her pregnant, with a large stomach?” asked the podestà.

“Yes, sir, about three years ago. One night, she had a bad time in labor, and my father went to call my Aunt Oliana. When my aunt arrived, my father told me there was nothing there for me to do and to get out. So I got up, dressed, and went outside. But before I got dressed, I heard my aunt helping Mattia. She would say ‘Hurry, as quickly as possible.’ After I went outside, I heard a baby cry, and I also heard my aunt, and I heard my father say, ‘Leave this to me.’ I kept my distance, but I saw my aunt, who was holding a candle, come out with my father, who was holding the baby. My father ordered me to get back in the house while they remained outside. I can’t say what they did out there. I returned to bed. After a while, my father came back to bed as well. Sir, I did hear Mattia murmur and cry out in pain. I know nothing about the baby.”

“Why did you keep silent?” said the podestà, pressing for more.

“He would have killed us all. He is the worst man in the world. I don’t know if my sisters heard anything, because we never talked about it. But we should have talked about it. This occurred at the time of the colts, during our haste to do the planting. I felt some pain for about three days, but I had to get up and plant. Mattia has been feeling bad, too. She said she had a headache, and she has stayed in bed until almost now. It is only about a month since she has begun to go out of the house. I don’t know what was wrong with her, only that she said her legs and feet hurt. I went to her now and then to see if she needed
anything, but she pushed me away. She threw me out of the room, saying not to go to her unless she called for me. She always stayed in bed, so I could not see if her body was fat or not. She never got up while any of us was in the house. I don’t know about any other babies. I think the time she had a baby, she confessed.”

Mattia’s sister Menega came forward next:

“‘I don’t know where my father is. He works in the fields as the other men do.’

‘Is it possible that you haven’t wanted to know where your father is or why we have come for your sisters, Mattia and Orsola, and your brother Francesco?’

‘I was outside with the pigs and didn’t see anything until late. My uncle was here last night to have dinner and to sleep over, and he did not tell me anything.’

‘Didn’t [your uncle] Alessandro tell you?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Have you ever realized that Mattia was pregnant?’

‘I don’t know what that is.’

‘Have you ever heard gossip around the Villa about Mattia and your father?’

‘No. I’m outside with the pigs all day.’

At last the podestà was ready to interrogate Mattia:

“Do you know why you are here?” asked the podestà.

“Yes, Sir, because my father has destroyed [slang for deflowered] me.”

“How has he destroyed you?”

Sighing, with tears welling up in her eyes, Mattia replied, “By sleeping with me in my bed.” Thus began her detailed, grueling testimony of a six-year sexual relationship with her father.

“The first time, he visited me at night. He lay with me without saying a word, when my other two sisters were not there. He came and took my virginity. He was with me about a quarter of an hour, and having done it, he left immediately that time, not saying a loving word or acting sweetly the way one usually does under those circumstances. Your
Honor, having committed the act, as I said, he left me without saying anything.”

“Did he visit you during the day or at night, and for how long after the first time?”

“He came to sleep with me again about a month after the first incident. He returned at night to my bed saying, ‘Dear daughter, make a little room for me, because I want to be with you.’ And I replied, ‘Go away and mind your own business.’ And he said, ‘I want to be with you.’ I did not want him. He jumped on me and put his foot on my throat saying, ‘Shut up or I will suffocate you.’ Hearing this, I replied, ‘But I am your daughter.’ He said he could do as he liked, and having said this, he left my room without doing anything. But three or four days later, he returned to my bed, again at night, and he began to caress me, saying ‘Dear daughter.’ I told him to go away and mind his own business, and to leave me alone. He did not want to, and he satisfied himself sexually with me once again, staying with me more than an hour. Then he left and stayed away for about fifteen days before returning in an amorous mood once again. He did his business and then left. And so he continued, coming every ten or fifteen days, as he liked, and he stayed with me about a half hour each time, and when he had finished his business, he left.”

“Couldn’t you lock your bedroom door in such a way that he could not enter?”

“He was able to reach in, around the door, and undo the latch.”

“How long before you became pregnant?”

“The first time it took about a year. I did not know that I was pregnant, and I was working in the fields. This harmed me, and I miscarried. The fetus slipped out like a slice of ham. I haven’t any idea how many months pregnant I was. I did let my father know about it, and he warned me not to tell anyone. He waited two months before coming to me again. I got pregnant again six or seven months after the miscarriage. He continued to come regularly to me up until near the birth. When the time of birth came, which was at night, I told him I felt bad. He told me to be quiet. Then my labor pains became stronger, and I could not keep quiet. And he told me he was going to summon my Aunt Oliana. I told him to call whom he liked but also to summon the priest, because I wanted to confess. After a short while, my Aunt Oliana arrived. She had
me lie on the bed and then told me to be quiet and thank God. Shortly
thereafter, the priest arrived as well.”

“Which priest?” asked the podestà.

“Pre Rastallin. As he began to hear my confession, I gave birth to a
girl. As soon as the priest heard the baby cry, he stopped hearing my
confession and left.”

“Where was your aunt all this time?”

“Outside, and my father was on the porch in the courtyard.”

“Was anyone else out there?”

“I heard my uncle’s voice, and the priest, also Zuanne Barichella the
priest’s servant, and my Aunt Oliana.”

“What were they doing out there?”

“I couldn’t tell you, except to say they were talking, but I could
not hear what they said. When the priest left, my aunt and my father
entered my room. They took the baby from me.”

“Where did they take her?”

“I don’t know where. They did not tell me, although I asked them.
And I have never found out. An hour or so after they took her, my aunt
asked me if I wanted something to eat, and I responded that I could not
eat. My father and aunt left my room. . . . My father threw everyone
out of the house when I started having pains. The next morning, he
warned me not to say anything, and my aunt added that I should thank
God.”

“How long ago did this birth take place?”

“About three years ago, during Lenten Season. Afterwards, my fa-
ther stayed away for three months. Then he returned once again at
night to be with me according to his desires, every ten or fifteen days.
He came when he had a yearning to.”

“Didn’t your other sisters realize what was going on?”

“No, not that I could see.”

“How long did it take you to get pregnant this last time?”

“About five months after he began to visit me again after the pre-
vious birth. This last month, in May, during the time when the colts
began to leave the mares I began to have pain in my knees, then in my
legs. I spent the entire summer in bed. I was pregnant. I gave birth a
month and a half ago.”

“Who was present at this birth?”
“Only my father. I did not see the baby and did not know if it was a boy or a girl because my father took it away immediately . . . and I remained in bed. My father was gone for about four hours. When he returned, he told me it was a boy.”

“Have you ever confessed?”
“Yes.”

“Didn’t the priest reproach you for this grave error?”
“Yes.”

“Then why did you continue?”
“Because my father forced me. I begged him, but he wanted to kill me.”

“Why didn’t you flee?”
“Because he threatened me.”

“Has he had sex with you since this last birth?”
“No, sir.”

