

5

After Respectability: Women, Sexuality and the Circus in Pre-Sexology Italy

Mark Seymour

In May 1871, Raffaella Saraceni, at the nubile age of 18, married Captain Giovanni Fadda, a respectable army officer in the prime of life at 29. The wedding took place after a brief courtship in Naples, where the groom was posted. Both parties to the marriage represented the *borghesia* of southern Italy. Saraceni was from Cassano, a provincial town in Calabria of about 9,000 inhabitants; her mother came from a prominent family and her stepfather was director of the region's railways. Fadda, first-born son of a notary from Cagliari, Sardinia, had signed up for the army in 1859 in order to participate in the unification of Italy. By 1871, he was a decorated soldier-functionary of the state he had helped to forge.¹ The era in which the marriage took place had special significance for modern Italy: recently established as a unified nation, the first decade of nationhood had concluded with Rome finally becoming Italy's capital in 1870, the year before the wedding. In this historical context, it is tempting to see Raffaella and Giovanni's marriage as a symbolic union not just between two families, but between two major and distinctive components of the Italian polity. In the same vein, since one of the principal social functions of marriage was to provide the sole respectable context for expressions of sexuality, particularly in a deeply Catholic country, it was likely to be only a matter of time before Raffaella and Giovanni consolidated their joint role in the unification of Italy by making more Italians.

Nevertheless, contemporary documentation of the marriage arrangements leaves no trace of either the patriotic or indeed the personal feelings that may well have been uppermost in the minds of the betrothed. Rather, the records suggest that this conjunction of middle-class Italian

families was typical of established historiographical understandings of the phenomenon. These views have largely been shaped by the nature of traditional historical records of marriage and personal life, in which subjective matters such as sentiment and sexuality can only be discerned between the lines.² As was customary, financial and material concerns dominate the union's written arrangements, exemplified by the marriage agreement's detailing of Raffaella's dowry, from the handsome sum of 19,500 lire, down to the sheets and blankets provided for the marriage bed.³ There is little to be gleaned anywhere about the partners' emotions, hopes and desires, let alone what they might have done between those carefully inventoried sheets.

This paucity of intimate detail underlines one of the challenges faced by historians of sexuality, summed up succinctly by Bruno Wanrooij when he pointed out that the problem of retrieving 'factual' information makes it difficult to write about the history of sexuality 'in terms of experiences and not only as discourse'.⁴ It remains the case that our understanding of nineteenth-century sexuality in Italy (and elsewhere) is shaped more by research into legal, medical, religious and cultural discourses than it is by accounts of subjective, carnal experience – which, although almost certainly the subject of contemporary verbal discussion anywhere from the bedroom to the confessional, were seldom left inscribed in permanent, readily accessible records. Moreover, notwithstanding Paolo Mantegazza's prescriptive writings from the 1870s, it was only really from the 1880s that the work of figures such as Lombroso, Tamassia, Kraft-Ebing, Freud and the like so accelerated the circulation of theories that came to dominate concepts of sexuality from the *fin de siècle* onwards.⁵

Raffaella married Giovanni in an era when issues of sexuality were less likely to have had the discursive prominence they gained just a short while later. Nevertheless, in this chapter I explore these newlyweds' story in an attempt to uncover aspects of sexuality and its experience, particularly in relation to women, during a period of Italian history still relatively unexamined from that point of view.⁶ If the marriage had been as typical as it first appeared, it would very probably have added little or nothing to our still inchoate knowledge of the era's sexuality. Sadly for Raffaella and Giovanni, their marriage was troubled from early on: it did not result in the birth of children, and it appears to have been a sexual fiasco, most likely because of problems on the part of the groom. Divorce was inconceivable in Italy at the time, but the sexual failure apparently led to other measures that ultimately resulted in the creation of an archival trove that is unusually rich in historical traces of sexuality.

Some years into the marriage, apparently seeking more satisfying fleshly experiences than Giovanni could provide, Raffaella bartered the respectability of her marriage by entering into the sexual underworld represented by a very different milieu from her own: an itinerant circus. In doing so, she appeared to benefit from the complicity of her family, and the social mingling between southern *borghesia* and circus troupe revealed by the resulting liaison throws into question received views of the Italian bourgeoisie's vigilant protection of female sexuality and even its class boundaries.⁷ In fact, the sheer temerity and fantastical nature of the inter-class connections evidenced by the documentation of Raffaella's 'fall' point to the possibility that repressive regimes of sexuality, whether religious or secular, did not always exercise full hegemony over the mentalities of 1870s Italians, even among those who bore all the outward hallmarks of respectability.

This chapter aims to extend our understandings of sexuality in pre-sexology Italy, making use of an ill-starred marriage and its denouement to explore a distinctive set of sexual dilemmas and complexities. Though the case in question provides an exceptionally dramatic example, I use Raffaella's and Giovanni's story in the spirit of a micro-historian who focuses on the exceptional to explore the 'normal', to bring to light sexual undercurrents that could swirl, seldom witnessed by posterity, beneath the still waters of a bourgeois marriage. Using the evidence provided by this failed partnership, I argue that experience of sexuality, even among the respectable women of 1870s Italy, was likely to have been more intense, dynamic and desired than the historical records usually permit us to witness.

From marriage to sexual underworld?

In September 1879, eight years after the wedding in Naples, Raffaella found herself before Rome's Court of Assizes, accused of instigating the murder of her husband, Captain Giovanni Fadda. Beside her in the dock also facing charges were two further defendants, Pietro Cardinali and Antonietta Carrozza. Both were equestrian acrobats, stars of the Cardinali brothers' circus, a familiar sight in the provincial towns of southern Italy in that era. Pietro was widely understood to have been Raffaella's lover and he was charged with committing Fadda's murder so that the illicit couple could marry. Antonietta, Pietro's co-star and the Cardinali brothers' adoptive sister, faced trial as an accomplice in the crime. She and Raffaella had been intimate confidantes for some months before the murder in 1878 and the prosecution alleged that

Antonietta was guilty of conveying crucial messages between Cardinali and Raffaella as the murder plan was put into action.

