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Beware the Mammoni: My Search to Understand Domestic Violence in Italian-American Culture and Rhode Island's Family Court

Anne Grant
Anne Grant, agrant275@gmail.com

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Beware the Mammoni: My Search to Understand Domestic Violence in Italian-American Culture and Rhode Island's Family Court

Abstract

Since I disapproved of stereotypes, I found myself trying to comprehend Italian-American culture after I became executive director of the largest shelter in Rhode Island for battered women and their children. Many of those I met were fleeing Italian-American men. On *60 Minutes*, Lesley Stahl reported from Italy about the large number of single men who still live with their parents and are known as *mammoni*, or “mama’s boys.” Their mothers dutifully cook and clean for them. The Roman Catholic Church’s view of the Holy Family reinforces mammoni culture. I learned that Rome’s founding legend starts with men colluding to commit violence against women. The Italian Renaissance graphically celebrates this “Rape of the Sabine Women” in sculpture and paintings. A story in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Botticelli’s paintings of men hunting and slaying women reinforce this cultural algorithm of sexual harassment and abuse. Leoncavallo’s opera *Pagliacci* portrays domestic violence as art. The coercive control that many battered mothers encounter at home feels identical to that at family court. I describe specific Italian-American cases, including professional abuses in the court, where guardians ad litem often orchestrate custody cases unethically. Though the Rhode Island Supreme Court’s Ethics Advisory Panel has recognized this problem in theory, judges fail to confront it in fact. We can and must challenge abusive behavior entrenched in our cultures. We can and must create a culture of law that insists upon the ethical use of power in our custody courts.

Keywords

Rhode Island, Mafia, mammoni, stereotypes, domestic violence, Italy, Italian-American, coercive control, alienation theories, guardian ad litem, cabals of court

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**BEWARE THE MAMMONI:
MY SEARCH TO UNDERSTAND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ITALIAN-
AMERICAN CULTURE AND RHODE ISLAND'S FAMILY COURT**

Anne Grant

Retired minister and writer

ABSTRACT

Since I disapproved of stereotypes, I found myself trying to comprehend Italian-American culture after I became executive director of the largest shelter in Rhode Island for battered women and their children. Many of those I met were fleeing Italian-American men. On *60 Minutes*, Lesley Stahl reported from Italy about the large number of single men who still live with their parents and are known as *mammoni*, or “mama’s boys.” Their mothers dutifully cook and clean for them. The Roman Catholic Church’s view of the Holy Family reinforces *mammoni* culture. I learned that Rome’s founding legend starts with men colluding to commit violence against women. The Italian Renaissance graphically celebrates this “Rape of the Sabine Women” in sculpture and paintings. A story in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Botticelli’s paintings of men hunting and slaying women reinforce this cultural algorithm of sexual harassment and abuse. Leoncavallo’s opera *Pagliacci* portrays domestic violence as art. The coercive control that many battered mothers encounter at home feels identical to that at family court. I describe specific Italian-American cases, including professional abuses in the court, where guardians ad litem often orchestrate custody cases unethically. Though the Rhode Island Supreme Court’s Ethics Advisory Panel has recognized this problem in theory, judges fail to confront it in fact. We can and must challenge abusive behavior entrenched in our cultures. We can and must create a culture of law that insists upon the ethical use of power in our custody courts.

KEYWORDS

Mafia, mammoni, stereotypes, domestic violence, coercive control, alienation theories, guardian ad litem, cabals of court

“**D**O YOU FIND CERTAIN CULTURES MORE VIOLENT than others?” I wondered if this man in the audience was hinting at some racial prejudice. In fact, I was the one with a stereotype. He looked Italian-American. So, I dodged his question and said, “Domestic violence occurs in all cultures, religions, races, educational levels, and income brackets.”

True enough. But a significant number of battered women and children who sought services at the Women’s Center of Rhode Island, the state’s oldest and largest shelter for victims of domestic violence, were fleeing Italian-American men.

When I was executive director at the women’s center—from 1988 to 1996—Rhode Island, had just over one million people sharing the smallest land mass of all fifty states. In the 2000 Census, Italians and their descendants accounted for

19% of the population, making it the most densely Italian-American state. A short distance from us in Providence, the capitol city, Raymond L.S. Patriarca had ruled as godfather of the New England Mafia until his death in 1984. *The Providence Journal* reported him saying, “It’s easier to corrupt a small state. If you have some dirty cops, some dirty politicians, and a judge or two, you can corrupt the whole system” (Malinowski, A-01).

