

[Kuehn on Pullan, 'Tolerance, Regulation and Rescue: Dishonoured Women and Abandoned Children in Italy, 1300-1800'](#)

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The following book review from H-Italy may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Brian S. Pullan

Reviewer:

Thomas J. Kuehn

Brian S. Pullan. *Tolerance, Regulation and Rescue: Dishonoured Women and Abandoned Children in Italy, 1300-1800*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. x + 240 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78499-129-6.

Reviewed by Thomas J. Kuehn (Clemson University) **Published on** H-Italy (January, 2019) **Commissioned by** Peter Sposato (Indiana University Kokomo)

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Tolerance, Regulation and Rescue presents itself as "a work of synthesis, which explores one corner of a sprawling, inexhaustible subject: poverty, charity, and social policies in pre-industrial Europe" (p. 1). There is no one, surely, as well situated to craft such a synthesis than Brian Pullan, whose works on charity in Venice, beginning with the pathbreaking *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice* (1971), have inspired similar studies elsewhere that are the object of synthesis here. Nor is there anyone so acutely aware of the limitations of the summary he provides. It is prostitutes and abandoned children who catch Pullan's eye. These are categories of persons who were at times tolerated as a lesser evil, though, as nonetheless involved with sin, also regulated to keep their disturbing presence within bounds and offered forms of rescue from the social and religious consequences of the disgraceful behavior that was otherwise behind their marginal social status. It is the successes and failures of these approaches, over five centuries, that Pullan explores. He does so masterfully, displaying an enviable command of the burgeoning literature on foundling homes, hospitals, convents for fallen or battered women, charitable institutions, and confraternities. And he does all this in an avowedly nonpolemical manner, evincing no interest in quarreling with scholars whose works he generally and genuinely seems to admire.

The brief introduction sets a general context regarding charity in early modern Italy. Pullan then moves to prostitutes and other women "deemed to be outside or near the edge of decent, godfearing society" (p. 8). He dedicates a bit more than half of the book (chapters 1-6) to them, leaving the last five chapters to deal with the children who were, in their very existence, another consequence of

sexual activity outside marriage. Deeply implicated in the low status accorded such women and children were the prevailing notions of honor, which they notably failed to meet in one way or another. Discussion of honor therefore opens consideration of prostitutes and abandoned children (chapters 1 and 7). Foundling homes were seen to serve the need of protecting the honor of the parents. Communal brothels confined, in theory, women who had lost their honor, while keeping sexually predatory males satisfied with those women and away from the honorable ladies of a community.

Chapter 1 is a tour through the vocabulary of prostitution and illicit sex, covering the meanest *puttana* and the most elegant courtesan. As Pullan notes, prostitution itself was not a crime (unlike pimping and procuring) and broadly gained toleration as a lesser evil. It would not only protect from honorable local women from male lust, it would also keep men away from each other. Mere fornication was far preferable to the destruction that met Sodom and Gomorrah and was promised by the Almighty to other similar communities. Exacerbated by well-documented prevailing tendencies of men to marry relatively late, and thus be in need of a sexual outlet, the problem of directing male concupiscence led to the erection of "fortresses of lust" in a number of places. One paradox of that policy was the relaxing of restrictions on dress and ornament so that prostitutes could be socially obvious and distinct from "good" women. And though at first such women had few legal protections, "by about 1500, prostitutes had in theory acquired much the same legal capacity as 'reputable' women and some entitlement to protection" (p. 39). Regulation (and possibly revenue) trumped suppression.

By the sixteenth century the moral climate had begun to change. Protestantism presented a competing vision of sexuality, especially as it related to clergy. The new scourge of syphilis (the "French pox") raised the costs of lust. Casuists like Martin de Azpilcueta saw lust as a continuous drive not at all satisfied by the occasional visit to a prostitute but rather made more powerful and urgent by every expression of it. Official brothels closed or fell into ruin. Governments no longer ran a sex business, although they still had to regulate the expression of sexuality and its location(s) in the city. The problems of recruitment to prostitution and of rescue from it form some of the best reading in Pullan's book. The role of mothers in turning out their daughters was significant in the literature, including satire. Fathers came in for less attention. The husband who prostituted his wife was another stock character. Court records dwell on their spendthrift ways and hopes for additional income from a wife's illicit earnings. Then there were the pimps and others who preyed on prostitutes and lived off their work. More tragic are the figures of women seduced and abandoned, or raped, who might try the courts to redress their lost honor but, much like today, also faced smears and aspersions on their behavior and character from men seeking to escape penalties for their behavior. Defloration might be taken as a crime or as a private wrong to be met with compensation (typically a dowry, possibly marriage itself). Proof of things like betrothals was not simple, even with new legislation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that attempted to put some teeth in the decrees of the Council of Trent about publication of bans and vows. Still, as Pullan notes, suits for breach of promise were less frequent after a while, and general social tolerance of premarital sex during engagement lessened. Finally, perhaps the greatest recruiter to prostitution was simple destitution, notably so in the cases of women struggling to care for children in the wake of the death or disappearance of their husbands. Pullan marshals several telling examples from the historical literature.