It was time to question the father, Sebastian di Francesco Stanghelin. Bastian for short. He had been born in the hamlet of Godengo but resided in Galliera Veneta. Sebastian described himself as a farmworker, a peasant who also tended pigs. He claimed he lived as a Christian, confessing according to the Church’s requirements. His last confession had been at Easter. He had been married twice, and he had not had sex since his last wife had died, he told the podestà. He had five children, four females and a male. When asked about his daughter Mattia, he told the podestà that she had had a brief affair with a Giulio Zonta three years back. Zonta had died, so the story could not be confirmed, at least not by the young man. Once Mattia was sick, and Sebastian called the priest. But if she was pregnant, Sebastian did not know it beforehand. His sister Oliana told him Mattia had had a child, but it was dead. He had buried it without question.

Unsurprisingly, this was very different from the story that Mattia had told. Four days later, the podestà returned to the young woman and listened to a summary of her story once again. In particular, he wanted to make sure Mattia had not had a lover named Giulio Zonta. She acknowledged having known him, but the young man had died, and she had not been his lover. At that point, the podestà was ready to revisit the prisons and force Mattia’s father to confess.
“You have been having sex with your daughter Mattia for a long time,” the podestà began. “And she was pregnant. She had one miscarriage and gave birth to two children.”
“I know nothing about this,” Sebastian replied.

To prod his memory, the podestà decided to resort to torture. He continued:

“Justice objects to your taking your daughter Mattia’s virginity and your having forced her to have sex with you for around six years and getting her pregnant. From you, she has given birth to at least two living babies. Indeed, that is clear. What did you do with those babies who came into your hands alive?”
“Sir, I said I know nothing of this.”

Sebastian was ordered to undress. He would be subjected to torture.

“Bastian, do you have doubts about telling the truth about what I’m asking you?”
“Oh, sir, what do you want me to say?”

A rope was tied around Sebastian’s body.

“Tell us the truth, Bastian, about what you did with those two babies your daughter gave birth to.”
“Yes, sir, I did tell you.”
“It’s clear to us she had those babies. Now what did you do with them?”

Sebastian continued to say he knew nothing, he did not have any babies. Feeling pain as the rope was tightened, Sebastian cried out,

“Ah me! Ah me! I shall die without a defense.”
“Just tell us the truth.”
“It is others that have spoken against me. Divine Majesty of God have mercy on me.”
“You must tell the truth.”

Over and over, Sebastian denied the accusations. He was scheduled to have a defense on December 10, 1593, but no record of it survives.

A small note scribbled in a margin near the end of the inquiry, clearly
placed there months after the interrogations, records that Podestà Zuane Vallier condemned Sebastian to death on February 10, 1594. He was to be beheaded and then burned, so that his body “would be reduced to ashes.” The message from the Venetian state was clear. It affirmed what the priest and the community of Galliera Veneta had not: that incest and infanticide were wrong. They would not be tolerated in silence. Rather, they would be met publicly with the most severe punishment.

Mattia’s subsequent fate is unknown. If she was judged to have voluntarily participated in the incest, she might have been incarcerated. If she had been merely a victim of it, robbed of her virginity, she would have been allowed to go home. The podestà’s harsh words to Sebastian, “Justice objects to your taking your daughter Mattia’s virginity and your having forced her to have sex with you for around six years and getting her pregnant,” suggest that the young woman was judged a victim rather than a perpetrator of crime. The key word is “forced,” placing blame on the father.

As in the case of Alvise Negro, the state here underlined the limits of patriarchy. Its privileges did not include the right to have sex with one’s own daughter, who must either remain celibate or be given in gift to another man to start a family. Sebastian had broken the incest taboo, a biological law, but also an agreement among men in patriarchal societies over the disposition of women as objects of exchange. He had no intention of giving his daughter in marriage but rather of abusing his own paternal power. According to this logic, a father who is entitled to give his daughter in marriage also has the prerogative of keeping her for himself. Implicitly, Sebastian felt himself entitled to use his daughter as a substitute for his deceased wives. He had already remarried once, but upon his second wife’s death, he found it convenient to take full possession of his oldest daughter, whom it seems was a compliant, submissive woman. If not physically and emotionally convenient, it was convenient practically, because he already had five children under his roof, and a third wife would have brought additional offspring to this poor rural laborer. His relationship with Mattia provided him with a sex life, and infanticide was a convenient form of birth control. Clearly, most fathers stopped short of this pathological expression of patriarchy, finding suitors for their daughters even if reluctant to give them away.

It is hard to know whether Sebastian cared for his daughter. His ac-
tions and Mattia’s testimony suggest an indifference to her feelings. As head of the household, Sebastian was in a position to dominate, even though he was not the sole financial support of the family. (As customary throughout early modern rural Europe, his children also worked.) His violent episodes are confirmation that he ruled by force. Moreover, his drinking may have been excessive enough to make him cross the line. It is plausible that he abused alcohol in addition to abusing his daughter.

Where were Mattia’s allies? There was no mother in this family to protect her, although the 1557 Alvise Negro case demonstrates that there is no guarantee that a mother would have interfered with a misbehaving husband, especially if the punishment the latter might incur as a result was death. Pre Rastallin might have offered Mattia some hope. He was informed of Sebastian’s misbehavior, and it would have been his duty to attempt to stop him, but if he did, he was clearly ineffective. The testimony suggests, however, that Sebastian bought the priest’s silence with a gold ring. Pre Rastallin did punish Mattia’s aunt, Oliana, for her inaction. His refusal to confess Oliana until Easter, a decision priests were urged to take in response to grave sins, was a strong signal both to her and the community of mortal wrongdoing. Oliana had full knowledge of the incest for years, as reputedly did the other women of the Villa, but she did nothing to stop Sebastian or protect Mattia. Nor did Oliana’s husband want her to interfere in another man’s house, especially that of a violent man. In fact, when Oliana asked her niece what she was doing, there is the implication that Mattia was as guilty as her father. Mattia may have been viewed as an accomplice to the incest because she did not protest or denounce her father to authorities. The young woman had no allies. She lived in a community filled with tension but nonetheless bound together by private arrangements.

What were Mattia’s choices? Denouncing her father meant facing a judicial process and disclosing the intimate details of her sex life to male public authorities. Having her father punished would mean destroying the household, leaving her siblings without financial support and paternal authority. There was also tremendous shame attached to public disclosure. Mattia could also have chosen to flee the household and to try to find work as a domestic servant, but that was not without its own sexual dangers. Nor was it clear that her father would allow her to wed, or that she had any marriage prospects before her father’s seduction of her.
Not all women were encouraged to marry, and in Mattia’s social milieu, many could never afford to wed. Mattia chose to stay, and her case thus offers us the opportunity to look beyond social choice, to dig deeper into the young woman’s psychological development. Describing the night her father took her virginity she lamented to the podestà, “He was with me about a quarter of an hour, and having done it, he left immediately that time, not saying a loving word or acting sweetly the way one usually does under those circumstances. Your Honor, having committed the act, as I said, he left me without saying anything.” These are the words of a daughter experiencing profound disappointment, if not shock, that her father not only did not love her enough to protect her, but that even when he took her virginity, he did not show her any affection. Do these words not also hint at her hope for a loving relationship, one that would partially explain why Mattia cooperated with her father for six years? He had “left immediately that time,” she said, but what about the others? She told the podestà that she had yielded to physical force, at least the first time. Legally as well as emotionally, this would explain her victimization. She also described the sex as her father’s business, not hers. But the consistent pattern of sexual relations over the long term also suggests that Sebastian eventually succeeded in seducing his daughter. She tacitly assumed a wifely role for him, suggesting that Sebastian’s attitude was of critical importance to her own development. He did not find her a suitor but rather wholly possessed her for himself. Mattia’s sexuality was channeled into a submissive relationship that included not only her own abuse and the murder of her children but also a profound longing for her father’s affection.