The three co-defendants did not quite constitute anything so straightforward as a love triangle, but the links between them suggested erotic, social and professional ties whose tangled nature was in stark contrast to the prim ideology of sexual relations represented by Raffaella's marriage to Giovanni. Although the main task of the court was to establish guilt and mete out punishment for Fadda's murder, a less explicit but still evident aim of the prosecution was to bring to light the way in which the complex ties between the trio had resulted in a respectable marriage concluding in the husband's death seven years after the wedding. Unsurprisingly, the trial attracted enormous public attention and, as Angela Groppi has shown, the female public's interest in the case itself became the subject of public debate and discussion.⁸ By the time the trial opened, the public already knew the main elements of the story, but the details were eagerly awaited.

The murder had taken place very early on a Sunday morning in October 1878, in the nation's new capital, Rome. Giovanni Fadda had recently been transferred there and lived by himself, having separated from Raffaella, who had re-settled with her parents in Cassano. Fadda was attacked in his own home, a small first-floor apartment in a populous quarter not far from the Colosseum. Seconds later, Pietro Cardinali had been arrested as he fled the apartment, blood all over his hands. Within hours, it started to become evident to the chief prosecutor, Michele Finizia, that this had been a premeditated crime with matters of sexuality at its heart. A key early witness was Cardinali's stablehand, Giuseppe De Luca, who had accompanied his employer from Calabria to Rome a few days earlier and was also arrested soon after the attack. He immediately told the police that in Calabria the whole town knew the circus star had for some time been involved in an illicit liaison with the murder victim's wife. De Luca elaborated that the crime 'was planned some time ago, because the wife of the captain, according to rumours in the town, was bored with him, so she and Cardinali planned to have him killed'.⁹

Beyond the chilling nature of the plot, De Luca's testimony already strikes an unusual note. For, familiar though we are with the notion that bored husbands were granted a degree of socially condoned sexual leeway, as far as we know, women had no margins for bewailing their own marital boredom.¹⁰ The day after the murder, De Luca provided more detail about the alleged affair, saying it had begun around May 1878, when the circus set up in Cassano for a two-month sojourn.

He reported that Raffaella ‘took to flirting with Pietro, who for his part already kept a woman in the circus by the name of Carolina’.¹¹ Apparently unperturbed by or unaware of Pietro’s concubine, Raffaella attended the circus’s performance every night, taking a front-row seat so that she and Cardinali could gaze at one another. Soon, according to De Luca, the attraction led to an affair, his account already suggesting that Raffaella did as much if not more than Pietro to bring it about.¹²

If so, the relationship between Raffaella and Cardinali turns a familiar nineteenth-century sexual trope of the bourgeois male with his chorus girl on its head. So topsy-turvy is the story that the notion of a respectable southern Italian woman with a circus acrobat in tow sounds more than a little preposterous. But this in itself may suggest that historians have too uncritically accepted the myth of complete feminine rectitude, leaving little conceptual space for exceptions even in their own minds. What Raffaella’s affair underlines from the outset is that women could be sexually drawn to men for their manhood, not just their suitability as husbands, and could play an active role in seeking to gratify their desires. Documentary evidence of women playing this role is a good deal harder to come by than literary traces of the phenomenon, such as Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* or Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, but the evidence does point in this direction in Raffaella’s case.

Some interpretive allowance needs to be made for the fact that the records attesting to Raffaella’s enterprise were produced by a legal system that sought to punish her for a crime it argued was the tragic result of her sexual transgressions. That system adopted a rhetorical strategy whose aim was to convince a contemporary audience that Raffaella had flagrantly transgressed norms of female rectitude by seeking sexual pleasure. As a later audience, historians need to be cautious about too readily assuming the prosecution’s point of view. For her part, Raffaella always denied her sexual involvement with Pietro and certainly denied any role in instigating her husband’s murder. Although there is room for doubt about her role in the crime, her denials about the relationship with Pietro were not terribly convincing because De Luca’s early testimony about the liaison was later strongly corroborated by a wide range of locals. For our purposes, it seems reasonable to assume that there was at least a kernel of truth in the story of Raffaella’s affair and her role in initiating it.

This assumption gains further credence from the fact that Raffaella was not a lonely exception who simply proved the rule of nineteenth-century Italian bourgeois female respectability. The only thing that makes Raffaella’s case exceptional is that her affair came fully to light.

Further investigations revealed that several other women of similar social standing had also dallied with the circus acrobat, though these affairs remained in a carefully contrived penumbra of anonymity, evinced only by a long string of love letters unearthed during the police inquiry. Some of the dalliances may have been physical, but whether they were or not, if we take the women's numerous expressions of their ardent wish to marry Cardinali as proxies for expressions of physical desire, they would certainly have liked them to be. After all, the circus performer had very little else apart from his robust physicality to recommend him as a potential husband for women from good families. Yet his correspondents, probably completely unknown to each other, and signing only with cryptic initials and symbols, showered Cardinali with unrestrained epistolary admiration, sometimes for months after the circus had left their respective towns. Some even furnished the object of their desire with money and expensive gifts.¹³ It would seem that crossing the boundaries between audience and stage was not the sole preserve of Raffaella or of well-to-do men and showgirls. Even in southern Italy, respectable women too, though less frequently and certainly less notoriously, availed themselves of straightforward levers of power, such as economic advantage, to attract the attentions of a man they desired.