The figure of Mary Magdalen as the repentant prostitute and the more recent example of Margaret of Cortona fired the establishment of convents for the *convertite*. Such houses sprang up all over Italy. As Pullan nicely puts it, "if whores and courtesans were very much in evidence, so too was their antithesis, the place of penance and purification" (p. 94). These were part of a context of growing charitable enterprises in the sixteenth century, including homes for *incurabili* (those sick from venereal disease) and foundlings. Concerted efforts, such as the yearly Magdalen sermons in Florence, were aimed at persuading women to give up the life and embrace prayer and repentance. The emerging problem from such efforts was the possibility that these convents would end up serving as retirement facilities for aged prostitutes. There was concern that the entrants be of fairly young age, and thus truly repentant and giving up the sex trade while they were still viable providers. Once in such an institution, former prostitutes found themselves under a strict regime, which substituted "a rigorous, monotonous existence for a disorderly life which had supposedly been sweetened by luxury, vanity, deception and avarice" (p. 102). So though these women were not convicts, "the convent had a jailhouse air" (p. 99). The very financial solvency of many such places, Pullan finds, was tenuous, as they could not always attract the sorts of donations they needed, including for dowries and possible marriages of former prostitutes.

From the sixteenth century there began provision for conservatories as places for transition and safe keeping for young girls. Prevention of sin overtook atonement for it. Such socially conservative institutions "did not equip women for economic and personal independence but set out to restore failing marriages where possible and prepare girls to be good housewives" (p. 106). Some aimed at women struggling with bad marriages (the so-called *malmaritate*); others aimed at young girls, virgins, whose honor was in jeopardy. These houses were to be found in Venice, Milan, Turin, and elsewhere.[1] These institutions thus did their part to counteract the recruitment of women into lives of sin. For some they provided alternatives for women who did not want to be wives or nuns. Some institutions became increasingly exclusive socially, if only because they needed to gain paying customers to subsidize their activities, which included arranging marriages for some of their women with artisans and shopkeepers, even shepherds and peasants. In any case, writes Pullan, "girls' homes were not exempt from a general law which affected many charities. At first they were supported by enthusiastic subscribers who seemed genuinely eager to rescue friendless young people. But at a certain point they became more dependent on benefactors who regarded their charity as a species of patronage and sought places for their own protégées—so that prospects would be bleak for any destitute person without influential protectors, and the shamefaced or respectable poor gained at the expense of people on the margins of society" (pp. 121-22).

There were parallels with the institutions established to house foundlings and orphans, but also clear differences. Whatever sexual acts lay behind their landing in such institutions, these children were not the perpetrators of them. Instead, Pullan declares, "by developing foundling wards they conceded that anonymous child abandonment, though regrettable, could be allowed in extreme circumstances so long as infants were left at city hospitals and the risk to life reduced. Both processes produced victims in need of rescue and redemption. It was important that tolerance be balanced by action to protect the weak" (p. 125). Such hospitals, Pullan hastens to add, were the least selective charities, often making abandonment and its concealment quite easy by providing wheels and other devices in which to leave an infant. Foundling homes were kept at some distance from the communal brothels by forbidding prostitutes to abandon their babies to the foundling homes. Thus they did not appear to be the flip side of that other tolerated sin. Abandonment was a lesser evil to attempting

contraception, or recourse to sodomy, abortion, or infanticide. These institutions were also concerned with saving souls, maybe more so than lives. Alluding to the scholarship regarding foundling institutions, Pullan concedes that "perhaps, viewed dispassionately, organised child abandonment was nothing more sinister than a rational process of redistributing infants—of 'circulating children' or 'delegating motherhood' from blood parents reluctant to keep them to foster parents who, with the aid of wages paid by charities, would be better equipped to bring them up" (p. 128). In an era when parents of a certain status regularly sent children to apprentice or to service in the homes of others, or to wet nurses, child abandonment rarely figured as a crime. Pullan tracks the spread of foundling homes throughout Italy. Homes established after about 1500 were less concerned with infants than with boys or girls seen to be in danger: "orphans, waifs and strays, beggar children, the daughters of prostitutes" (p. 135).