If a stranger to the community had not passed through, perhaps this case of incest and infanticide would have passed unnoticed. At the Capello Villa, the community’s voice never rose above a quiet murmur on the subject of Mattia’s confinements. What, then, did the idea of community mean in Galliera Veneta in 1593–94? Edward Muir concludes in his analysis of Buia, a tiny Friulan village, in 1516 that the sense of community in Renaissance Italy was built on a combination of “thin,” or fragile, trust and “thick trust” built upon daily human interactions at the bar, the church, the fields, and the barns. “Thick trust” sustained attempts to either resolve conflict or contain it. The community of Galliera Veneta tacitly chose to contain its conflict over Mattia and Sebastian’s incest
through private arrangements. Gossip flourished, as did private conversations behind closed doors, but knowledge of Sebastian’s misbehavior never reached Venetian officials or the patrician proprietor of the Villa. Galliera Veneta shunned institutional arrangements, which were public representations of authority. Members of the community did not want something as delicate as incest and infanticide resolved in public space, the space of the podestà and his court. Community arrangements at Galliera Veneta were in all likelihood motivated by self-interest, a desire to maintain safety in the face of outside authority. The priest knew what was happening. He may have told Sebastian not to repeat the offense, but he would not reveal what he had learned privately during confession or go to the secular authorities. He punished Oliana by denying her absolution, a sign that he expected the woman to regulate both her brother’s and her niece’s behavior, and that she had failed to perform. Mattia’s kin and neighbors clearly knew the incest and infanticide were wrong, and they were forthright once the podestà called them as witnesses. However, not one of them wanted to be the first to denounce Sebastian’s crimes. Perhaps his labor was essential to the village community, and denial of the problem served its interests best.79

But there are more questions that remain to be answered. How many incest cases in remote villages like Galliera Veneta went unreported? How common was incest in closed communities where marriage prospects were dim and there were few outlets for sex outside of matrimony? Was the community’s silence a tacit acknowledgment that the phenomenon was not uncommon? That what fathers worked out privately in their own households was not the community’s concern? That Mattia was old enough to defend herself and to make her own choices? That the village could not afford to lose a farmhand?

The Stanghelin case raises issues not only about incest but also about infanticide. However, it does not fit the usual profile of this crime, which has largely been attributed to women. Here, infanticide was not motivated by the poverty of a fatherless unwed mother. In this case, the father, not the mother, was the perpetrator of the crime, no doubt to cover up his wrongdoing and limit the size of his household, but also perhaps because of congenital anomalies that resulted from inbreeding. Was it violent intimidation that protected Sebastian, or had he developed “thick trust” among the members of the community? “Thick trust” does not
seem to have worked for Mattia, whose absence at the daily gatherings in the fields or to shuck beans was duly noted. No one outwardly asserted that she merited punishment from the authorities, but neither did anyone seem to think she needed protection.

A Young Spinner’s Story: Vicenza, 1757

Marieta Negro and Mattia Stanghelin were young women who submitted to long-term sexual relationships with their fathers until outsiders to their communities, for their own reasons, denounced the incest to the Venetian authorities. In contrast, during the summer of 1757, a 13-year-old girl from the village of Piovene traveled 29 kilometers to Vicenza, the urban hub of this Veneto province, and herself denounced her father for the crime of incest in Venice’s praetorian court. Anna Maria’s father, Giacomo Bonon, was already regarded in his village as riffraff, a petty thief who spent too much time at the local hostelry getting drunk and brawling with the clientele. Only a few days before his daughter approached the Venetian podestà, Giacomo had been thrown into Vicenza’s jail for attempted murder. His incarceration furnished Anna Maria with the opportunity to visit the city, for her mother, Giulia, was distraught over her husband’s detention. It was Giacomo’s very confinement, however, that had encouraged Anna Maria to speak up. She left her mother’s side and found her way to the praetorian offices. The young girl pled with authorities to protect her from further harm. Here are her words:

“Last Thursday rural authorities arrested my father at Piovene’s hostelry, which is considered a den of licentious men and thieves. He is incarcerated in Vicenza. My mother and I went to speak with him at the prisons at 11 PM, but we were denied access. Now that he is locked up, and I do not have to be afraid of his retaliation, I want to complain. My father had sex with me. He would come home at midday during the sorghum harvest last year. I was spinning course silk in the kitchen. He grabbed me by the arm and threw me on the bed where he slept with my mother. (I usually sleep with my grandmother.) He said if I did not comply he would beat me. He dropped his pants and lifted my dress and then came on top of me, and he put that member that he urinates with into my natura, and he forced it in, hurting me. I lamented that
it hurt, and he told me to shut up. He continued until he had done all that he wanted and liked. Then he let me go but told me not to tell my mother. In fear, I never dared to tell her. Four or five days later, he approached me the same way at the same time and place. He again wanted to inflict this brutality against my will. Actually, I was crying at the thought of submitting to such a thing. But I could not stop him. I am not even 14, and he is 37. He forced me to submit, and he continued to do this when my mother and grandmother were not home. I never told anyone, because I feared my father, who threatened me. No one knew what was going on, not even my mother. Only this morning I told her, as I had decided to come to Justice here in the Praetorian Palace and see if my father could be put under lock and key. I must add that the priest of Piovene, Don Antonio, had his valet accompany me to his house one day last spring after lunch. Don Antonio wanted to know how my father treated me, if he had beaten me or taken advantage of me. So I confessed. Don Antonio gave me a long lecture, saying I should never allow my father to touch me again, and if my father tried to force me I should shout and remind him not to commit such nefarious acts. However, my father has not been home throughout the Lenten season, so we have not had sex recently, and I did not have the chance to put the priest’s advice to use.”

“Have you ever had sex before?” asked the assessore, a functionary who took Anna Maria’s deposition, trying to determine whether the father had taken her virginity.

“No.”

“You must swear to that.”

“I never had sex with anyone else.”

“How many times during the last sorghum season until Lent did your father have sex with you?”

“As far as I can remember, four times.”