Between scandal and normality

Startling as it might be to discover nineteenth-century women expressing sexual interest in men, the anonymity and secrecy of the epistolary evidence reinforces a well-established understanding that it was completely taboo for them to do so. Thus, a further surprise in Raffaella's case is the fact that her liaison with Cardinali took shape in the context of an open family friendship with the circus troupe's leading performers. From the outset, De Luca had told police that the affair was common knowledge in the local area. As he put it, 'the affair took on such marked proportions that it was no mystery to anyone'.¹⁴ The social connections were plainly evident to all as a result of Cardinali's and Antonietta's regular visits to Raffaella's family home for lunch, the main meal of the day, and their attendance at parties after the evening's circus performance.¹⁵

The possibility that within the social cocoon of the Saraceni household, Cardinali's relationship with the daughter of the house may have developed a sexual dimension does not appear to have been particular cause for sensation in Cassano. Yet, in court during the trial, lawyers certainly beat the story into a scandal for the benefit of judges, jurors and the public, while newspaper editors also made full use of the sales

opportunities offered by the almost operatic murder plot.¹⁶ But the sense of scandal that emanated from the trial hearing and newspaper coverage seems out of kilter with the contemporary response in Cassano itself, judging by the extensive judicial interviews with witnesses of all types and classes. Among the locals, from the mayor to the gardeners, though there was clearly talk, a sense of moral outrage is difficult to find.¹⁷

Nor does it seem that there was anything unusual or remarkable about members of the circus mingling socially with the leading local families. When the prosecutor, Finizia, first interviewed Cardinali two days after his arrest, he asked whom the horseman knew in Cassano. The answer was ‘nearly all the leading families of the town, that is, the Aceti, the Lanzi, the Saraceni, Mazziotti, the member of parliament Toscano, and others’. Cardinali did stress that in the case of the Saraceni family, his principal friendship was with Raffaella’s brother Giuseppe, while Raffaella was in ‘cordial relations with the circus women’.¹⁸ By embedding the circus figures’ relationships in a context of social connections with the notable families and emphasising the individual friendships’ gender lines, Cardinali probably sought to downplay the singular nature of his relationship with Raffaella and her family. Later testimony from his co-star Antonietta confirmed this genuine social mingling between the circus performers and Cassano’s prominent families.¹⁹ This undermines any assumptions that the provincial town’s elite might have erected clear boundaries between themselves and the raffish stars of the circus for fear of losing respectability. On the contrary, the social and perhaps even the sexual boundaries of Cassano appear to have been permeable, with Cardinali and Antonietta welcomed with open arms into the bosom of the local elite.

This is a puzzle in at least two ways. First is the question of how the southern Italian *borghesia* perceived the circus in terms of class. In one of the few recent studies of the circus phenomenon from a social and cultural perspective, albeit in a British context, Brenda Assael affirms that circus performers were likely to be viewed as disreputable, rootless foreigners.²⁰ Although alluring, in Britain at least they were to be kept at a distance from society, exemplified by the story of a middle-class family’s resistance to one of their daughters marrying a circus figure.²¹ In southern Italy at much the same time, the opposite seems to have been the case, with Cassano high society vying to entertain the circus’s leading artistes. Yet, when the case finally came to trial, lawyers drew effortlessly on a series of tropes that cast Cardinali as a dissolute foreigner who had no right to dwell within the proud new Italian nation.²² Of course, a heinous crime had meanwhile taken place, but even this does not fully

explain the gulf between official Rome's vituperative ostracism of the circus figures and provincial Cassano's eager embrace.

A second puzzling element in Cassano's social welcome to the circus concerns the extent to which the town understood aspects of the troupe's sexual arrangements. The prosecutor's inquiries revealed that relations within the circus's extended family were unorthodox by the standards of the period's religious and civil laws. The stablehand De Luca had given the first hint of this when he let slip that as well as the affair involving Raffaella, Cardinali also kept a woman within the circus by the name of Carolina. Shortly after De Luca first mentioned Cardinali's and Raffaella's liaison to the prosecutor, three officials in Calabria, instructed by telegram from Rome, arrived at Pietro's abode to search for evidence of the alleged relationship. The door was opened by the selfsame Carolina, who described herself simply as Cardinali's wife. Also present in the house was Antonietta, who said she was Cardinali's sister. The officials soon found a collection of love letters, which they presumed would confirm Cardinali and Raffaella's affair. Noticing that 10 of the 40 letters to Pietro were in envelopes addressed to Carolina, the officials asked why this was so. She answered simply that she was aware of 'various affairs' that her husband had had in the towns where his work had taken him.²³ She seems to have said it as if a wife acting as intermediary between her husband and his lovers were a perfectly ordinary occurrence, and no official comments or reactions were recorded.

Perhaps the reason why the provincial officials gave no indication of a reaction was that they were sceptical of Carolina's claim that the letters revealed 'various affairs', firmly believing that they related only to Raffaella. But Carolina was telling the truth: the letters were evidence of the string of Cardinali's ardent admirers that Raffaella had joined only as the last and most lustrous pearl. Not one of the epistles concerned or was written by her. Full details of the marital and amorous entanglements around the circus were not yet clear, but what the provincial report signalled to Rome's prosecutor was that Cardinali and Carolina conducted their marriage well outside the normal bounds of respectability. Carolina's role as addressee for letters from her husband's other admirers was the most obvious sign.

A further point, though one the circus couple shared with many thousands of others in Italy at the time, was that Cardinali and Carolina were not legally married, in that they had only had a religious ceremony, rather than the civil ceremony that had been required since the new Italian Civil Code took effect from 1866.²⁴ It was for this reason that a marriage between Cardinali and Raffaella would have been

legally possible once Fadda had been done away with. But the legality of Cardinali's marriage to Carolina was the least of the prosecutor's concerns. He was much more interested in the sexual unorthodoxies of the circus and he plainly thought there were more to be uncovered. Further questioning of De Luca, and later Cardinali's 'sister' Antonietta, suggests that for Finizia, establishing the full extent of the sexual chaos at the heart of the circus was key to understanding the crime, or at least vital to convincing a jury about the guilt of the accused.

