

## 13. Straying and Led Astray

Roman Maids Become Young Women circa 1600

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### Abstract

For female youth, the slow transformation into sexual maturity recast the social expectations of family and outsiders, of women and men. It also changed how the teenager saw herself. Sexuality brought new opportunities and duties, but also vulnerabilities. Becoming sexually attractive turned girls into potential brides. It also opened them up to illicit male attention and abuse. Especially among those of lower status, the supervision and protection of nubile girls by parents and their surrogates sometimes lapsed. At the same time, some agency did fall, for better and worse, to young women themselves. Personal stories reconstructed from criminal trials in early modern Rome show how three non-elite teenagers navigated their first sexual experiences.

**Keywords:** sexual maturation; female teenagers; girls at risk; early modern Italy; partial agency; judicial records

Although early modern culture did not often concertedly articulate a life stage of female youth, during their teenaged years women went through distinctive changes that altered their physical capacities and social identities and prepared them for new adult roles. Social maturity brought more, and different, responsibilities and, though constrained, a greater measure of agency. Girls as they became young women had much to learn: dealing with people outside their household, leaving home, working for their own keep, and fending for themselves as well as for kinfolk and allies. In parallel with all these, youth also involved becoming sexual. Beginning well before the time that most women married, emerging sexual maturity was a novelty that carried complicated social and cultural resonances, opportunities, and risks.

Parents, masters and mistresses, and others responsible for young women's physical well-being and public reputation were supposed to protect nubile girls by surveillance and correction. For non-elite families, however, these strategies were not easy to practise consistently. Furthermore, with growing if always limited autonomy, the female youths themselves, if sometimes unwisely, deployed their new sexuality.

Comparing three stories, reconstructed from criminal court trials, of non-elite teenaged women in Rome around 1600, this essay explores the little studied but common female experience of acquiring a sexual persona long before marriage. These particular young urban women were in various ways vulnerable and fell victim to abusive exploitation by more powerful men. That is not, however, the only narrative that I want to recount. Tales of seduction from the Roman trials involved not only force but also negotiation, if from a position of weakness. These young women in whom an unfamiliar sexual allure was blossoming knew the rules. Yet some, like their age peers in other eras, knew less than they thought about social relations and were tempted by the attention and gifts on offer. Nor were female youth alone in these encounters. Adults with some responsibility for the young women, including family members and neighbours, also took part, responding with a mix of measures that, amidst the contradictions of real life, conformed imperfectly to moral proprieties.

Broadly, this essay rests on a view of a kind of everyday, non-elite culture around sex.<sup>1</sup> Disciplining precepts rooted in religion, honour, and law were influential, but did not dictate popular expectations or habitual practices. Rules often discounted the varieties and complexities of real experience, especially for the great mass of women and men who struggled with limited and unpredictable resources. For example, where most people lived at close quarters and had little privacy, the corporal mechanics and social stakes of sex were not easily isolated. Christian religion propounded strictures to corral all sexual appetite and to channel activity into only a few licit forms. Honour norms intensified the constraints on women and the costs, for them, of compromise, whether voluntary or not.

1 Crawford, *European Sexualities*, 30–47, describes the early modern European basics of most people's sexual lives. Much of this synthesis, like others, emphasizes, on the one hand, cultural or ideological sources penned by educated men and, on the other, institutional documents about the discipline of sex. Age does not figure often, but Ferraro, 'Youth in Peril', 761–68, argues that ordinary Venetians were more 'casual about age than legal theorists', but still sought to protect childhood innocence from exposure to sex. I would propose another, not mutually exclusive, reading of archival sources that seeks to reconstruct what more routine sexual experiences and attitudes might have been like for ordinary women and men. The judicial records selected for this essay describe heterosexual acts. Other desires and practices may be tracked elsewhere.

Nevertheless, as scholars assume was normal for early modern men, there were also for women substantial gaps between the codes governing sex and expectations of practice. For adult women, married and unmarried, sex was part of their everyday knowledge and direct or indirect experience. Women informally consulted about their husbands' failures, about unwanted attention from other men, or about their own romantic attractions.<sup>2</sup> Imagery that crammed women into a sexual binary – as madonna or whore – failed to capture either non-elite sensibilities or even the practical aims of authorities seeking to make order. Where breaches of the rules inevitably arose, they called for negotiation, but did not routinely relegate women to perdition, permanent shame, or worldly punishment.

Trials from the Governor's criminal tribunal in Rome provide distinctive access to the lives of young women who are seldom visible in most early modern records. Because this court gave weight to the words even of women and others of modest standing, the transcripts provide extensive and close to verbatim testimonies in many voices, including those of the illiterate, young, poor, and dependent. Testimony, more and less strategic, was not simple truth. Yet bearing witness was a serious and often intimidating business, and from their varying perspectives women and men tried to tell at least plausible stories that now serve the canny historian well. Criminal prosecutions involving illicit sex often concern the sexual misuse of young, mostly unmarried women. *Stupro*, meaning less generically rape, and more specifically defloration of virgins, along with *sviamento*, or seduction and leading astray, were the more common charges. As framed by the law, these victims of men who could not or did not intend to marry them lost a major personal and social asset. To wrest compensation, as in the rape trial of Artemisia Gentileschi, young women had to give credible accounts that matched the stipulations of the law.<sup>3</sup> In the process, and in their own defence, they also sometimes supplied details of a more personal reading of their experience.