The criminal judge immediately summoned Vicenza’s public midwives, Maddalena Asso and Serafina Braggion, for verification. Asso examined Anna Maria and concluded that she had been “made a woman,” for her “virginal cloister” had been ruptured. Braggion concurred, stating “her natura has been freed from every virginal obstacle.” Both midwives officially swore to the defloration.
The very same day, the judge’s assistant summoned Giulia Calvanella, Anna Maria’s mother. Giulia sought to defend her husband. She claimed her daughter had been coerced into making up a story.

“My daughter told me she came to Justice to swear her father had had sex with her, but that is not true, and her father would not dream of touching her. She told me she told Justice this story because a gentleman whose name I do not know said she would go to prison if she did not tell this story.”

“During the sorghum harvest do you stay at home or go to the fields?”

“Usually, I go to work. My daughter stays home as she is too young to work [in the fields]. My husband fishes for a living. My mother-in-law stays home.”

“What time does your husband come home?”

“I do not know, because I am out working, and I have lunch out.”

“What does your daughter do?”

“She spins coarse silk. So does my mother-in-law. They spin thread. I do too when I am not working the fields at harvest time. My daughter remains with my mother-in-law, an old woman past the age of 50.”

Two days later a deputy from the criminal court approached Giacomo Bonon at the prisons to verify Anna Maria’s story. He described the father as “rather tall, with clear skin, black hair combed back, and a beard.”

“What do you do?”

“I work in the fields, and I was arrested because I am accused of knifing Michel Bonon. But it is not true. I was just in the hostelry playing cards with friends. They threw stones at this Michel Bonon. There was a scuffle.”

“Where do you live?”

“Piovene.”

“Do you own your home?”

“I rent.”

“Who lives in your house?”

“My wife, my daughter who is 13, and my mother who is 70.”

“Where does everyone sleep?”

“I sleep with my wife in the barn. In the kitchen, there is another
bed, where my mother and daughter sleep. Sometimes my wife sleeps with them, too. Sometimes I work in the Austrian state, cutting wood, digging ditches, hoeing sorghum, and picking mulberry leaves. I stay away a week at a time.”

“Do the women work?”

“They all spin. My daughter has been spinning at a field in Piovene since she was 11. My wife spins hemp and oakum, and she works in the fields. About twenty women and girls spin thread under the supervision of the priest, Don Antonio Ghirardo.”

It was getting late so the interview closed and was resumed the next day, June 21. Giacomo and the interrogator talked of other things, and then the interrogator asked:

“Have you ever seen your daughter spin in your kitchen during the harvest?”

“Yes, but I do not remember when . . . I am beginning to understand where you want to go with the questioning, but all that is maliciousness.”

“What do you mean, ‘maliciousness’?”

“I figure Justice is asking me if it is true that I have been with my daughter and that I have had sex with her. That is malicious.”

“Has your daughter had a lover?”

“Not that I know of. I watch her, but she does not always listen to me or mind me.”

“Have you ever seduced your daughter with flattery or violence?”

“Never. She is a fool [cogionessa, in Veneto dialect, a feminized testicle, which probably signified something like “asshole”], and I am not saying anything more.”

“Do you know that your daughter Anna has lost her virginity or had it taken from her?”

“I think she is a virgin, and I know of no one having illicit intimate relations with her.”

Next a man who engaged Anna Maria and the other girls and women to spin was summoned for questioning. Zuanne Bianchin, a native of Bassano living in Piovene, had some twenty to twenty-four female workers spinning thread for him. His interrogator, however, was only interested in Anna Maria Bonon.
“Was she good at spinning?”
“Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It depended. Sometimes her father would come and take her away from work.”
“Why?”
“I am ashamed to say it, but I must say it. Her father would enjoy her sexually when he pleased.”
“How did you learn this?”
“Anna Maria told me several times. In the past, people gossiped about this, especially the neighbors, but at this point, the entire village knows it.”
“Name the neighbors.”

At this point the officials of the maleficio, the criminal office that assisted the Venetian governors in the praetorian court, forwarded the depositions to the latter. The governors in turn alerted the Council of Ten on July 7, 1757.

Meanwhile, July 8, Giacomo asked to be interrogated once again, apparently succumbing to the pressures of confinement. He claimed the truth was that he had regularly had sex with his wife for the last year, as one does within matrimony. But during the last month, he had also had sex with his daughter, Anna Maria. The deputy asked him why he was changing his testimony at this point, and he claimed he wanted fair justice. Still, he insisted he had only had sex with his daughter once.

“Do you realize that this is the crime of stupro [raping a virgin], with enormous consequences?”

It seems that Giacomo did not. He had admitted to the incest hoping that would help free him from the attempted murder charges. Although the officials of the praetorian court now had what amounted to a confession, they began to put the gossip networks to work, using hearsay to corroborate Anna Maria’s allegations. They approached a neighbor, Antonio Bontempo, to ascertain whether the girl’s behavior was honest. Most people in the village were saying that Giacomo Bonon was a pig, a scoundrel, and a thief with a dirty mouth. For example, the Bonon’s next-door neighbor, Steffano Bonon, a cousin related to Giacomo in the fourth degree, was asked about sleeping arrangements, and he related that Giacomo came home drunk and threw his wife and mother out of the
Another neighbor, Marc Antonio Valdagno, said the community was gossiping about Giacomo’s mistreatment of his wife and mother. With this damming evidence, the Venetian governors once again wrote the Council of Ten, who authorized a formal inquiry.

In October, the deputies traveled to the small community of Schio, lodging in the house of a Venetian noble, in order to be closer to the site of the crime and to interrogate local witnesses. They sought out Anna Maria’s confessor, Don Pietro Antonio Ghirardo. The priest of Piovene’s characterization of Giacomo was consistent with that of other neighbors: he was crazy, a public nuisance, and a poor Christian.

At the end of October, the Venetian governor selected various witnesses to swear in. A deputy read Giacomo’s relative Stefano Bonon what the court had learned about Giacomo’s behavior; that he was a scoundrel, a pig, a thief, and even a blasphemer. He also swore in Giovanni Pizzati, another of Anna Maria’s employers, who complained she had not been a reliable worker because she had to keep her father company. He wanted nothing to do with Giacomo, whom he described as dangerous, so he had dismissed the girl from his spinning team.

Giacomo would be given the chance to defend himself with witnesses, and to respond in his own words. He was also entitled to the assistance of a lawyer, who would provide a written defense in Giacomo’s voice. He had only his mother and his wife to defend him. On October 25, 1757, his mother swore the tale of incest was not true. Of Anna Maria, she said, “She always slept with me, and I would know if it was true. I cannot even imagine this.”

The next day Giacomo’s wife, Giulia, heard the evidence against her husband. She responded,

“I never knew this. I still believe he loves his daughter.”

“Do you think your daughter is a virgin?” asked the deputy.

“Yes.”

“Well, she is not a virgin.”

“My husband is not to blame, but my daughter could tell you who is.”

With this allegation the girl was once again questioned. The deputy read aloud the accusations against her father and asked her to confirm. Anna, who probably had received a dressing down from both her mother
and her grandmother, made a feeble attempt to reverse her stance but then once again confirmed the incest.