Uncovering sexual twilight zones?

Antonietta had been brought to Rome on suspicion of helping to organise the murder, and she first met Finizia for interrogation on 19 October 1878. The wording of the questions was not recorded, but it must have been put to her that she had played a role in facilitating Fadda's murder to make way for Cardinali to marry Raffaella. She denied the accusation flatly, adding that she would have had no motive to cooperate in such a plan because she was the one Cardinali had promised to marry. Asked to explain her relationship with the circus, she said she had been adopted by the mother of the Cardinali brothers at the age of seven, had been brought up as an equestrian artist and had assumed the family surname. The prosecutor asked her to elaborate on the family arrangements of the troupe. She explained that there were 24 persons in total, each of the three Cardinali brothers having 'a woman', with a total of 14 children between them, and four other members. She reported that Pietro's partner, Carolina, had three children, the oldest of whom was nine. Further questions concerned various telegrams exchanged between Antonietta and Cardinali during his murderous visit to Rome. She was formally charged as an accomplice to the crime after her interview.²⁵

Finizia cross-checked the family arrangements of the circus in a further interview with De Luca. On this occasion the prosecutor's questions were noted, and he asked first whether Antonietta was Cardinali's sister or sister-in-law. De Luca said he was not certain, but affirmed that within the circus she was regarded as the sister. Finizia then proposed to De Luca rather pointedly that in fact Cardinali also had a sexual relationship with Antonietta. Apparently unfazed, De Luca replied that he doubted it because Pietro had Carolina, with whom he had those three children.²⁶ Two weeks later, Finizia was able to confirm his suspicions about the sexual connection between Antonietta and Cardinali, probably first aroused when Antonietta had mentioned his promise to marry her. During a more intense interrogation of Antonietta by the prosecutor, she

admitted that, about eight years earlier, Cardinali 'promising to marry me, seduced me, and took my honour'. As a result, on 17 March 1870, she gave birth to a baby, which was adopted out. The sexual relationship continued and another baby was born just over a year later on 13 April 1871. Finizia put this information together with Antonietta's earlier claim about the age of Carolina's oldest child and then sought confirmation of the unavoidable conclusion that Cardinali had sexual relationships with both women at the same time. The answer was a meek 'Yes, sir'.²⁷

Pressed a little on how Antonietta could have 'flattered herself' that Cardinali intended to marry her, she explained that she had been certain that his mother and brothers would have made sure he honoured his promise.²⁸ She then claimed, almost as an afterthought ('I should also add'), that Pietro often beat her, making it impossible for her to resist his 'impure desires'.²⁹ These investigations usefully reveal the way the circus embodied an intense intertwining of potent sexual tropes and taboos, from stolen honour to sex verging on incest, birth out of wedlock, sexual relations under threat of violence and, finally, a form of bigamy. Equally worth noting, however, is that this concatenation of taboos was nevertheless shot through with the discursive traces of 'honourable' defences such as seduction with a promise to marry and the expectation that family pressure would encourage Cardinali to make an honest woman of Antonietta. Did these traces testify merely to Antonietta's cunning ability to pay lip-service to hegemonic values or do they reveal that even within the circus, there prevailed a diluted cultural regime of sexual propriety – the sexual equivalent of honour among thieves?

Moving from the inner sanctum of the circus back out to Cassano, the question remains as to how the townsfolk perceived the sexual mores of their itinerant visitors and even how much they knew of their relationships. Finizia had scented sexual rats within the circus as soon as he had started to ask questions of its members. The people of Cassano were not paid to be suspicious as Finizia was, and virtually nothing of their views on this question was ever committed to paper. All we know is that in contrast to Assael's portrait of British views, in Cassano the circus was far from socially sidelined. Moreover, witness statements indicate that the entire town put its collective shoulder to the wheel of a dynamic though not particularly judgmental rumour mill when it came to Raffaella's improprieties. By extension, it seems unlikely that nary a soul stopped to wonder about the sexuality of the circus artistes themselves.

After all, these artistes entertained their audience with a highly physical performance, a display of bodies that were traditionally clad in ways

that emphasised their physiques. Artists' impressions of both Cardinali and Antonietta, published in a contemporary popular volume created to satisfy the public's thirst for details about the trial, illustrate the point. Cardinali wears a close-fitting costume, outlining a body that judicial investigations had indicated was probably quite virile. He observes a female performer (presumably his fellow equestrienne, Antonietta) in the background, her tutu-like skirts lifted even higher by her athletic antics (see Figure 5.1). Antonietta's own portrait shows her in a revealing costume, thighs alluringly outlined in sheer tights, stepping coquettishly yet confidently on to the back of a crouching clown as she prepares to mount her horse (see Figure 5.2).

It does not take too much imagination to discern an element of sexual allure behind the glitter and sawdust of the circus. Indeed, explaining the provincials' ready embrace of the *Cardinalis* requires a reckoning with what in modern times came to be called sex appeal, even though such a discourse had yet to be invented in 1870s Italy. The locals of Cassano perhaps found a way to prolong the frissons of the circus performance by extending invitations to the star artistes to socialise in their homes. Though we will never know how much the people of Cassano understood or were curious about the mores and sexual practices within the circus, it would be mistaken to ignore the sexual element of a circus's entertainment value. While it is unlikely that anyone knew the details as Finizia did, it also seems improbable that the troupe's sexual connections were left un contemplated.

How might such ideas have been processed or even conceptualised before modern sexology provided a discursive framework around which to elaborate such matters? It is a difficult area to research in the realm of everyday life, particularly with only scant archival information. One possible direction is offered by Anna Clark's concept of the 'twilight moment', a phrase coined to describe the way certain episodes of taboo behaviour seem to have been accepted as long as they were not flaunted.³⁰ The people of Cassano may well have had an inkling of the sexual unorthodoxies represented by the circus, but were not worried about them because the group was transient, rather than forming an intrinsic part of the fabric of society.