The girls most vulnerable to sexual predation were those socially and economically exposed: lacking an intact family; coping with even the temporary absence of either father or mother; or poor and so susceptible to offers of food and money, or just to vague promises of 'good things to come'. Certainly, there were costs to honour – both the girl's and her family's – if a loss of

2 For examples, Archivio di Stato di Roma, Governatore, Tribunale Criminale (GTC), Processi secolo xvi, busta 134, case 10, ff. 58r–66r; Querele, busta 8, f. 90v. Later citations will appear as GTC with series and location details. All translations are by the author.

3 Cohen, 'Trials of Artemisia'.

virginity and, especially, an illegitimate pregnancy could not be socially or financially remedied. At the same time, for some young women – among them those already at risk – the new attention that sexuality attracted was exciting and might hint, if misleadingly, at power or desirable assets to those who had little. A few young women learned to wield sexuality instrumentally or, in the words of Lucia Ferrante, ‘as a resource’, a means to try to secure a husband, an income, or other more ephemeral but still useful boons.<sup>4</sup> There were emotional temptations as well. As portrayed in literature and drama, young women were prone to falling, inappropriately, in love. For example, in the later sixteenth century the role of the *inamorata*, played by a woman, was capturing admiration on the Italian commercial stage.<sup>5</sup> And in trial records witnesses used the same language of romantic love.<sup>6</sup>

For the most part, the transformation into sexually mature beings was not marked by precise signals, and perhaps least for the girls themselves. Socially, what did happen was that, over time, young females came to look ‘grown up’, like someone who was ready, in one sequence or another, to marry, to have sex, and to get pregnant. Some young women acquired, for good or ill, notable sexual attractiveness that not only invited suitors but also tempted men to seek illicit relations. A young woman’s own feelings, including pleasure at men’s interest, could compound the risks. The transition of social identity was a product of interactions – fragmentary, inconsistent, semi-conscious – between other people’s responses and the girl’s own shifting sense of herself.

Young women who appeared in the Roman courts participated in the everyday culture of sex. As witnesses, they were not expected to plead ignorance and, when necessary, often testified to their sexual encounters in quite matter-of-fact language. Although the term was not used in early modern criminal law, the female youth at the centre of these trials – along, no doubt, with many others – were victims of sexual assault. Young, non-elite women, including the many servants, did move routinely around the city. While they might be subject to taunts or insults, trials give little evidence of sexual injury in daytime streets. Night, or even twilight, could be another matter. For example, in the dim, empty city at daybreak two bravos accosted and threatened a quartet of married washerwomen as they approached a private fountain with loaded baskets on their heads. Picking out by lantern

4 Ferrante, ‘La sessualità’.

5 Brown, ‘Traveling Diva’, 254. For Italian comedy, Collier, *Women, Rhetoric*, 19–40, elaborates on love and other themes linked to female youth.

6 For example, Cohen and Cohen, *Words and Deeds*, 103–24.

light the youngest and prettiest of the women, the bigger man jumped her, his erection evident, as she reported, through her skirts. After the women's cries brought people to their windows, the bullies decamped, and the laundresses pressed charges against 'men unknown'.<sup>7</sup> More typically, assaults, including those I describe here, involved not strangers outside but encounters inside households or at social gatherings where teenaged girls were often first seduced before being manhandled into compliance.

In the Roman court records several terms designated girls; one in particular clearly signalled, in context, a sexually mature and desirable young woman.<sup>8</sup> When a witness spoke of a female youth, two terms, *zitella* and *giovane*, appear often. *Zitella* labelled an unmarried woman, but also notably a virgin. It included the relatively uncommon older spinsters, but usually referred to nubile younger women whose sexual honour needed protection. The other term, *giovane*, as both adjective and noun and grammatically applicable to males and females alike, meant 'young' or 'young person'. In the trial testimonies, the word appeared describing young women in various circumstances. Mostly, however, when referring to a female youth, the term suggested a physical maturity that incorporated size, womanliness, and a distinct sexual attractiveness. When a young woman was called *giovane*, it was often coupled with adjectives that highlighted her good looks: *bella*, *bionda* ('blonde'), *avistata* ('eye-catching'), or *vagheggiata* ('desirable').<sup>9</sup> Sometimes the term carried an edge suggesting that attractiveness made a young woman suspect. Both unmarried and married women might be called *giovane* in this sexualizing way.