“What I told you at the maleficio and what I told the priest is false. I said this because I was afraid and confused. A gentleman told me everyone already knew this to be true, and if I did not tell Justice I would be imprisoned. But the part about my father having sex with me is true. May god pardon him.”

At that point, the functionaries of the praetorian court in Vicenza had no doubt that Giacomo was guilty. In November, they sent a summary of the evidence to the Venetian governors in Padua. What had the other witnesses said about him? There were five sworn testimonies that he cursed at and beat his mother and wife and threw them out of the house and remained eating and drinking with his daughter; and that he took his daughter to the mountains and kept her there for many days. His mother and wife denied this, but there was public gossip that he was having sex with Anna Maria. Further, the priest revealed that Anna had confessed to having sex with her father three times. Finally, Giacomo himself admitted to having sex with his daughter when his wife was not there, but then tried to deny it, saying that his dark jail cell and the wine he had drunk had made him confess falsely.

The judge of the criminal court in Vicenza read Giacomo the accusations and gave him a chance to defend himself. The defendant attempted to deny all the accusations, but he had no resources to defend himself, save the lawyer for the poor, who would write his formal response.

The judge’s commentary is important in understanding how he, with the praetorian court, came to the decision to condemn Giacomo:

“We have two confessions that attest to your criminality, one from your own daughter and the other from someone who surely knew what was going on. Your daughter, with sentiments of loving regard, has asked God to pardon you. You proved your own guilt by demonstrating remorse: during the first interrogation when asked if you had sex with your daughter you became red in the face, you bowed your head, you blew your nose. This was observed and noted by the functionary who interrogated you. . . .

“Later, you claimed that the accusation of deflowering your daughter was simply malicious gossip, and that you never thought of doing
that. However, the enormity of the crime was too heavy a burden to
bear, and every time you were asked a detail, you became warm or
you hesitated, saying it was too long a story to tell. Finally, your own
confession constitutes absolute proof. It is not to your advantage to say
you were drunk and did not know what you were doing. As a Catholic,
it was your duty to recognize the gravity of the crime.”

Giacomo continued to deny his guilt, saying, “Jesus Christ knows that
with regard to my daughter, I am innocent. This is all malicious gos-
sip.” The judge gave Giacomo two final days to produce evidence that
he was innocent, but he was unable to do so. His final statement had to
be written in the words of a lawyer. A brief summary of it follows:

Dear Podesta and Capitano and Illustrious Assessors,

My persecutors could not have mounted a more incredible impos-
ture. My own daughter was forced by my enemies to make these ac-
cusations. My daughter’s rapist was Zuane Bianchin, a man who has
already been banished but who is scandalously tolerated by the min-
isters of justice. You are making me out to be an inhuman man acting
against every law of nature, of blood, and of the Catholic religion. I
am a Catholic, born of the womb of the Holy Church, ordained and
nourished by the sacrosanct laws of God our Lord. I only confessed [to
the incest] because I had drunk too much and was feeling bad about
being in jail. I beg for clemency.

In February 1758, Giacomo was pronounced guilty of incestuous de-
floration of his own daughter. He was sentenced to ten years in the
galleys. If he was physically unable to row, then he was to be locked in
prison, without light, for twenty years. Should he escape, he would be
banished from the Venetian dominions in perpetuity, and if captured, he
would once again be condemned to prison, with a bounty of 600 lire on
his property. Anna Maria had successfully stopped her father’s abuse,
with the help of her confessor, her employer, and possibly the anonymous
gentleman who had urged her to approach the court after hearing the
village gossip.

Villagers and remote kin in Piovene did not initiate the cause against
Giacomo for incest. However, like the rural folk of Galliera Veneto, they
were forthcoming when the authorities questioned them. Clearly, Gia-
como was a public nuisance they could live without, and they were glad
Facsimile of the bishop of Belluno’s request that the Venetian governors intervene in the alleged sexual abuse of Osvaldo de Vei’s daughters. ASV, Consiglio dei Dieci, Processi Criminali Delegati, Treviso, busta 47, fol. 11r. Sezione di fotoriproduzione dell’Archivio di Stato di Venezia. Act No. 40/2007.
to get rid of him, but they had not interfered with the incest. The priest had knowledge of the wrongdoing, and his questioning of the girl indicates that checking for incestuous relationships was part of his clerical responsibilities. He counseled Anna Maria to avoid her father. On whether he counseled the father, or thought avoidance was only the girl’s responsibility, the record is silent. Like the Galliera priest, he kept secret what he learned in the confessional, however abusive, under clerical privilege. Giacomo knew incest was wrong, but mistakenly thought murder was worse, so he admitted what he perceived was a lesser transgression. Anna Maria, with the support of an understanding gentleman, had the courage to stand up to her father, as well as to her mother and grandmother. She had no one to trust except herself.

The River Raftsman’s Daughters: Borgo Piave, Belluno, 1788

Catterina de Vei, the 44-year-old wife of a river raftsman named Osvaldo and the mother of three children stood before Jacobo Foscarini, the podestà of Belluno, in the first week of September 1788. “I blush to have to speak against my husband,” she began. “My daughter Anna, who is now 26, has been living in Venice for five years because he was being intimate with her.”

It was the bishop of Belluno who had encouraged Catterina to denounce her husband of thirty years to secular authorities. Days before, she had turned to the cleric in desperation when she discovered that her husband, who had already driven one daughter out of the house because of a sexual relationship, was repeatedly raping their second daughter, Antonia, as well. She feared the girl would become pregnant, and thus the bishop, mustering all his pastoral zeal, urged Venetian authorities to rein in the incorrigible father. The podestà alerted the Council of Ten, who in turn authorized both the arrest of Osvaldo and an inquiry.

The anxious mother confessed that the sorry plight of both daughters, who had lost their honor because of their father, was weighing on her conscience. Still, she had not been very skillful at stopping the incest, and five years after the first incident was a long time to wait before taking action. Of the first episode with her elder daughter Anna, Catterina recounted:
“[The Court of] Justice can imagine the rage I felt when my daughter told me he had taken her virginity, and that she could no longer suffer through the brutal ways [in which] he satisfied his desires. My mother-in-law was living with us at the time. When I told her what had happened, she was horrified. She summoned her son and demanded an explanation. He denied anything had happened.

“When my daughter said she feared she was pregnant, I arranged a marriage for her with Pietro Bonado, a 60-year-old painter from Belluno. He did not have any money to feed her, so [after six months] I had to take her back in so that she would not starve. The baby died at birth, right after the midwife baptized it. My daughter assured me that her father had sired the baby, because the old man was incapable of [doing so]. Three months after she became a widow, in fear that my husband would approach her again, I sent her to Venice to live with a widow. She is working [as a domestic servant] there.

“Now I will tell you about my other daughter, Antonia. She sleeps in a room with my son, who is 12, but they have separate beds. My husband started having sex with her about a month ago. He took her virginity while she was resting. I admonished him, and he almost beat me to death.