In that sense the circus, more than a twilight moment, might have represented a sexual 'twilight zone' in Cassano, one whose antics were acceptable, and even titillating, within the spatial and temporal parameters of a limited sojourn. The problem in 1878 was that a murder had been committed and a modernising legal system, personified in the early stages by Finizia, had a very different concept of the acceptability



Figure 5.1 Illustration of Pietro Cardinali

of those antics. What the prosecutor encountered in Cassano was perhaps an older system of mental habits for dealing with sexual otherness, reflecting centuries of Catholic hegemony over morality, where carnal transgressions were processed and absolved in the hushed twilight of the confessional.³¹

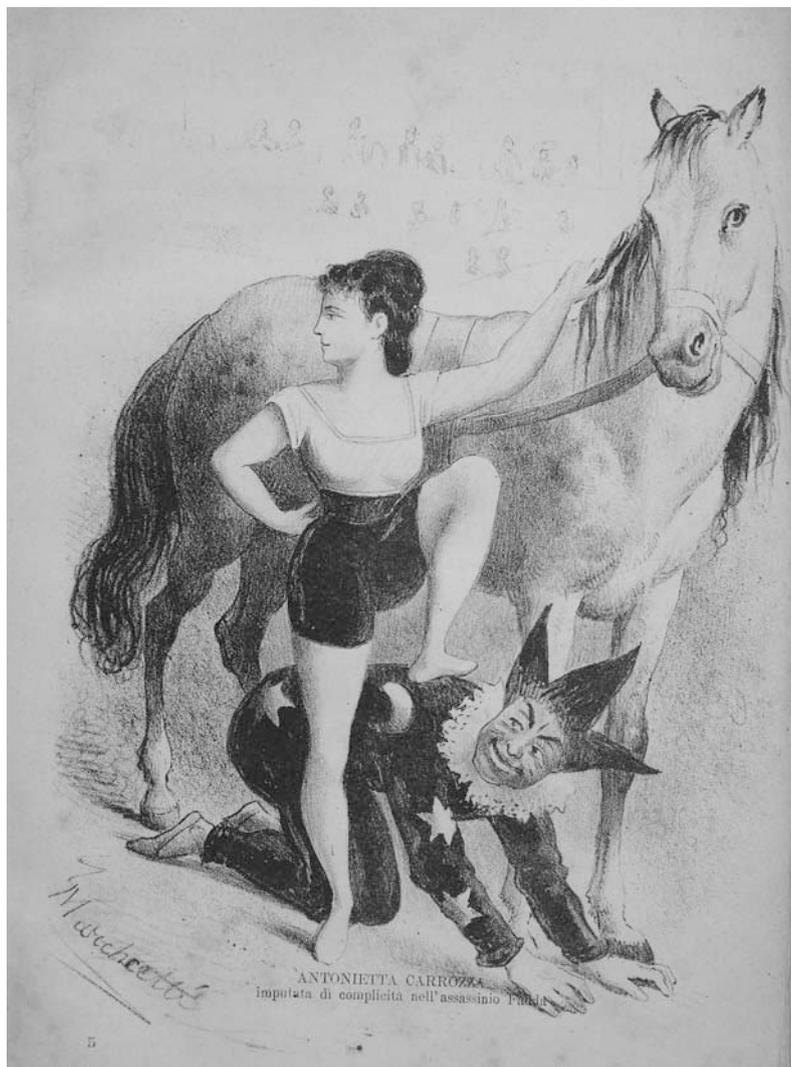


Figure 5.2 Illustration of Antonietta Carrozza

Acknowledging the influence of this older system may help us to understand the apparent lack of scandal about Raffaella's having been drawn into the sexual underworld of the circus. Although she was a respectably married woman, her 'fall' was very much cushioned by a

community's tacit acceptance. At first, this might indicate the need for historians to overhaul received notions that the social and sexual life of bourgeois Italian women was invigilated to the point of suffocation. It could be that within certain limits, Raffaella was able to dwell in a twilight moment, though it may also have been her rising sense of the moment's limits that prompted her to resolve the situation by desperate means.

Although useful as a way of encapsulating a phenomenon that is difficult to explore historically, the 'twilight moment' idea remains nebulous, and in any case a more finite aspect of Raffaella's story remains to be explored. Unusual mitigating circumstances may play just as important a part in any explanation of the surprising level of local acceptance surrounding Raffaella's peccadillos. On the day of the murder, De Luca had testified that Raffaella 'was bored' with her husband. A woman's boredom with her husband was not by any means a licence for sexual infidelity, but shortly after the murder, interviews began to point to the possibility that Raffaella's 'boredom' was in fact sexual frustration due to unfortunate shortcomings on her husband's part that were, alas, no fault of his own.

Uncovering a sexually troubled marriage

Three days after the murder, on 9 October, one of the victim's colleagues in the 32nd Infantry Regiment, Alberto Gobbi, told the prosecutor that he had known Fadda for many years and knew about the marriage to Raffaella. He reported that Fadda had had a 'physical imperfection' in the groin, due to a battle wound, and recalled that the future parents-in-law had stipulated a medical examination in order to ascertain the suitor's sexual potency before giving him their daughter's hand in marriage. As far as Gobbi was aware, Fadda passed the medical examination. He also knew the marriage had been troubled, though Fadda had never elaborated on his private life.³² Gobbi's claim about the pre-nuptial medical examination provided an interpretive perspective for a document that had been found on Fadda's desk after the murder. This was a military certificate, issued at Fadda's express request, to the effect that as a soldier, he had indeed been wounded in the groin during the Battle of San Martino on 24 June 1859. He had suffered two serious bullet wounds: one in the thigh and one in the left testicle. The document was dated Cagliari, 2 October 1871.³³

There is no indication why Fadda requested the certificate 12 years after the injury and five months after his wedding. We could speculate

that it had something to do with the medical examination mentioned by Gobbi, but it is also possible that Fadda was trying to explain something to Raffaella some months into their marriage. Similarly, why the document was on Fadda's desk – seven years later, and on the day of his death – remains a mystery. But the presence of the certificate corroborated Gobbi's story and galvanised a process by which the question of Fadda's compromised virility and the possibility that his marriage had been a sexual failure became central to the prosecutor's investigations.