The year after Patriarca died, Rhode Islanders woke up to front page surveillance photos by state police of another powerful Italian-American. Joseph A. Bevilacqua had risen through the legislative ranks while working as defense counsel to the New England Mob. He was speaker of the House in 1976 when he exerted ultimate control to orchestrate his election by statehouse colleagues. They made him chief justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. In 1985, the *Providence Journal* ran the photos taken two years earlier as the chief justice drove his wife’s sports car to a tryst with an out-of-state woman at a mob-owned motel and left there zipping up his fly. With Bevilacqua’s vulnerability so exposed, impeachment proceedings finally forced him to retire as Rhode Island’s top judge (West, 1993, pp. 1, 3).

Does Italian Culture Make Domestic Violence Acceptable?

As a child, I found Italy the easiest country in Europe to identify by its distinctive shape — a kicking boot in the Mediterranean. I never imagined this boot as a weapon until I began meeting women who had been stomped and kicked — one in the groin, another in the belly as she tried to protect her unborn child. Her husband’s family had allegedly used Mafia connections to persuade authorities to overlook his alleged dishonorable discharge from the military. He became a prison guard and then a police officer. After he kicked his pregnant wife off the bed, she said he had threatened to kill her if their baby died.

The infant survived, and the mother got a divorce. The father refused to pay child support. When the state summoned him to court, he convinced a drug dealer to testify falsely that the baby’s mother was an addict. The police officer instantly won custody of the little girl, then 2 years old. He spread the rumor his ex-wife was a “druggie” and got her arrested on false charges -- assault, bank fraud, filing false reports, sexual abuse, kidnapping. Over the years, judges threw out seven false charges against her that cost money, jobs, apartments, friends, health, and, most tragically, her daughter (Prevost, 1997).

After twelve years, the girl, then 14, recognized that her mother was not a drug addict. She went to court and asked a judge to let her live with her mother again. In the courthouse coffee shop, her father angrily flipped over a table and warned that she would never again see her two young half-sisters. This broke her heart, but did not change her mind. The following year she was back in court, ready to testify with public documents that her father misrepresented his income and real estate to avoid paying child support. Her mother could not afford a lawyer, and the case never went forward. Nine years later, the daughter needed surgery. The Affordable Care Act assured health coverage under her father’s insurance, but he had taken his oldest daughter off his policy. He was a law unto himself. The court accommodated him, even sealing their public divorce file at his request.

I wanted to understand the dysfunction at Rhode Island’s family court, presided over by an Italian-American chief judge. When he awarded custody to this father, the chief judge ignored the mother’s seventeen drug screens that he had personally ordered. The screening supervisor wrote to the chief judge, that this

mother had “missed no appointments ... had an excellent attitude ... was on time, polite, and paid promptly...” On the witness stand, he confirmed that she was “highly motivated ... highly exceptional,” even asking for the screens to be monitored so the court would have no doubt she was drug-free (Carleton, 1991, p. 47). Four years later I asked the chief why he had taken her baby away, and he answered simply that he used to be a prosecutor and he trusted police.

He was also a best friend and former counsel to the Italian-American governor, who had rewarded him with his judicial appointment. Eventually, the governor pled guilty to eighteen felonies and went to prison, avoiding a trial that might have implicated his friends and family (Stanton, 1998). In addition to steering state contracts to his campaign contributors, the governor had ignored repeated warnings and failed to confront credit unions that made reckless loans to Mafia figures. A Mob-connected bank president disappeared under state investigation for embezzling \$13 million from his own institution. Within weeks, Rhode Island suffered its worst financial crisis as the new governor shut down the entire credit union system on New Year’s Day 1991 (West, 2014, pp. 38-40).

Whenever a woman came to our shelter trying to escape Mafia-run prostitution, staff immediately moved her to another state. Otherwise, she would soon recognize a new woman at the shelter, sent by the mob under a false pretext to spy on the first one. When the wife of a pornography kingpin volunteered to work on our capital campaign, I learned who she was just in time to meet her at the door and explain why we could not accept her as a volunteer.