The young women labelled in the trial testimonies as *giovane* were usually what we would call teenagers; the youngest were twelve or thirteen and the older ones eighteen to twenty. For Roman female youth, the teenage years framed timetables of possibilities for marriage and domestic service. Two pivots had special resonance: onset at age twelve, and then a second moment at fourteen or fifteen. The malleable years between twelve and fourteen, when gendered and sexual identities were just emerging, marked a time of particular risks. Based on classical learning, age twelve was the youngest that a girl could be married. This hypothetical threshold implied sexual maturity and the ability to procreate, although very few early modern

7 GTC, Processi secolo xvii, busta 87, ff. 450r–460v, especially f. 457v.

8 Evidence comes from context of use in many trial records.

9 GTC, Processi secolo xvii, busta 25, f. 18r; busta 36r, ff. 65v, 84v, 87v; busta 65, f. 400r–v; Investigazioni, busta 353, f. 102v; busta 383, f. 63r; Querele, busta 8, f. 104v. The term *giovannetta* suggested a girl who was not yet fully mature.

twelve-year-olds, even in the Mediterranean, had probably passed through menarche.<sup>10</sup> Though there were exceptions, even aristocratic or patrician Italian brides of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were usually at least in their mid-teens, and most working-class women did not marry until later.<sup>11</sup> In practice, in Rome, the age of fifteen was more likely than twelve for some non-elite girls to become sexually active. Fifteen-year-old brides were not surprising, and girls who entered prostitution young were often around the same age.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, while the age of fifteen was acceptable for an early start to regular sexual activity in marriage or prostitution, it was certainly not typical of most female youth.

Domestic service, a common recourse for teenaged girls of modest rank, fit into a similar age framework. For families with precarious incomes, if a daughter's work was not needed at home, in another household she at least earned her own keep.<sup>13</sup> She was likely to go into service at the age of eleven or twelve. Having proved herself, she might begin earning money beyond her expenses at fourteen or so. If she stayed on for some years – seven or eight was the usual stint according to formal contracts – she could expect a substantial payment toward a dowry. Although such long-term service seems to have been an exception in Rome, it figured a path to marriage for those of few means. Furthermore, high mortality meant that many children moved into adolescence without both parents. For girls, the death of a mother in particular posed problems, and becoming a servant supplied a gender-suited kind of fosterage. Besides practical training and physical supervision, service could address youthful needs for social education. Surviving fathers, brothers, or uncles – charged with responsibility for younger girls of six, seven, or nine years – paid for their maintenance until they were of an age when their service was useful enough to earn their keep.

Within this framework for the lives of female youth, let us turn to the stories of three teenaged Roman girls as they experienced the fraught opening of their sexual lives. All three were motherless, and two also lacked fathers. In the place of parents, other adults provided more or less formally constituted supervision for all three girls. Around each was also a cluster of other people, notably older women, who took part in or observed these

10 See Introduction, 20–21.

11 For Florence, see Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, 203–10; Litchfield, 'Demographic Characteristics', 198–200. For Venice, Chojnacki, 'Measuring Adulthood', 188–93; Chojnacka, *Working Women*, 4–6.

12 For example, early serial data with ages can be found in the Archivio storico del Vicariato di Roma (ASVR), Stati delle anime, Santa Maria del Popolo, 1604.

13 Romano, *Housecraft and Statecraft*, 99–106, 129–52, and 152–56.

sexual initiations. Although trial records do not provide straightforward accounts of what happened, their multivocality offers varied assessments of female youth at a critical moment, including words from the young women themselves. We begin with two girls of impoverished backgrounds, Anna and Delia, who lost their virginity while servants in households facing some financial and social precarity. The third young woman, Virginia, lived in a more secure, bourgeois setting, but still became sexual before respectably married.

Among our three Roman maidens, Anna di Benedetto had the least control over her own youthful fate. With close male family members and several female neighbours nearby, she came somewhat unwittingly into her sexuality while a servant in a modest Roman household. Her father, Benedetto, had migrated to the city from a village in Rome's hinterland with his two young children, but evidently no wife.<sup>14</sup> His urban work is obscure; but, as Anna and, three years later, her brother Colantonio reached the customary age, the single father arranged to reduce expenses or supervisory responsibilities by putting them into service with the same couple. Then, in February 1595, Benedetto complained formally to the Governor's court about the abuse of his daughter by her master and mistress (741r–742v). The subsequent judicial inquiry yielded testimonies from father, daughter, and son, as well as from the accused husband and wife and several neighbours.

Sometime early in 1592, Benedetto had placed his motherless daughter, aged eleven or likely twelve, as a servant with Florestano and Lucretia, who lived suitably for their station on a small street behind the church of Sant' Andrea delle Fratte (740r). Benedetto and other witnesses described Anna, in retrospect, as then *grandetta*, well grown but still a child (741r, 744r, 752v). With no children, the couple lived in several rooms and had access to a fountain which served their livelihood doing laundry for, among others, the household of Cardinal Colonna (749v). Lucretia had also for a while fostered the daughter of a courtesan neighbour (753v). The pair had come to Rome more than a decade before from Bologna, where they had met as servants in a large household. In Rome they lived as husband and wife and attended church as was customary. In fact, they were not married, and indeed Florestano had a wife still living in Bologna (743v–744r). Among Roman working people, however, *de facto* divorce was not uncommon, and the unspoken absence of nuptial rites did not compromise their local reputation.

14 GTC, Processi secolo xvi, busta 286 (1595), ff. 740r–759r. Folio references to these principal documents appear parenthetically in the text.