This meant that from the early stages, there were two main sexual currents to the murder investigation, with Raffaella very much seen as having been caught between the two: on the one hand, the unbridled sexuality of the circus; and, on the other, a very unfortunate case of either 'limited potency' or impotence.³⁴ It is worth noting that before Italy's new Civil Code came into force in 1866, under the previous ecclesiastical laws that governed marriage, it would have been possible for Raffaella to apply for an annulment of the marriage if Fadda had been impotent. This possibility was removed by the Pisanelli Code, which was even more insistent on the indissolubility of marriage in Italy than the ecclesiastical laws it replaced.³⁵ Nevertheless, the degree of apparent tolerance for Raffaella's seeking sexual gratification elsewhere and even the plan itself to do away with Fadda suggests that the general population was still steeped in the cultural residue of a regime where a husband's impotence gave a woman one of the few just causes to seek an annulment.

The importance of the question of Fadda's sexual capacity was soon amplified by an interview between the prosecutor Finizia and Fadda's younger brother Cesare, who was also in the army. Cesare gave a particularly sad portrait of Giovanni's marriage. He said that in the early days he thought Giovanni had 'found his happiness', but once a transfer to Calabria brought Cesare closer to the couple, he realised that his brother was not happy at all. Eventually Giovanni had confessed that he felt Raffaella did not love him and, furthermore, he had suspicions about her fidelity. Cesare last saw Giovanni just a few days before the murder, prior to travelling from Rome to Calabria to consign Raffaella's jewels to her (via an intermediary) as part of the marital separation. When Cesare heard about his brother's murder at the hands of Cardinali a few days later, he must have gone to Calabria again, for he claimed that the 'whole population' felt that Raffaella was the instigator. He also reported that Raffaella had fanned rumours around the town that her husband was impotent as a way of justifying her adulterous behaviour.³⁶

Although it would take the Italian state more than a year to bring the case to trial, a mere five days after the murder, the prosecution had formed the view that the crime's motives lay in Fadda's sexual inadequacy, Raffaella's sexual desire, Cardinali's capacity to gratify it and, finally, the illicit couple's wish to marry. This view framed the investigation carried out among witnesses in Calabria by the local judge, Giuseppe De Lizza, who, instructed from Rome, examined approximately 100 witnesses on two broad questions: Fadda's impotence and the illicit relationship between Raffaella Saraceni and Pietro Cardinali. The witnesses ranged from Cassano's mayor through the professional elite, down to the servants. Some claimed to know nothing about either of the two questions, but most had an opinion, and over two weeks of interviews, their ideas built into a kaleidoscopic glimpse of the local public's view of the alleged affair.

Raffaele De Vincentis, a 52-year-old doctor and mayor of Cassano, said that from the moment Raffaella married Fadda, their long periods of living apart 'excited the marvel' of the townsfolk and it began to be heard from the servants at the Saraceni household that Raffaella 'did not know what to do with her husband because he was impotent'. De Vincentis was not specific on the illicit relationship (perhaps in his position he felt the need to be diplomatic), but he did say he once saw Cardinali race by on a buggy at 3.30 am and assumed he was departing the Saraceni household, since 'that is where he always went'.³⁷ The least diplomatic view of the same issue was reported by one Leonardo Rizzo, conductor of the circus orchestra. He recounted that while having a conversation about Pietro Cardinali's friendship with the Saraceni family, one of the circus clowns scoffed: 'A fine friendship that one of Pietro's: it consists of eating, drinking, and screwing.'³⁸ Most locals expressed their view of the affair in terms somewhere between the discretion of the mayor and the decidedly unminced words of the clown.

Opinions on the question of Fadda's impotence were harder to elicit, but there was no shortage of witnesses willing to give their version of the story, which was usually similar to that already provided by the mayor. Giuseppe Lombardi, a local landowner, said that in addition to rumours on the subject, Domenico Saraceni, Raffaella's stepfather, had also told him that Fadda's impotence was the main reason she did not want to stay with her husband.³⁹ Rosina Pesce, a young woman not far in age from Raffaella, but married to an engineer in his early fifties, provided a more first-hand account. Raffaella was her friend and, during a visit about three years earlier, Rosina had asked why she was always sad. Raffaella replied that she would not wish her fate on anyone, confiding

that her husband was ‘completely impotent’. Rosina claimed to remember Raffaella having used ‘these precise words: my husband is good for nothing, and no matter how many times he’s tried to fulfil his marital obligations, he’s never managed to do so’.⁴⁰

Another witness, Giuseppe De Francesco, a jeweller from Cassano, family friend of the Saracenis and guest at Raffaella’s wedding in Naples in 1871, said he had not heard anything about Fadda’s impotence at the time of the marriage, but rumours to that effect had started to circulate in Cassano two or three years prior to the murder. The fact that these rumours emerged well before Cardinali and the circus arrived on the scene does not prove them true, but it is important to note that these whispers had an independent life as a narrative trope before they became entwined with the story of the illicit affair and, ultimately, the murder.

Other witnesses provided evidence that directly linked Raffaella’s marital dilemma to the crime. Cassano’s pharmacist, Domenico Stabile, told the prosecutor that during the circus’s sojourn, Cardinali had come into his shop and announced spontaneously: ‘Oh how unhappy Raffaella Saraceni is about having fallen into the hands of an impotent husband; if I were in her shoes I’d spend 100 ducats to have him killed.’ Stabile said that Cardinali added nothing else and that there were no other customers in the shop.⁴¹ We know Cardinali was in showbusiness, but there is a stagey quality to this report that makes it sound less than spontaneous on Stabile’s part. We cannot know the extent to which his statement represents ‘cooperation’ with the prosecution, but unsurprisingly, the information took its place as a crucial piece of evidence in the prosecution’s case.