Abandoned children most likely came from the ranks of *spurii* (those children whose parents were not involved in a stable relationship of concubinage), but by the seventeenth century it was becoming more common for the simply poor to leave their children, although legitimate and who might be older, to the tender mercies of hospitals, especially at moments of famine or other catastrophe (Pullan offers numbers for abandoned legitimates in the eighteenth century, their proportion rising to 20 percent or even double that in some cities). Most parents of abandoned children were of lower social status, such as servants, slaves, or peasants. Identifying fathers and holding them to account for their offspring became somewhat less urgent over time as well. Charities operated so as to protect reputations and avoid scandals: "To create scandal was not so much to arouse public indignation at moral offenses as to cause other people to stumble, to tempt neighbours into sinning themselves. To publish a person's misconduct, to insist on public penance rather than private confession, contrition and satisfaction, would be to set a bad example for the faithful and would probably cause social disruption, a worse evil" (p. 146).

The hospital provided something much more positive than prevention of infanticide or fear of its detection. The hospital could raise and train children to take their places in society, if they survived. There was the rub. Mortality rates among abandoned children were notoriously high. It was not that the hospitals did their work poorly by some deliberate choice. By the eighteenth century especially they were overrun with incredible numbers to care for (Florence's Innocenti taking in around 1,000 per year and the Annunziata in Naples twice that). Wet nurses were not always easy to find and had to be paid, and they were generally not on premises after the first few weeks of an abandoned child's arrival at a foundling home. But hospitals were also disgusting places, by some accounts, and chronically short of funds. Many fresh arrivals were also malnourished or worse by their travels at someone's hands to the hospital, and sickly infants were more likely to be abandoned. Thirty to 50 percent of babies died on premises. All in all, in Pullan's words, "Early modern societies may perhaps be suspected of hypocrisy—of professing to value the lives of base-born children, but in practice treating them very cavalierly: not, perhaps, as Malthus half-seriously hinted, of deliberately employing foundling hospitals to dispose of surplus population, but of giving low priority to foundling children and exposing them, out of a mixture of callousness and inefficiency, to deadly ordeals. The alarming infant mortality sprang partly from parental selection, exposure of the most unfit, and partly from the dangers attending secret pregnancies and births and the consequences of attempted abortions. But there was a grim and potentially fatal logic in the process of removing newborn babies from unmarried nursing mothers and distancing them from their places of birth" (p. 173). Genuine charitable purposes and concern for the children can be hard to find against such a record. Hospitals

"could never be free of a suspicion that they were attempting the impossible" (p. 189), saving a few while putting many at risk.

Children were frequently placed with nurses in rural communities, where the treatment they received could vary enormously from house to house. Foundling homes faced a daunting task in tracking the foundlings and insuring their care. Once a child survived weaning, it faced the prospect of being put to service with a foster family, for whom a foundling's labor could be a much-needed contribution. Some of these children were adopted, although more by the tendering of promises to bring them up and feed them, and to dower girls, than by a formal legal adoption (a process that continued to be rare, with only fifteen adoptions recorded at Florence's Innocenti between 1574 and 1652). Children who survived infancy often returned to the foundling home to receive some sort of education and training in a craft. Conservatories for older girls, crowded and unhygienic, nevertheless gave them experience in sewing and mending and such, gaining the institution funding from sales of the fruits of their labors. Some of these women gained the social respectability of marriage, although their dowries were typically modest and suitors were not always abundant. Some found themselves subject to exploitation at the hands of hospital personnel. In the end, the status of foundlings was always ambiguous, says Pullan.

Foundlings, especially the illegitimate, and prostitutes were always ambivalent figures, Pullan concludes. The latter practiced a vile trade, but were also of a class of sinners of especial interest to Christ; the former arrived as innocent babes, but had supposedly been conceived in sin. The ruling elites of Italy operated with both hands: "The left hand accommodated a degree of evil on the pretext of avoiding social disruption. The right hand tried to atone for this realism by practicing bodily and spiritual charity—by rescuing or protecting a number of individuals from the contamination of tolerated evil" (p. 211). Over time sympathies changed, as did the purposes of institutions as they drifted away from their founding intentions. The intractable problems of the era were faced, tolerated to some degree, handled by regulation, and offered a means of rescue, at least for a while.

Tolerance, Regulation and Rescue is an extremely helpful overview of its subjects for early modern Italy. It will stand as a model for similar efforts for other regions.

Note

[1]. Nicholas Terpstra provided a telling comparison of approaches taken in Bologna and Florence in his *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

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