“I cannot describe his character well. When he married me, he had another friendship. Not long passed before he began to show his indifference to me. When he had sex with me, it seemed he was more disgusted than anything else. A few years after we had married, he started having anal sex with me, and he has continued to do so all this time, even though I told him that this was prohibited by Divine Law. Still, he did not want it any other way, and he threatened me if I resisted. With my daughters, on the other hand, he pleasured himself the other way. He was a tyrant with his own flesh and blood, and it is his fault that they are deflowered.”

“Does anyone else know?” the podestà intervened.

“Domenico Cibien lives in our house. You can ask him. He heard my daughters scream at their father many times.”

The wife’s accusations were grave: both anal sex and incest were sins proscribed by the Church and crimes under the laws of the state. Caterina may have felt obliged to explain to the podestà why she was not fulfilling her “conjugal responsibilities” to her husband by saying the
kind of sex he preferred was a sin. Catterina was also careful to protect her oldest daughter from retribution, stressing that the death of her baby had been a stillbirth, or owing to some weakness, and not infanticide. Still, the weakness in her testimony was the length of the abuse. She had waited five years to report her husband. Venetian judges demanded immediate denunciation of such crimes.

The podestà summoned Antonia, the younger of the two de Vei sisters, who had accompanied her mother to the bishop’s quarters, supplicating him to free her of her father’s “brutal passions.” Antonia described her rape and subsequent abuse:

“One morning I was in my bedroom and my mother was in hers. My father came into my room, took me by the waist, and threw me on the bed. He raised my dressing gown. I began to scream, but he gagged me and then threatened me if I continued to resist. He is cruel with his own flesh and blood. I had to suffer horrible blows, and in fear I submitted to his brutal desires. In that encounter, I lost my virginity. He told me not to tell my mother, but I had to. My mother scolded him strongly, but then he threatened both of us, so we had to be silent. A few days later, he appeared again and wanted to do it again. He returned a third day, and a fourth, and a fifth. Five times I had to submit to his brutal appetites. Seeing that he would not change, and moved by my religious feelings, I went to the Monsignor Bishop. I also had the example of my sister, Anna, who many times in my presence had to satisfy his brutal appetites. While I was watching them I admonished them as much as I could. My sister screamed and cried. But all was to no use. I could have been talking to a statue.”

“Does anyone else know about this?” asked the podestà.
“I do not think so. I did tell my mother.”
“Did anyone hear your sister scream?
“I don’t know.”
“How long has it been since you had to satisfy your father?”
“Fifteen days. I have tried not to be alone during the day, and at night I lock my door so he cannot get in.”
“How many people can come to Justice and testify that this happened?”
“I would not know who to name. It all happened in secret. I have
nothing to add but that Justice free me from my father’s brutality. Because of him I lost my honor.”

“Brutal appetites” was part of the semiology of rape, alluding to some Hobbesian lack of control in man. This was quite a shift from the Renaissance discourse around women’s hungry wombs. The blame was cast on the violent inclinations of men.

The podestà ordered his bailiff to summon two midwives to examine Antonia. Both confirmed that she was no longer a virgin. At that point, the Venetian governor placed Osvaldo under arrest and subjected him to interrogation. He described Osvaldo as a man of ordinary height, with gray hair and a gray beard. He wore a shirt made of hemp, white pants, and white shoes with metal buckles, and he looked about 58. One could imagine that Osvaldo was a strong, muscular man as a river raftsmen on the Piave River, a major artery of transport that originated in the Carnic Alps, passed through Belluno, and flowed south for another fifty miles into the Gulf of Venice. Raftsmen transported goods up and down the waterway, connecting the entrêpot on the Adriatic with the territories to the north.

The podestà opened the interrogation by asking Osvaldo if his daughters’ honor had suffered. His response did not conform with the expectations of ideal fathers, who would undisputedly protect their daughters’ honor:

“I do not know,” he replied, “because they have had the freedom to go as they please. I could not watch them because I am a river raftman, always on a trip and far from home. But I think they behave honestly.”

“Have you had any sexual satisfaction with them?”

“Fifteen or twenty days ago, when I arose from bed, I went to my daughter Antonia’s room while she was dressing, and seeing that she was disposed, I began to touch her breast and feel her lower body parts. She did not say anything to me, except to convey that she wanted it, and she let me continue even more. I never did anything to my other daughter, Anna.”

“Were you dressed?

“Yes, like I am now.”

“Did you threaten your daughters?”
“Only when they fought with each other.”
“Whom did Anna sleep with?”
“Her sister, or her mother when I went rafting.”
“When she slept with her mother, did you sleep with them as well?”
“I don’t remember. I don’t think so.”
“Did your mother scold you about your behavior with your daughters?”
“Never.”

Osvaldo’s testimony contradicted that of his wife, who had explained that when her husband returned from work or the hostelry in the wee hours of the morning, he would crawl into bed and begin to fondle his daughter Anna. In all likelihood, he was inebriated. What Catterina never explained, however, is why she continued to allow her daughter to sleep in the marriage bed, subjected to abuse. Was it because she no longer wished to satisfy her husband’s desires? Because she depended on him for income? Because there was no place else to sleep?

Osvaldo told the podestà that he thought Anna had been a virgin when she married, and that he supposed the child she gave birth to was her husband’s, unless she had committed some indiscretion. He also explained that she had left Belluno, her birthplace, to work as a domestic in Venice because he could no longer feed her. Osvaldo admitted that he threatened his wife when she wanted to do things her way rather than his.

The conversation then turned to Antonia. Was she a virgin, the podestà asked.

“I think so, except what I did with her, and I do not think I did anything wrong.”

Venetian Justice moved swiftly after Osvaldo’s initial interrogation. The podestà received authority from the Council of Ten to begin an inquiry, gather witnesses, and promise them secrecy. Osvaldo was sworn in and questioned again on September 22, and again he denied all the accusations. Catterina was sworn in on September 24, and she affirmed again that her husband had deflowered both daughters. However, she could supply no witnesses. Her mother-in-law had been the only other person in the house at the time, and she had since died. Still, Catterina
remarked, “Daughters would not fabricate such things about their own father. Moreover, it would have been scandalous for them to tell anyone else. My older daughter is here from Venice, and she will tell you herself.”

But before the podestà questioned Anna, he swore Antonia in and noted her testimony. This was an indication that he found her allegations credible and carrying judicial weight. On September 24, Antonia stated:

“My father was always cruel to his own flesh and blood. I was always afraid of him. The first day that was fatal to my honor—when my mother was far from home—he came near me to check to see if I had a rash. I had no idea that with this pretext he wanted to rape me. I showed him my bare arms, and then he began to touch me and grab me by the waist. The subjection of my father, the confusion, my blushing . . . I was stunned. He surprised me, and I was not able to escape. So he did it.”

“Did he tell anyone?” the podestà asked.
“I don’t think he would be so imprudent.”

With this we learn Antonia knew her father’s sexual misbehavior placed him in legal jeopardy. The assumption would be that a 20-year-old woman should have been able to resist her father, and to counter this, she emphasized his use of force.