Benedetto made standard arrangements for his children's employment in Florestano's household. In 1592, aged twelve, Anna did not require expenses for fosterage, but was old enough to earn her keep, if not much more. The father first committed Anna to serve the couple for a year receiving only 'board and clothing' (*vitto e vestito*) (741r, 752v). If things worked out, the adults would later draw up a contract either to convey a dowry, if Anna served for seven years or until about the age of 20, or to pay wages.<sup>15</sup> The first year or so seems to have gone smoothly. Anna later confirmed that she had received a skirt (*gonella*) that she was still wearing at the time of the trial (749v). Then, two years later, in March 1594, Benedetto arranged to place his son Colantonio, who had by then reached the age of eleven or twelve, also to serve in Florestano's household for his keep (741v). Sister and brother then both slept in the room 'where the fire burned' (*dove facemo il foco*), Anna on a mattress under the table (750v). At the time of Colantonio's arrival, it was also agreed that Anna was now to receive wages of one scudo per month (741v, 749v).

In his legal complaint in 1595, Benedetto described his small family as 'poor folks'. This language invoked economic straits and invited pity. Yet, for someone of scant means, the father also insisted vigorously on the family's good reputation – 'I esteemed honour above all else' (*io stimava piu l'honore che qualsi sia altra cosa*) – and asked that Anna never be left alone (741r–v). His son absorbed this paternal lesson. It is unclear why Benedetto put his pubescent daughter into this particular couple's hands, but he presumably would not have done so if he was worried about the moral environment. He acknowledged the risks, however, when he later sent the younger Colantonio to keep an eye on his sister (741v).

During her three years of service Anna's body matured, as was evident to the adults around her. A neighbour woman described her in February 1595 as 'now a grown woman' (*adesso é donna fatta*) (744r). Anna's youthful sexuality had many months earlier piqued her master's interest. At the trial, the same witness reported that one day during the previous May, Colantonio had called her son and another boy, saying 'run, run [...] come see what Florestano is doing to my sister' (*corri, corri [...] a vedere quello che fa Florestano a mia sorella*) (748v–749r). Peering through a keyhole, they saw the master on top of Anna. Shocked, Colantonio then started crying and shouting against his master and his sister. To calm the boy, Florestano

15 Interestingly, Anna herself testified: 'I don't know what age [*tempo*] I have, but my father said [when the contract was arranged] that I needed six or seven years to arrive at twenty' (f. 750r).



urged Anna to come out, so that, in tears, she hobbled painfully down to the courtyard where the women were gathered (751r). Suggesting that Colantonio was decrying offended honour, a widow wiped drops of blood from the stairs, but no one else intervened (748v–749r, 751v). The master countered the flailing protests of the twelve-year-old brother by promising to make him a pair of trousers if he would not tell his father, but the boy refused the bribe (749r, 751v). Colantonio's testimony many months later veiled the spying and the sights of sex, but his distress at discovering Anna closeted with their master still reverberated.

For many months a conspiracy of silence about the resulting pregnancy prevailed. Pregnancies often went unrecognized by inexperienced youths, but more discerning onlookers also turned away. Whatever her feelings about her errant husband, Lucretia cared most not to disrupt her livelihood, and deflected inquiries (752v–753v). In February, however, with a baby imminent, she arranged for a Venetian laundress to tend Anna, with a modicum of discretion, at a nearby house. Neighbour women reported that the newborn, wrapped in bloody clothes, had been immediately carried off to the foundling hospital at Santo Spirito (744v, 749v–750r). During these months Benedetto may have been, like many workers, in and out of the city; nonetheless, he was notably inattentive until, two weeks after the birth, he apparently received word of the arrest of Florestano and Anna. According to the father's tardy complaint, Colantonio had alerted him to this dubious alliance even before the defloration. The son had reported looks and touches between Anna and Florestano that suggested that they 'loved each other' (*se volevano bene*) (742r). It is not clear who introduced this language of love, or how much Colantonio had told of what he had seen. Yet, for all his claims to family honour, Benedetto had failed to take steps when first he heard from Colantonio in the spring, and even after the assault in May. At one point the father enquired of Lucretia, but seemed willingly put off by her denials and accepted payment of Anna's wages (753v). Indeed, he did nothing until, well after the fact, someone else denounced the illegitimate child to the officials. Benedetto's belated protests of honour rang empty.

Anna's feelings around these events we can only imagine. Yet there were hints that, while she was clearly misused, her master's attentions were not, at least at first, wholly unwelcome. Testifying, Anna answered simply and directly to questions of fact intended to pin down Florestano's crimes. There were no other men in the household, she said, nor any male visitors. She had been a virgin girl (*ragazza zitella*) when she arrived, and had never had a husband (749v). She had had sex only with her master; she said at first that it had been only one time, although later she admitted to repeated

encounters (750v, 754r). Switching gear, the court then asked about Anna's part: is she entangled by love (*amore capta*)? She answered, as she must for the logic of the trial, 'I am not in love with anyone, and no one is in love with me' (*io non sono innamorata de nessuno ne nessuno é innamorato di me*) (750v). These claims, however, geared to minimize Anna's legal culpability, conveyed only part of the story. Clearly, the sexual initiation had been embarrassing and painful, and its aftermath, nine months later, was more damaging still. But what of the brother's earlier observations, reported to their father more than once, that the master and his sister appeared to be touching, even cuddling? Possibly, Florestano's seduction might initially have flattered an inexperienced and neglected young teenager, who then found herself in over her head and without support from those who should have taken responsibility.