In fact, Italian-American women were in the group that first organized the Women’s Center of Rhode Island in 1974. They declined the protection offered by mobsters, even though many police still looked askance on the battered women’s movement and accused it of breaking up families. One of those Italian-American founders who encouraged me to come to Rhode Island laughingly reminded me: “Don’t ever talk about any of us, because we’re all related!”

I craved the insights women gave me into their lives and cultures. A Nigerian woman said she would not have suffered domestic violence like this in her own country, for her family would have protected her. They would never have given the children to such a violent man, as Rhode Island family court had done. A Chinese woman said her well-educated husband insisted that Americans had sex with their children. She said he mocked her “old-fashioned” disapproval when he forced their children to watch and re-enact pornographic movies. At family court, his high-priced lawyer and psychologist convinced her to abandon the shelter and take the children back to her husband, or else he would win custody, and she would never see them again. She did as they advised.

I learned that many women born in this country, especially those who had been abused or neglected as children, felt isolated and vulnerable. They were susceptible to the courtship behavior of men who seemed protective at first, but then became possessive and controlling. Many of these men were Italian-Americans who fit romantic stereotypes, Romeos and Lotharios who sang Elvis Presley karaoke. I never thought of them as Mafiosi, but many were emotionally wounded, manipulative, and contemptuous of the women they charmed. Even when they exerted control, these men never seemed to feel good about themselves.

I sometimes asked the wives if their husbands had been abused as children. Many said yes, though it was a secret the men never discussed. The women heard it from other members of the family, like the Italian-American man whose wife testified about her terror as he angrily raced his Porsche more than a hundred

miles an hour over a bridge toward Newport, “weaving in and out of traffic,” pushing her against the door and yelling, “I’m in control now. How do you like it, how does it feel?” (DiRuggiero 1993, p. 32). He was the oldest child in a large family. His brother had told how their oldest brother would get dragged out of bed by their hard-working father in the middle of the night to suffer the punishment for all his younger siblings. He now seemed determined to be the one in control.

These stories came to me as anecdotal reflections, not scientific research. Older generations had come to America from the impoverished southern regions of Italy along with organized crime. Here, they encountered prejudice. Once I heard a battered mother joke that she needed to get “deGuidoed.” I searched online and found the name *Guido* was a cutting slur that mocked Italian-American men for vanity, ignorance, and pretentious masculinity. That epithet made these men understandably defensive.

Some of these men adored their fathers, while others despised the older men for their shortcomings or their perfectionism. Perhaps researchers have documented these as cultural trends, but I only heard them as granular events: “My nephew opened the refrigerator and chugged milk from the carton,” one woman recalled. “His father exploded, slapping the startled teen across the face.” Such brutal authority could silence a family like an intolerable weight unloaded from one generation to the next.

The prejudice of outsiders and the backhand of their fathers created angry young men. Some became cruel and moody, unable to talk about conflicted feelings. Careening from rage to helplessness to self-pity, they smoldered, inconsolably sad. One was 14 when he sat on a wall behind the home of the friendly girl who had teased him about his ragged jeans the first day of school. He plaintively called her name over and over at all hours, day and night. Her sister thought he was cute and let him in the house. Their mother considered his obsession with her daughter sweet.

A few years later he threatened suicide, and his family begged the girl to marry him. Before escorting her down the aisle, her worried father whispered to her: “Are you sure you want to do this?”

She replied: “*Now* you ask?!”

She told me this story years later, long after they had divorced. I pressed her: “Why did you go through with it?”

“I couldn’t stand the Italian guilt.”

“Your father wasn’t Italian.”

“No. He was English and Scottish,” she replied. “But my mother was 100% Italian.” She said: “Italians make you feel so guilty that you’re letting them down.”

Sometimes I drove her to encounters at family court, and she would ask me to pull over so she could vomit in the gutter. I was an outsider trying to understand an extraordinary culture and its attitudes toward women and men. I watched on full alert for every clue when a new one appeared.

The Mammoni in Italian Culture and Religion

In 2001, Lesley Stahl reported from Italy about an ancient, widespread custom. More than half of the single men there expect devoted mothers to cook and clean for them, she announced (Stahl, 2001). As she interviewed these *mammoni*, or “mama’s boys,” I wondered if recent generations of women who reject this mindset might explain why Italy’s birth rate has plummeted since the 1970s and is now the

lowest in the European Union (Giuffrida 2016).