This also indicates that the explanation of the crime formulated by the chief prosecutor in the few days after the murder shows little sign of having wavered or deviated on its journey from Rome, down to Calabria, through stories of nearly 100 witnesses that were by no means consistent, and back, finally, to the public trial in Rome. By early March 1879, after five months of investigation, the charges against the three prisoners stood as follows: Cardinali was accused of premeditated homicide; Raffaella was charged as ‘principal agent’ of the murder, who, after premeditation, induced Cardinali, with a promise of marriage, to kill Fadda, and provided the means for him to do so; and Antonietta was charged with complicity for her role in ‘assisting the author of the crime and facilitating it’.⁴²

The prosecution must have been reasonably confident of the watertightness of its accusations against Pietro and Antonietta, but the

solidity of the evidence against Raffaella was inversely proportional to the gravity of the allegations against her. It was over her case that the prosecution's documents tarried most in a summary of the charges. As Raffaella's alleged motives, top billing was shared by her interest in removing Fadda as an obstacle to her 'guilty union' with Cardinali, and the equally significant factor that Fadda, 'being completely impotent in coitus... had left her unhappy'. Various pieces of evidence were adduced, but the last, and perhaps most debatable, was that: 'Public opinion... rose in concord against Raffaella, pointing to her as the moral agent of her consort's assassin.'⁴³

In fact, the town did not speak with one voice, but the prosecution was determined to make an example out of Raffaella. The state's case against her boiled down to a simple formula: for whatever reason, she was not sexually gratified by her marriage and she had bartered her respectability in order to gratify inappropriate desires, with tragic consequences. The case succeeded and, after a month-long trial that became one of the new capital's most sensational early *causes célèbres*, Raffaella was found guilty by the public jury as charged and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Cardinali was sentenced to death, though the sentence was later commuted to hard labour for life.⁴⁴ Only Antonietta was found not guilty: the jury decided that she had been subject to Cardinali's *force majeure* and she was acquitted. The renown she had gained as a result of the trial boosted her acrobatic career considerably, and she was immediately recruited by the circus performing in Rome's Politeama, just across the river from the Court of Assizes.⁴⁵

Conclusion

During the trial for the murder of Giovanni Fadda, the court sifted through and publicly aired the sadly clean linen of a sexually troubled marriage, as well as bringing to light the grubbier rough-and-tumble sexual arrangements of a provincial circus with which the marriage had become entangled. Cardinali's guilt in the crime was a foregone conclusion. The guilt of the women was not so black and white, for the nature of their crimes was far less clear. What is evident is that the way in which the women had managed their sexuality was of central concern to a legal case prepared by a new political entity that was not greatly experienced in judging matters of sexuality and did not yet have a large body of sexological research to guide its deliberations.

In the early stages of their sexual lives, the two women on trial represented opposite sides of the coin of respectability. Raffaella, the

nubile and circumspect young bride of an honourable state functionary and soldier, epitomised the rectitude that historians have underlined as the overriding experience of female sexuality among the nineteenth-century Italian *borghesia*. At the other end of the scale, Antonietta, a foundling adopted by the circus at the age of seven, had begun a sexual relationship with one of her adoptive brothers in her mid-teens and had borne two children out of wedlock. She continued to play her assigned role in the circus's twilight world of serial sex partners and she participated in the web of intrigue into which Raffaella was drawn and which resulted in Fadda's death. But ultimately the jury disagreed with the prosecution's representations about her guilt and it judged Antonietta to have been too weak to resist Cardinali's influence.

Perhaps the way in which Antonietta framed her account of the sexual relationship around her passive hope that Cardinali would honour his promise to marry her elicited sympathy from the court, temporally close as they were to an old regime where such a promise carried great weight when it came to absolving sin. In a sense, we might speculate that the court discerned incipient values of bourgeois respectability in the gypsy girl. With Raffaella, the problem was the opposite: the way the prosecution had seen it from the outset, and evidently the way the jury heard it, was that there was far too much of the wayward gypsy in the bourgeois woman. By taking active steps towards sexual gratification, Raffaella betrayed her husband and bartered her respectability. The court, on the basis of flimsy evidence, handed down a sentence and a punishment that told any Italian woman in her position that after respectability, there was nothing.

Notes

1. Archivio di Stato di Roma, Tribunale Civile e Penale di Roma (henceforth TCPR), busta 3659 (volumes IA, IB, II, and III), 'Il processo Cardinali'. This synopsis of the wedding and the spouses' backgrounds is synthesised from a range of documents within this file.
2. M. De Giorgio and C. Klapisch-Zuber (eds), *Storia del matrimonio* (Rome-Bari, 1996).
3. TCPR, b. 3659, vol. IB, folios 98–101, Marriage agreement between Raffaella Saraceni and Giovanni Fadda, dated 2 May 1871.
4. B.P.F. Wanrooij, 'The History of Sexuality in Italy (1860–1945)' in P. Willson (ed.), *Gender, Family and Sexuality: The Private Sphere in Italy, 1860–1945* (Basingstoke, 2004), 182.
5. On Mantegazza's influence, see G. Rifelli and C. Ziglio, *Per una storia dell'educazione sessuale, 1870–1920*, 2nd edn (Azzano, 2006), 33; on the origins of Italian sexology, see C. Beccalossi, 'The Origin of Italian Sexological