A decade later, in a tale with a very different tone, another fourteen-year-old servant, Delia di Angelo, bartered her virginity quite brazenly to a powerful man for promises of maintenance and a dowry. Delia's is one of several women's tales embedded in a very long murder trial of 1602–1603 against Valerio Armenzano, the overbearing, lustful head of Rome's largest police brigade.<sup>16</sup> Concerning Delia, Armenzano spoke dismissively as part of his broader need to deflect the serious charges against him, but the testimonies of Delia herself and her mistress, Sveva Gualtieri, give interesting accounts of the transformation from girl to young woman. Here an orphan with meagre assets grasped the chance to exchange her sexual appeal for tangible benefits; she also craved paternal protection and even affection.

Delia passed her later girlhood in two non-familial households in Rome. Born in the city, she was orphaned so young that she did not know her parents. Her paternal uncle, a canon in the nearby small town of Palestrina, took over the infant's care, and Delia lived with him there until the age of seven (168v). Then, as propriety deemed fit, her clerical kinsman took her to Rome to place her with a respectable woman (*donna da bene*), an elderly widow named Virginia.<sup>17</sup> Because she was young, Delia received no payment for her work; instead her uncle gave the widow a monthly sum, 'so that she would have care for my person as if I were her daughter' (*accio havesse cura della persona mia [...] come se fusse stata sua figliola*) (169r–170r). For five

16 GTC, Processi secolo xvii, busta 23 (1602–1603), ff. 167r–198r, 214r–216r, and 274v–276v. See also Cohen, 'Back Talk'.

17 Another example of early fosterage and service: GTC, Processi secolo xvi, busta 273, ff. 664r, 666r.

years, Delia served her mistress and sometimes also helped out women neighbours.

After Madonna Virginia's death, when Delia was twelve or thirteen, her uncle arranged a second placement with a gentlewoman, Signora Sveva Gualtieri. Since Delia was now of an age where custom gave value to her work, Sveva promised her uncle to keep and clothe her and eventually to provide a dowry to marry her off. Delia shared a bed with another, slightly older *giovane*, Lunidia da Amelia. Together, the two servants attended to all necessary tasks inside the house, and regularly accompanied their mistress when she went out to Mass and other devotions (170v–171r). This practice both provided Sveva respectably with company in the street and exposed her charges to the benefits of religion. Sveva also took Delia with her when she left the city to visit her daughter (171v–172r).<sup>18</sup>

Sveva Gualtieri herself had a complicated personal history. She was the daughter of a prominent family in Orvieto and the wife of Saracinello di Saracinelli, who belonged to another noble house in that city (185v). Living in Rome in 1592, she was described as a widow of about 40 years old, and the mother of two grown sons and a daughter. That year two lovelorn letters addressed to an unnamed recipient and signed 'Sveva Gualtieri' figured incidentally in the prosecution of a Roman tavern keeper also from Orvieto for pimping.<sup>19</sup> Though we know nothing further of the widow's romance, she evidently actively sought consolation, or at least male assistance.<sup>20</sup> The middle-aged Sveva then reappeared in 1602, keeping two servants and renting an apartment in the fashionable Corso opposite the large hospital of San Giacomo degli Incurabili that treated venereal disease in men and women. For these quarters, she owed a substantial 55 scudi a year (185v). All was not well, however, for Sveva had not paid her rent, and her landlord requested a formal confiscation of her belongings until she made good her debt. So, on the last day of carnival, rough officials carried away mattresses, bedding, and other household effects from the gentlewoman's rooms (186v). Seeking help from her own contacts in the police, Sveva received a visit from their corrupt and libidinous chief, Valerio Armenzano, who then became acquainted with Delia, her fresh, young serving girl.

18 Lunidia then left Sveva's employ; she appears in parish records in later years living as a courtesan with a young son. ASVR, Stati delle anime, Santa Maria del Popolo 1605, f. 41v, and San Lorenzo in Lucina 1609, f. 9r.

19 GTC, Processi secolo xvi, busta 256, ff. 492v, 497r, 498r, 501r–v, 503v.

20 Armenzano testified that he had first met Sveva Gualtieri through another police chief who, while working for the papal Tribunal of the Rota in the mid-1590s, had had a sexual alliance her. GTC, Processi secolo xvii, busta 23, f. 222r.