The notion that women exist to serve men comes to us from a Hebrew creation story in Genesis 2:18, where God decides to make a “helper” or “helpmeet” for the man. Paul conveys this idea to Christians in his first letter to the Corinthians 11:19 “For the man was not created for the woman, but the woman for the man” (Douay-Rheims Version).

Whether or not they are religious, the *mammoni* assume that women’s primary purpose is to serve men. Marriage ceremonies often carry the vestiges of a property transaction, when one man “gives away” the bride to another. She may take his surname, signifying that she is now his property, and he is entitled to her services. This belief in male entitlement to women’s work still pervades ideas about family law in many cultures.

The Roman Catholic portrayal of Jesus and the Holy Family reinforces the *mammoni* tradition. The Blessed Mother lives only for her Son, in complete obedience and devotion to him. Father God, the all-powerful *paterfamilias*, appears well pleased at the Son’s baptism. But when Jesus drinks the cup his Father requires, he feels like his Father has forsaken him. The Son faces execution alone.

Catholicism does not lift up the empty cross of resurrection, but rather the crucifix, the executioner’s tool with the Son nailed down, obedient to the Father, and dying. The Son has cried out to the Father: *Why have you forsaken me?* The Father is too perfect to look on him carrying the sins of the world. The Mother, helpless, weeps at her Son’s feet. People with this religious worldview often believe that only the Father’s mercy and omnipotence can make things right again.

Rhode Island has long been the most Catholic state in the United States (Piacenza, 2015). A deeply engrained religious worldview can feed fatalistic assumptions that the way things are is “meant to be” and “everything happens for a reason.”

I was neither Italian nor Catholic. By the age of twenty, I had studied Latin for several years and had visited Venice, Florence, and Rome. I had a peaceful childhood with no awareness of violence in the families I knew. That’s the way things were for me, and I assumed they were meant to be that way.

I married a minister and discovered how complicated many lives are as people came for counseling or moved in with us to escape danger at home. Decades later, in Rhode Island, the Internet enlarged my world. I discovered art from the Italian Renaissance that portrayed jaw-dropping violence against women.

Most Italian-Americans trace their ancestry to southern regions -- not those northern city-states where the Renaissance flourished. But descendants of the entire country are rightly proud to display artistry produced in this extraordinary era. I wondered if those stories, statues, and paintings that horrified me had thoroughly permeated the Italian-American consciousness with a casual acceptance that violence against women was meant to be.

Violence Against Women in Italian Renaissance Art

Ancient history and legend hold that the City of Rome was born in a fraternal act of violence against women. Romulus, the founder and first king of Rome, came to power in 753 B.C.E. Neighboring Sabines had refused to betroth their daughters to Roman men, who retaliated by inviting those families to a religious festival. At an agreed signal, Romulus and his men seized the Sabine women, tearing them from their parents. When Titus Tatius, king of the Sabines, returned to fight the

men of Rome, the Sabine women took decisive action to protect the children they had borne to their Roman husbands.

According to the Roman historian Livy (1919, 1.13), the women strode with their children into the midst of the warring men and demanded peace. But the prevailing image of women in the art of the Italian Renaissance is not that of fearless protectors and peace-makers. Instead, celebrated paintings and sculptures of the “Rape of the Sabine Women” reinforce the image of women’s helplessness against men’s violence.