- Studies: Female Sexual Inversion, ca. 1879–1900', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 18(1) (2009), 103–20.
6. Among the notable exceptions are M. Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860–1915*, 2nd edn (Columbus, 1999); B.P.F. Wanrooij, *Storia del pudore* (Venice, 1990); A. Pasi and P. Sorcinelli (eds), *Amori e trasgressioni. Rapporti di coppia tra '800 e '900* (Bari, 1995); D. Rizzo, *Gli spazi della morale. Buon costume e ordine della famiglie in Italia in età liberale* (Rome, 2004).
 7. For a representative example of the received view, see M. De Giorgio, *Le italiane dall'unità a oggi. Modelli culturali e comportamenti sociali* (Rome-Bari, 1992), 77.
 8. A. Groppi, 'Il teatro della giustizia. Donne colpevoli e opinione pubblica nell'Italia Liberale', *Quaderni Storici*, 37(3) (2002), 649–79.
 9. TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 85.
 10. For example, these gendered degrees of sexual leeway lay behind Italy's early debate on prostitution. See Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy*, 30, 46–47.
 11. 'Prese ad amareggiare col Pietro, il quale alla sua volta nella compagnia teneva una gazza a nome Carolina': TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 95.
 12. TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 95.
 13. For an elaboration of these relationships, see M. Seymour, 'Epistolary Emotions: Exploring Amorous Hinterlands in 1870s Southern Italy', *Social History*, 35(2) (2010), 148–64.
 14. 'La tresca prese delle proporzioni così marcate da non essere mistero per alcuno': TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 95.
 15. Accounts of socializing at the Saraceni house are numerous. See, for example, TCPR, b. 3659, II, 194–221.
 16. On the media response in particular, see T. Simpson, *Murder and Media in the New Rome: The Fadda Affair* (New York, 2010).
 17. A wide range of witnesses were interviewed extensively in November 1878: TCPR, b. 3659, II, 152–320.
 18. TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 104, interrogation of Pietro Cardinali by Michele Finizia, 8 October 1878.
 19. TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 249, interrogation of Antonietta Carrozza by Michele Finizia, 19 October 1878.
 20. B. Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville, 2005), esp. 12–13 and 41.
 21. *Ibid.*, 17.
 22. M. Seymour, 'Emotional Arenas: From Provincial Circus to National Courtroom in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy', *Rethinking History*, 16(2) (2012), 177–97.
 23. It was reported that Carolina 'sapeva diversi amori che il detto suo marito avea contratti nei paesi or'erasi trattenuto a lavorare': TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 265, Report of search of Cardinali's abode led by Luigi Garetti, acting mayor of Corigliano Calabro, Calabria, 7 October 1878.
 24. M. Seymour, *Debating Divorce in Italy: Marriage and the Making of Modern Italians* (New York, 2006), 19–20.
 25. TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 247–54, interview of Antonietta Carrozza by Michele Finizia, 19 October 1878.
 26. TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 258–60, interview of Giuseppe De Luca by Michele Finizia, 21 October 1878.

27. '...promettendo di volermi sposare, mi sedusse e mi tolse l'onore': TCPR, b. 3659, 1B, 131–32, interview of Antonietta Carrozza by Michele Finizia, 12 November 1878.
28. On the complex legal and popular culture around the notion of sexual intercourse with a 'promise to marry' in nineteenth-century Italy, see M. Pelaja, 'Marriage by Exception: Marriage Dispensations and Ecclesiastical Policies in Nineteenth-Century Rome', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 1(2) (1996), 234–36.
29. TCPR, b. 3659, 1B, 131–32, interview of Antonietta Carrozza by Michele Finizia, 12 November 1878.
30. A. Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York, 2008), 6.
31. Catholic confession and its relation to sexual matters is difficult to study in empirical detail. Still persuasive as a general account is M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York, 1978), 18–21.
32. TCPR, b. 3659, II, 11–12, interview of Fadda's military colleague Captain Alberto Pontiroli Gobbi, 9 October 1878.
33. TCPR, b. 3659, IA, 14, Certificate of Fadda's war wounds, dated Cagliari, 2 October 1871.
34. TCPR, b. 3659, III, 9–14, a summary of the prosecution's case refers to Fadda's 'impotenza od almeno la poca potenza' as Raffaella's motive to have him done away with.
35. P. Ungari, *Storia del diritto di famiglia in Italia, 1796–1975* (Bologna, 2002), 158.
36. TCPR, b. 3659, 1A, 136–42, interview with Cesare Fadda, conducted by Michele Finizia, 11 October 1878.
37. TCPR, b. 3659, II, 210, interview of Raffaele de Vincentis, Mayor of Cassano, 21 November 1878.
38. 'Bella amicizia è quella del Pietro: consiste nel mangiare, bevare, e fottere': TCPR, b. 3659, II, 155–56, interview with Leonardo Rizzo, 17 November 1878.
39. TCPR, b. 3659, II, 182–84, interview with Giuseppe Lombardi, 20 November 1878.
40. 'Queste precise parole: mio marito non è buono per niente, e per quanto varie volte abbia cercato di adempiere agli obblighi maritali, non ha mai potuto concludere nulla': TCPR, b. 3659, II, 222–23, interview with Rosina Pesce, 20 November 1878.
41. TCPR, b. 3659, II, 228–29, interview with Domenico Stabile, 22 November 1878. The emphasis was in the original, probably indicating that the prosecution saw the statement as key evidence.
42. 'Essendo del tutto impotente al coito... l'avea resa infelice' and 'la voce pubblica... si elevò concorde contro la detta Saraceni, additandola quale agente morale dell'assassinio del suo consorte': TCPR, b. 3659, IV 1–6, Requisitoria del Pubblico Ministero, a summary of the prosecution's accusations, 3 March 1879.
43. TCPR, b. 3659, IV, 6.
44. *La Capitale* (Rome), 3 February 1880, 2.
45. 'Echi del processo Fadda', *Il Bersagliere* (Rome), 6 November 1879, 1–2. The revival of Carrozza's career was even reported by London's *The Times*, 8 November 1879, 5.