Signora Sveva's own complicated circumstances inflected her commentary in the trial about the youthful Delia and her sexual initiation. Sveva knew her custodial responsibilities but yet, as a woman on her own in awkward circumstances, she was beholden to male patrons. Sveva later explained that she had carefully kept Delia, who had come to her house a virgin, always by her side. And she protested repeatedly that she wanted nothing to do with a sexual arrangement involving her servant (190r). Yet, driven by financial distress and a need to keep a powerful man sweet, she allowed Armenzano to approach Delia in her house (175r–v). Seeking to absolve herself of responsibility, Sveva described the teenager to the police chief as 'grown up and knowing her own mind' (*grande e grossa e sa il fatto suo*), but also of good parentage and a virgin (189v–190r). So, Armenzano made Delia a direct proposition, and she quickly picked up the offer. For her virginity and sexual accommodation at his pleasure he would maintain her and later set her up for an adult future of her choice (175v–176r). She was not the only young woman to appear thus in the trials, trading their sexual assets for a promise of economic security.<sup>21</sup>

The first sexual encounter between Armenzano and Delia took place almost immediately at Sveva's house. It was preceded, as often in the initiation of sexual relationships, by the man sending out for food from a tavern so that all present could sup together. Because it was Friday, they ate fish (188r–v). Afterwards, the police chief led Delia into a bedroom, where he took her virginity on a bare straw mattress because the rest of the bedding had been confiscated (176r). Sveva later asked to see the bloody shift to confirm the deal (177r). Afterwards, Armenzano gave the girl '5 or 6 scudi in *paoli* and *testoni*' (small coins), which she tucked into her bodice and later transferred to Sveva's storage chest to pay for food and drink. The mistress also used the funds to buy slippers and stockings for the girl (177v–178r). In the months that followed Armenzano met Delia often, sometimes at Sveva's. At other times his henchmen came to fetch her in a carriage to spend the night at his house when his live-in mistress, Antonia, was absent. Afterwards, the police chief usually gave Delia 'a few scudi' (178v–180v).

Delia presents this liaison with Armenzano in very forthright terms. But it was for her more than mercenary. It is a guess to say that the young woman was a bit intoxicated by the powerful man's attentions. More explicit is her expression of affection and concern for him. Months later, when Armenzano was arrested for arranging the arquebus murder of a painter whom he suspected of pimping for his concubine, Delia was much distressed

21 Cohen, 'No Longer Virgins'.

over her lover's troubles. The court at this time was keen to collect any dirt about the police chief, and questioned her closely. She in turn aimed to defend Armenzano. She was likely a good actress, but her words spoke also to her own attachment: 'I wanted and needed to know about Captain Valerio's condition because I loved him and I cared for him' (*Io desideravo et mi appartenevo di sapere del stato del Capitano Valerio perche l'amavo et gli volevo bene*) (174r). Repeating a question about why she felt so much, the court pressed the teenager to tell the truth. In response, she paused and then began to cry:

I know [him] and I have spent time and kept company with Captain Valerio since carnival last [about eight months]; he had sex with me and took my virginity, for I was a maiden and a virgin.

*Io cognosco et ho conversatione et practica con detto Capitano Valerio da Carnevale prossimo passato in qua, che hebbe che fare con me carnalmente et mi tolse la mia virginità, che io ero zitella et vergine.* (174v).

Asked whether Armenzano had sweet-talked her or made any deceptive promises, Delia recounted at length the history of their relationship, including a very upbeat, initial offer, that:

If I wished to become his, he wanted to maintain me in all my needs and he would arrange to marry me off with a dowry or have me become a nun [...] and with all these fine words he got me to agree to his proposal without any violence or force.

*Che se io volevo esser sua che mi voleva mantenere di tutto quanto quello che mi bisognava, et che mi haverebbe maritata datami la dote, ovvero fattomi mi far monica, [...] et di molte altre parole buone che mi fece acconsentire à quello che lui volse senza alcuna violentia ne forza.* (175v)

Emotional, but also impressively confident for a fifteen-year old, Delia presented herself as making the most of her attractive sexual assets.

The third story, taking place in a more affluent and clearly respectable milieu, shows us a young woman who succumbed to sexual seduction as she took steps, explicitly condoned by older women, to have a social life of her own. In 1603 Virginia lived in the centre of Rome, near the Chiesa Nuova, with and under the guardian eyes of her married sister, Prudentia, and her brother-in-law Carlo Folli, a goldsmith.<sup>22</sup> Virginia was evidently an orphan:

22 GTC, Processi secolo xvii, busta 26 (1603), ff. 723r–735r.

though her mother is never mentioned, her deceased father was Alessandro Chigi, probably a member, if not necessarily a notable one, of a prominent family of bankers and men of affairs (725). Clearly, Virginia lived among prosperous and honourable kinsfolk who ensured, in Carlo's self-justifying words, that she 'lacked for nothing, neither clothing nor food, indeed perhaps [enjoyed] even more than was required' (*che mai l'ho fatto mancare niente ne di vestire ne di magnare, et forse di piu che non si doveva*) (724r).

Virginia's age in years was never given, but depositions clearly designated her status as a female youth. Launching the trial, her brother-in-law's formal complaint called her a *giovane zitella*, that is, a marriageable and likely attractive virgin (724r). In confirmation, the midwives who assessed Virginia's defloration both called her a *giovane*; one elaborated that she was a 'grown woman' (*donna fatta*) and the other 'big and beautiful' (*grande bella*) (728r, 731v). That Virginia was not just a female teenager but a *giovane* in this sexualized sense was one key to what happened.