The next day Antonia’s 26-year-old sister Anna appeared for questioning. She was visiting from Venice, no doubt summoned by her mother.

“My mother assured me he was locked up, so we could talk, and stop his lewdness. I think Justice knows what he did to me, let alone my sister.”

“What is he to be blamed for?”
“I slept with my mother. My father would return and many times would wake me up. He would be near, and he would touch me all over my body with his hands. I did not understand how he got into the room because I had closed [the door]. I was always subjected to him, and I defended myself and tried to avoid all his brutal furor. He gave my mother to understand that he had returned exhausted from work, and that all he wanted to do was to sleep, with no harmful intentions. This went OK for some time, but understanding that my father desired me,
I knew that sooner or later, I would become a victim of his brutality. Finally, I confided my fears in my mother, who tried to help.

“When the opportunity arose to marry Pietro Boncado, I took it, even though he was over 60. After five or six months, my husband moved to Conegliano, and I had no way to support myself, so I returned to my parents’ house. I slept with my mother, who rose early. My father would come and oblige me to satisfy him using force and threats. I could not resist his desires. I cannot tell you how many times this brutality occurred.

“My mother wanted to scold him. He mistreated her and threw her out of the bed. He used force to keep me there. My screams were to no avail. I tried to free myself from his rages. I had to submit to his brutality. One other time, I was in another bed, and it was early in the morning, and he appeared nude, without his shirt. I understood in that moment [that he wanted to have sex with me.] I tried all I could to escape his hands and get to safety. I decided to leave the city, to go to Venice, where I now live permanently.”

“Did you tell anyone what happened with your father?”

“My mother. I would have told others of quality, but my father threatened me, saying it would be his ruin. So I was silent.”

Anna swore that she and her father did not copulate; that he had simply fondled her. She believed she was a virgin when she married, unless her father had deflowered her when she was asleep. She believed the baby she had given birth to was her husband’s, not her father’s.

We cannot know whether Anna was telling the truth. Perhaps she soothed herself by denying the incest. Her marriage to an “old” man did not conform with community standards, and it was interpreted as a marriage of convenience. Bonado did not even have money to support a wife, but at least if Anna was pregnant, it would appear that the father of her child was her husband, rather than her own flesh and blood. Catterina’s solution to the domestic tension was thus a clever one, at least in terms of meeting social norms.

Clearly, in this complicated case, the Venetian authorities needed witnesses to corroborate the allegations, yet such testimony was nearly impossible to gather. They began with the residents in the Piave neighborhood nearest to the de Vei household. Domenico Cibien, aged 67, lived adjacent to the de Vei dwelling, sharing common walls. Asked if he knew
whether Anna and Antonia had experienced any threats to their honor
he replied:

Many times I heard Catterina reproach her husband in significant terms,
saying that it was a terrible and cruel and scandalous thing to do with
one’s own daughters. I understood some intimacy had taken place. I
never wanted anything to do with Osvaldo. I know his temperament.
He is more beast than human. So I was silent. But his wife started tell-
ing me her husband had brutal passions, that he was transformed by
wine. He was intimate with his daughters many times. Catterina was
desperate. This was an enormous crime, and I wanted to help her, but
with Osvaldo, I feigned ignorance about what he was doing. I won’t
say whether what he was doing was true or false, because for the facts
of something of that nature you cannot call witnesses. I will say that
many times in the morning, I heard him go into his daughter Antonia’s
room. Probably he went for those iniquitous ends, to have lascivious
pleasures. I heard him leave his daughter’s room and return to his wife.
She would scold him, and he would beat her. Neither daughter told me
anything [directly]. I got this information from their mother. I think the
old man was deceived into marrying Anna. He was very poor. Many
times, I heard those girls scream, because Osvaldo mistreated them day
and night. I judge the girls to be of honest character.111

A spinner named Maddalena followed Domenico with testimony. She
lived next door to the de Vei family. She told the podestà that she had
heard Anna scream but had not seen anything. Once de Vei was in prison,
she had heard gossip about his behavior, which was also confirmed in a
conversation with Catterina. Maddalena suggested that the podestà ques-
tion Teresa, the coffee vendor in the neighborhood.112

A 62-year-old-widow who made stockings, also named Catterina,
spoke next. She had lived next door to the de Veis. She recounted that
both girls used to run over to her house to sleep because their father mis-
treated them continually. He would come home drunk and try to beat
them, and so they fled. Antonia had also confided in her that she had
been raped by her father five times. The mother had told her about the
sex between Anna and her father as well.113

The town notary, Giovanni Pietro Perpini, aged 50, testified next. He
described the age gap between Anna and her husband in a negative way.
Perpini explained that he knew everyone in the whole town. Notaries generally knew a great deal about people’s business. Perpini tried to do right by everyone, but when Catterina asked him to find a husband for Anna because Osvaldo was molesting her, he wanted nothing to do with arranging the marriage. (It would not, according to canonical rules, reflect the mutual consent of the marriage partners.) Later, after Anna was widowed, he ran into her in Venice one day, where he learned her father had been abusing her. He found it hard to imagine, but essentially believed her. Yet he could not name any witnesses that Venetian authorities could examine.  

Teresa de Boni, who with her husband Pietro, sold coffee in Piave, spoke next. She revealed that Osvaldo’s imprisonment had unleashed a flood of gossip, making the incest “universal” knowledge in the town. There had also been gossip over that last four years about Anna, at age 22, marrying a poor old painter because her mother was afraid her husband would impregnate their daughter. Teresa had learned this from Anna herself. Subsequent to Anna’s marriage, Teresa and her husband Pietro had moved to Venice to open a coffee shop. Having just returned, she learned that Osvaldo was currently molesting his younger daughter, Antonia. “People say Osvaldo tried to rape his daughter one night when she and her younger brother went to fetch him,” said Teresa. Yet she could not name who those witnesses were, rather just repeating hearsay. She ended by saying, “I knew Osvaldo to be an extravagant man who mistreated his wife and daughters continually.”

Following Teresa was the baker’s wife, Vittoria, aged 35, who volunteered that Antonia had confessed her troubles to her. “I replied to her that she was old enough to know good from bad, and that she should run away from such a detestable crime. She said her father had gagged her and threatened her so that she had to give in to his brutal appetite. He does have a bestial temperament.”

Giovanni de Vei, the 12-year-old son of Osvaldo and Catterina, testified next. He was simply asked to describe the hostelry incident, which he confirmed. He said his father had hurt him so badly that he did not notice if there were any witnesses to the attempted rape. When the podestà asked him if he knew why his father was in jail, he replied, “I don’t know because my age does not permit me to know these things.”