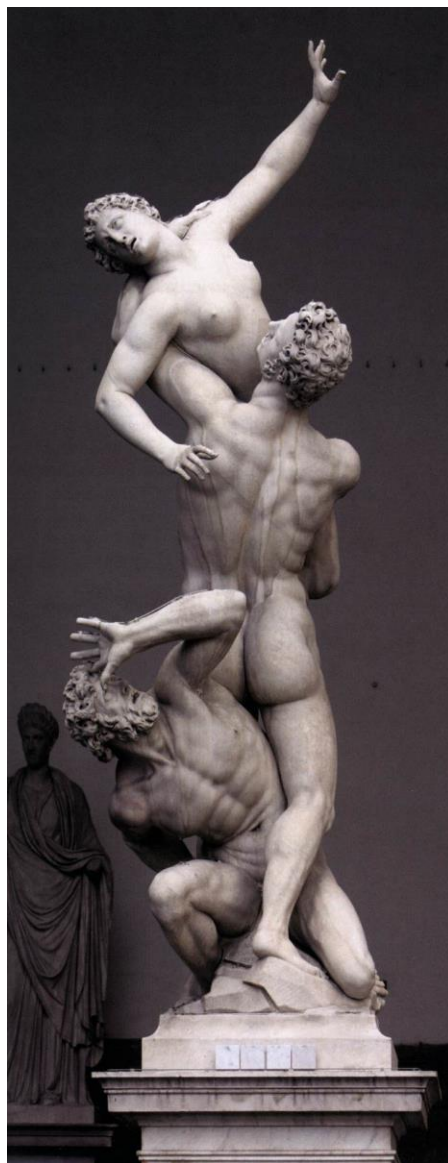


Figure 1. Giambologna’s giant sculpture, “Rape of the Sabines,” carved in 1581-83 from a single slab of marble, towers over people at the Piazza della Signoria under the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence, Italy.

Six hundred years before television, storytellers described men’s preoccupation with their power and control over women. The writer Giovanni Boccaccio entertained his 14th Century audience with a chilling tale in the *Decameron*. A noblewoman rejects a knight’s marriage proposal. He invites her and her family to

breakfast, where he stages a play in which a woman gets torn apart by dogs. The clear threat terrifies the woman into marrying her host (Boccaccio, p. 428). Here is a translation of that story:

Nastagio degli Onesti, loving a damsel of the Traversari family, by lavish expenditure gains not her love. At the instance of his kinsfolk he hires him to Chiassi, where he sees a knight hunt a damsel and slay her and cause her to be devoured by two dogs. He bids his kinsfolk and the lady that he loves to breakfast. During the meal the said damsel is torn in pieces before the eyes of the lady, who, fearing a like fate, takes Nastagio to husband.

Around 1483, a prominent man of Florence hired the artist Sandro Botticelli to illustrate the grisly story on a *cassone*, a wedding chest for the politically arranged marriage of his 23-year-old son, whose first wife had recently met an untimely death.



Figure 2. Botticelli, "The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti," Panel 1

In the first of Botticelli's four wooden panels, a naked woman runs in helpless terror through a forest of phallic trees that resemble prison bars. A black dog bites into her right hip, as a white dog claws at her left. A knight on horseback is about to strike her with his sword. She screams, looking up, as if imploring heaven to rescue her. In front of her, two young squires intently study the ground, adding a touch of humor. They seem to be ineptly searching for water with magical dowsing tools, popular in Florence at the time, with the rod aimed at the woman's crotch. The squires and a group of men in the distance ignore her plight. In the background, sheep graze peacefully. Ships sail in the harbor. The pleasant worlds of agriculture and commerce remain oblivious to the horror of the woman getting assaulted in the woods.



Figure 3. Botticelli, "The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti," Panel 2

Botticelli's second panel shows the woman lying dead as the knight rips off her flesh with his bare hands, and his dogs devour it. In the background, a commoner on horseback with his sword and dog pursue another naked woman.



Figure 4. Botticelli, "The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti," Panel 3

The third panel shows the same shocking scene recreated at an elegant breakfast beneath the two families' coats of arms. Above the center hangs the coat of arms of Lorenzo de' Medici, ruler of Florence and patron of the arts, who may have arranged this new marriage.

The fourth presents a perfectly ordered wedding feast with resplendent guests, including prominent officials of Florence. We see no hint of the barbarity behind the story as servants dote on the somber bride.