Virginia's story comes in a trial launched on Sunday, 11 May 1603, immediately after the events. The day before, Virginia had left by carriage for an excursion to the Seven Churches, a fashionable pilgrimage circuit in the outskirts of the city. According to her married sister, who had approved the outing, the young woman should be home by nightfall. But she did not come back and, indeed, stayed away overnight. Carlo had been out of the house when Virginia left; when he returned at the end of day and asked after her, his wife burst into tears (724r). It is not clear whether her sister's fate or her husband's displeasure caused Prudentia greater anxiety. Making his own enquiries early the next morning, the goldsmith learned that his ward was at a *vigna*, an ex-urban country place of a sort where Romans – rich and poor, male and female – often went both for work and for recreation. At Carlo's request, the police went to arrest the girl and her companions and to bring them back to the jail for interrogation. In the meantime, Carlo made his formal complaint to the Governor on charges of defloration and leading a young woman astray. The accused were a French gentleman, known in Italianized form as Pietro Eschinardo, and three male associates – two coachmen and Giovanni Battista, a stocking-maker with a sideline in private event planning.

As was common in trials involving sexual compromise of respectable women, the state did not initiate proceedings. The family had discretion as to the best way to minimize the dishonour of publicity. In this instance Carlo resorted unusually quickly to the public authorities. The trial record consisted of his complaint, two interrogations of Virginia, during which her tale changed, and two separate examinations of her body by midwives.

As happened in some other trials, several underlings also testified, but the culpable French gentleman was never called.

Reconstructed from these testimonies, the seducer, with his assistants, had an elaborate plan. All the first steps fit local demands for a maiden's good conduct. On the Friday, Pietro Eschinardo, whose rooms backed onto the courtyard where Virginia lived, caught the girl's attention through a window and proposed an outing for the next day. Having duly secured her sister's permission, Virginia agreed (726r–v). On Saturday morning, the Frenchman hired a coach and driver and arranged for a respectable chaperone, Francesca, the wife of a minor official in the ecclesiastical court (724r–725v). After picking up Virginia, wearing a white dress and black cloak, at her house, the coach lurched out of the city – not to the Seven Churches, as first proposed, but south toward a *vigna* (731v). How this change of direction happened we can only guess, but clearly the destination was familiar to Virginia, since she gave directions to the driver (732v–733r).

A mixed party assembled at the *vigna* and, joined by the gentleman Pietro, shared a convivial meal. After socializing for some hours, the older woman announced that she 'was afraid of her husband' (*che haveva paura del marito*) and had to leave (730r). Virginia, thus losing her chaperone, wanted to go home, too. Pietro countered with promises of a ride to another town, and Virginia joined him and the fixer Giovanni Battista in the coach that rolled along until after nightfall. When, at last, the carriage dropped the pair off at Pietro's lodgings, Virginia protested that they were supposed to be somewhere else. Although the location was near her home, she appeared not to recognize her surroundings in the dark. Pietro urged her to come in with him. When she hesitated, he wrapped her cloak over her and with a firm hand led her to his room. Upon her refusal to sleep with him, he began to undress her with some force and put her into the canopied bed. After shedding his own clothes, he climbed in, had sex with her one time, and claimed her virginity (727r, 730r).

Virginia had succumbed to the seducer's pressure, but continued to try to manage her plight. After both woke up early Sunday morning, Pietro locked Virginia in a room, left the key with his manservant, and told him to put the girl in the carriage that would come (729v). The Frenchman then again organized a coach with a different driver and another chaperone, Lucretia, an artisan's wife, and sent them with Giovanni Battista to collect Virginia and take her to a different *vigna* north of the city (728v–729r). Pietro later made an appearance, coaxed Virginia 'not to worry, that he had fixed everything' (*che io stessee alegramente, che lui haveva remediato ad ogni cosa*), and then left, giving instructions to take her home (727v).



Virginia, concerned to cover her tracks, refused in turn to go without a chaperone; and she wanted someone who would lie about where she had been, which Lucretia refused to do (727v, 729v). Giovanni Battista then went to seek help from Virginia's sister. Prudentia, however, now more worried about her husband's reaction, washed her figurative hands and said that Virginia should stay wherever she had spent the night (725v). Shortly after this failed mission returned to the *vigna*, the police sent by Carlo arrived and took Virginia and two of the lesser men to jail.

Although Virginia's willingness to join the excursion might seem imprudent, her behaviour, as reported not only by herself but also by others, was not out of line for women of her circle. Religious destinations like the Seven Churches justified women venturing out, even when it was understood that social recreation was part of the programme. A coachman reported having carried Virginia herself to Saint Peter's the previous March, perhaps to take part in Easter celebrations (732v–733r). Women's work – to gather fruit and process vegetables, for example – also justified leaving urban domesticity and travelling to the *vigne*. In this trial, the driver said that he had carried two women who wanted to spread laundry out to dry in the fields, and a *vignarolo* testified to having seen Virginia herself with her married sister visiting two weeks earlier to rinse laundry (730v–731r). Although it seems unlikely that Virginia's trip was really about laundry, the explanation justified women moving in an ex-urban orbit. As guardian, Prudentia not only approved Virginia's trip to the Seven Churches, but also the two of them had recently been on a similar junket outside the city gates together. At the same time, while agreeable for fresh air and a casual atmosphere, the *vigne* also posed some dangers. Because away from so many eyes of family and neighbours, these were places where assignations, and sometimes illicit sex, could easily happen.