On December 8, 1788, Podestà Giacomo Foscarini and the local
criminal judge, Luigi Graziani, summarized for the Ten what they had learned thus far, primarily from Catterina de Vei, but also from interviewing the two daughters. The alleged incest had begun some four years before with Anna, who slept with her mother in the marriage bed. Catterina woke up many times, feeling her daughter twist and turn, and she realized her husband had returned from work and was seducing her daughter. When Anna became pregnant, she covered up the scandal by arranging a marriage with an old man. Eight months after her marriage, Anna gave birth to a baby boy, who died immediately. Her old husband had left Belluno and soon after died. Anna had nowhere to live but with her parents. Afraid the scandalous affair would start up again, Anna’s mother sent her to Venice to support herself through domestic service. Then Osvaldo began to behave lasciviously with Antonia, forcing her to have sex five times, which was when the mother sought the help of the bishop of Belluno.

Foscarini and Graziani observed that some of Catterina’s testimony did not coincide with that of her oldest daughter, Anna. Anna had told them that while she was asleep, she did not know what was happening. But when she awakened to find her father in bed next to her she felt him embracing her, not anything more serious, except some scandalous sensuality that, despite her seeing her honor in danger, she submitted to because she felt she had to submit to her father’s will. After her marriage and subsequent return to her natal home, her father’s sexual inclinations continued. He subjected her with force and threats to his “brutal appetites.” Many times she had to submit to this aberrant sex. She was forced to go to Venice to escape him.

Anna confirmed that she had given birth in her eighth month but denied her own father was the baby’s father. Clearly, the podestà was not convinced by Anna’s testimony. He wrote the Ten: “She says, like a fool, she does not believe she was actually deflowered when she slept with him, and that she was a virgin when she married her old husband.”

The podestà reported that two midwives had found that the younger daughter, Antonia, had been deflowered. She admitted that she had been subjected to her father’s brutal desires. One morning he had surprised her in her own room and thrown her on the bed, gagging her so that she could not call for help. She had told her mother, who in turn admonished her
husband. Then he threatened to kill both of them, so they had had to be silent. Another time, Antonia and her younger brother had gone to fetch Osvaldo at the neighborhood hostelry. It was 4 AM. The father emerged, drunk, and tried to rape his daughter. Giovanni, his 12-year-old-son screamed for help, so his father beat him. Foscarini and Graziani concluded that only the mother and daughters knew about the aberrant sex. That was all the two officials could learn about this “hateful subject.”

On March 20, 1789, Foscarini was ready to read Osvaldo the accusations out loud, as was required, and the latter would then be asked to respond. The father denied almost everything, except “a dishonest act against Antonia when she got up from bed.” Then Osvaldo’s self-defense took an interesting turn. He complained that it was the notary Perpini who was encouraging his wife to invent these stories, and that his wife was the notary’s concubine. Osvaldo mistrusted Catterina and had caught her being unfaithful with the notary. “The daughters are not mine but rather his, the fruit of Perpini’s seduction and my wife’s vendetta.” He insisted that he was innocent and his wife “diabolic.”

There is no follow-up evidence for these accusations. Osvaldo’s claims that his wife committed adultery are unsurprising for the times; they called his wife’s chastity and fidelity into question, playing on the vulnerability of female honor. It was the strongest charge a man could bring against his wife. But in this case, there is no evidence that Venetian authorities followed up on the adultery charges. Nor did Osvaldo bring further evidence. Instead, his lawyer wrote his final defense, presenting it as if it was in Osvaldo’s voice, on April 10, 1789:

The Sacred Scriptures testify to the flames that burned Sodom and Gomorrah, and to the punishment that Lot suffered [presumably, association with sodomites and the involuntary commission of incest]. The law does not admit either a wife’s testimony against her husband or a child’s against his or her father. What these women claim, thus, is not admissible. Moreover, you judges do not have my confession. Thus the law prescribes my absolution. You have no proof. No proof, no conviction. You cannot condemn me.

In my defense, let’s discuss my sodomizing my wife first. What proof do you have of that wicked crime? What valid and convincing testimony? That I tried to sodomize her? That she refused? That she abstained?
That I did it anyway and she submitted? How many times? When? My wife has to prove this. What Nature finds repugnant cannot be taken as verisimilitude. I have obeyed Divine Law and not partaken of that abominable sin. Why bring to light such a wicked thing after so many years of matrimony? She wants to bring revenge against me. And if the sodomy is not proven, neither is the incest with my daughters. Why after so much time has passed would my widowed daughter bring up this accusation? Why now after being silent so long? Where is the proof? Even if my younger daughter is deflowered, there is no proof to blame me.\textsuperscript{120}

Legally, Osvaldo, or rather his lawyer, was correct. The testimony of kin could not stand alone but required corroboration. However, there were no eyewitnesses to either the sodomy or the incest. There rarely were with hidden crimes, which was why prosecutors both looked for clues among the testimonies of witnesses and tried to force the accused to confess. In the previous stories we have examined, the fathers who were punished had ultimately admitted wrongdoing. Moreover, Giacomo Bonon had exhibited behavior that betrayed his guilt and embarrassment. Osvaldo, on the other hand, was steadfast, swearing he was innocent. Moreover, both he and his lawyer knew how to render the testimony of his wife and daughters suspect. Neither the podestà nor the Ten were convinced of the father’s innocence, or they would not have gone to great lengths over four months to bring him to justice. Yet they could not bring irreproachable evidence against him to convict. The day after Osvaldo presented his defense, he was legally absolved and free to go.\textsuperscript{121}

There is no concluding “truth” to reveal about this case, but rather the opportunity for several layers of interpretation. The conditions under which the incest occurred are by now familiar. Sleeping in the same bed with kin of the opposite sex lent itself to transgression and also to collective knowledge. What went on in bed was a family secret that all participated in. It could be excused to outsiders by claims of being asleep. Osvaldo’s inebriation and brutality were also common elements in the semiology of incest. The first excused the deviant behavior; the second excused the victim, who was overwhelmed by violent inclinations and strength.

What is most interesting about this case is the role of the mother,
Catterina de Vei. Several questions emerge: why did she wait so long to denounce her husband? Had something changed to encourage disclosure? Were Catterina and the notary perhaps involved, with Perpini offering to take the unhappy woman under his wing? Catterina depended on Osvaldo for income. Perhaps Perpini offered her a way out. On the other hand, another way to read this case is to see that it offered Catterina a way out of an unhappy marital union. There was no satisfying sex between the couple, and there were grounds for the wife to be very angry, with a husband who stayed out late at the hostelry, got drunk, and beat and sexually abused his children. The accusation that Osvaldo wanted anal sex could be viewed as retaliation, a formidable weapon wielded by wives who wished to bring shame upon their husbands. Yet anal sex would not lock away this undesirable husband the way incest would. Catterina enjoined her daughters to cast Osvaldo out of the family hearth forever, which points to hatred more than disappointment.

Yet the law was not on the wife’s side. Without corroboration of this hidden crime, or an open admission from the accused, the law recognized the husband’s vulnerability to retaliation and even hatred. Osvaldo was freed. Perhaps his daughters were viewed as old enough to reject their father’s overtures. They were most certainly expected to stay out of his bed. Still the lengthy investigation, which lasted for several months, would serve as an example to the community, a reminder that crimes against the family brought dishonor, if not grave punishment.