Respectable women preferred not to venture from home without female companions. And Virginia, as a proper young woman, sought to observe this rule. When the seducer Pietro planned to lead the girl astray, he was careful to provide chaperones on both mornings. Similarly, at the *vigna*, Virginia wanted to have other women around. When, on the fateful Saturday afternoon, Francesca announced that she must return to the city, Virginia claimed to be uneasy left alone among men. And on Sunday, even after the defloration, for appearances and for reassurance, Virginia again wanted a woman's company in the carriage taking her home.

As a *giovane*, Virginia was an attractive sexual conquest, and seemed to Pietro susceptible to being led astray. Though careful to play by the rules, the youthful Virginia's appetite for sociability and admiration got

her into sexual trouble. Her report of the sexual assault was, compared to some testimonies, muted, but also notably detailed. Likely shocked to find herself in jail, Virginia stumbled trying to parry trouble not only from her assailant but also from Carlo, her familial guardian. In her first interrogation where, like all witnesses, she faced the magistrates alone, Virginia made improbable claims about an excursion to a distant town and passing the night sleeping in a chair fully dressed (725v–726r). Under pressure from the court, she soon revised this tale. In the second version, after a day of recreation and coach rides, she was dismayed to find herself after dark alone with Pietro at his front door. Pietro had then reassured her – ‘come, come, don’t be afraid’ (*venite, venite, che havete paura*) – and bundled her in with some force (727r). Again, a language of fear described a womanly response to gestures of male power.

Yet Virginia observed Pietro’s bedroom carefully, noting the location of the bed and its dark purple canopy. She used the language of ‘sleeping’ (*dormire*) with him. She resisted, but evidently not too much, and he resorted to the standard blandishments, saying that he wanted to marry her. ‘I don’t want a husband’ (*che non volevo marito*), she replied. ‘He had sex with me one time and deflowered me’, she reported, ‘but I didn’t pay much attention to whether there were signs of blood’ (*hebbe che fare con me una volta [...] carnalmente, che me sverginò, ma io non posi cura, se ce fussero segni di sangue*) (727r). Since there was not much time for her to have learned from lawyers what to say, Virginia must have known the ‘signs’. Yet, neither then nor later did she appear engaged with these details of her predicament. At the end of this long interrogation, however, she did reiterate, almost pro forma, that Signor Pietro had taken her virginity, that she wanted justice, and that, despite her earlier words, Pietro should marry her and restore her honour (727v).

Immediately following this interrogation came another stressful legal routine, a physical examination to assess Virginia’s virginity. Alone with the young woman in a small room in the jail, a midwife performed the usual tactile investigation and found Virginia’s genitals recently damaged (728r). When confirming this result two days later, a second midwife asked the young woman who she was and who had deflowered her. In reply, the girl, ‘because ashamed’ (*vergognata*), gave only her first name and described her abuser simply as ‘a man’ (732r).

Virginia’s distress, however, did not preclude her taking active part later in castigating her seducer. As was not uncommon in the Governor’s court, after an initial flurry Carlo’s case against the Frenchman lapsed. Although Pietro had given Virginia a ring with a blue stone at the time of the defloration, no

marriage appears to have been considered. Carlo reported that in May, rather than further parading his soiled family honour in public, he had, 'begged by many' (*pregata da molti*), agreed to a settlement. In a formal injunction Pietro promised not to speak – 'for good or ill', as the legal language went – about Virginia, Carlo, or his family (733v–734r). The goldsmith had thus opted for an official silence over more direct or material remedy. To mitigate embarrassment, Virginia had 'retired' temporarily to the house of another gentleman (734r–v). *Retirata* designated a socially recognized, atypical, deeper seclusion into which Roman women, or girls, sometimes withdrew when, as here, their public appearance attracted unwelcome risk. Nevertheless, the shameless Pietro tried to renew contact with Virginia, even as he sued Carlo for restitution of the ring. In October, Carlo, along with Virginia, again denounced Pietro's schemes to the magistrates. Using subterfuge and gifts, he had sent an older woman as a go-between to speak with Virginia in her private seclusion and to inveigle her to meet him again. Infuriated at his presumption, the feisty young woman first berated the messenger in unladylike terms and then went back to court against Pietro (734v–735r).

To conclude, while none of these three stories of Anna, Delia, and Virginia represents more than itself, each suggests some of the challenges and temptations that many Roman maidens faced as they acquired visible sexual maturity. This transformation was a particular feature of female youth. The ideals of religion and honour aimed to restrain women's sexual activities before, and during, marriage. One consequence was an ideological inclination to minimize an interval of youth between a largely asexual girlhood and the necessary sexuality of married adulthood. But everyday urban life in many ways resisted that tidy scheme. With many women not marrying until their twenties, most became potentially sexual long before they became brides. As 'grown-up' women, they attracted risky but not always unwelcome interest and offers. Family members, masters and mistresses, and female neighbours were therefore charged with protecting and correcting maids. Yet often enough these folk wrestled with conflicting economic needs and social goals so that their oversight produced irregular results. Young, unmarried women, especially those many with fragmented families, had relatively few personal and social resources, and were more often vulnerable to misuse. But, as female youths, they were not without their own aspirations, and sometimes plans, that some played out for themselves.

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