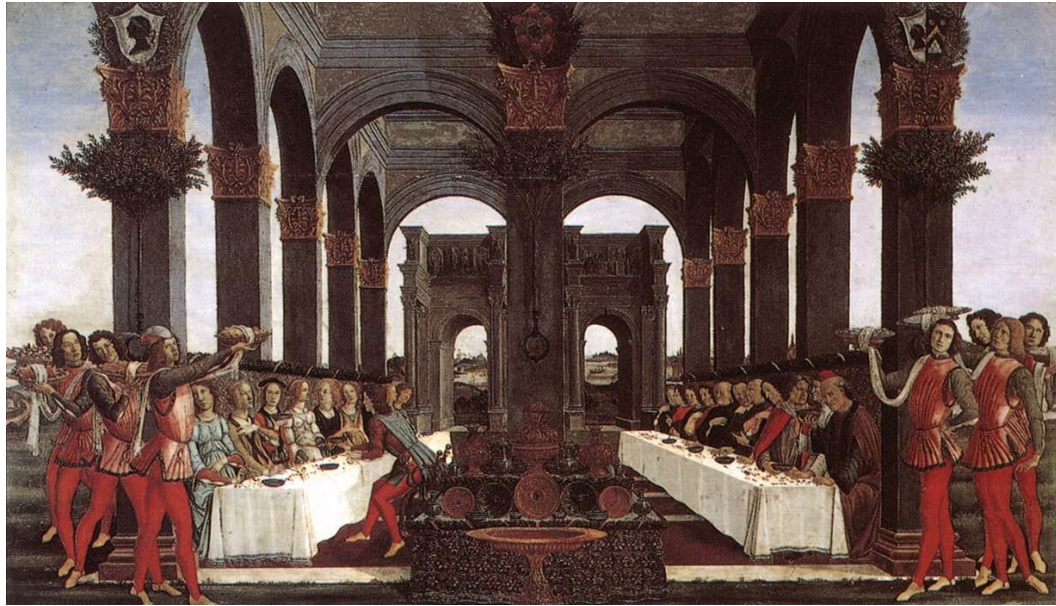


Figure 5. Botticelli, “The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti,” Panel 4

A 20th Century scholar paraphrases the story this way without commenting on its misogynous assumptions: a “disdainful mistress at last consents to marry... when she sees the everlasting punishment in hell of another cruel lady whose scorn drove her lover to suicide” (Lightbown, 1989, p. 119). This suggests that heaven is on the knight’s side. The murder so graphically portrayed is considered appropriate justice for a lady whose rejection caused her suitor’s suicide. No one questions that the person deemed “cruel” is not the knight whose hands tear apart the woman’s body, but the woman, herself, whose “scorn” deserved such punishment.

The Power of Art That Imitates Life

Ruggiero Leoncavallo got the idea for his 1892 opera, *Pagliacci* from a case once tried by his father, a judge. He wanted to write a play about real people, using the new *verismo* style of his time.

The lead character, Canio, is proprietor of a small traveling troupe of actors who have been performing at a village feast. Canio literally runs the show, as batters insist on doing.

His wife, Nedda, the sole woman in the troupe, is the object of other men’s advances. She feels trapped and yearns to fly off freely like the birds. When Canio goes drinking at the tavern, another actor declares his love to Nedda, but she rejects him. This actor then sees her scheming to run off with a local man and alerts her husband.

Canio returns in a jealous rage and hears his wife calling into the darkness, “I’ll be yours for ever!” Canio gives chase, but cannot find the interloper.

Returning to Nedda, he draws his stiletto, threatening to cut her throat. One of his actors interrupts him and announces that their audience is coming from evening vespers. The play must go on.

The acting troupe rushes into costume. Canio, who will play the clown, Pagliaccio, holds his head in his hands and sings his despair:

To act! . . .
While, gripped by frenzy,
I no longer know
what I'm saying or doing!
. . .
The audience pays
and wants to laugh.
And if Arlecchino
steals Colombina from you,
laugh, Pagliaccio . . .
And everyone will applaud!
Turn into jest
your anguish and your sorrows,
into a grimace
your sobs and your grief . . .
Laugh, clown,
at your broken love,
laugh at the pain
which poisons your heart!

The play-within-a-play they are about to perform has a plot almost identical to what is going on in their own lives. When Nedda, playing Columbina, calls to her escaping lover, "I'll be yours for ever!" Canio steps out of character to demand the man's name.

Nedda tries to jolt Canio back into the play: "Pagliaccio! Pagliaccio!" but he refuses:

No, I am Pagliaccio no longer:
If my face is white,
it is with shame
and the longing for revenge!
My manhood claims its right again,
and my bleeding heart
needs blood to wash away the shame,
o vile woman! . . .
No. I am a buffoon no longer! . . .
I was a fool
to pick you up,
an orphan, by the roadside,
half dead from hunger,
and offer you a name
and a love
which was mad and passionate!

The staged audience is with him, as women exclaim, "[I]t makes me weep! The play is so real!" Full of self-pity and recrimination, Canio continues:

And cheerfully I imposed
every sacrifice upon my heart,
and trustingly believed more in you

than in God himself!
But only vice inhabited
your heedless soul;
you have no heart . . .
You are ruled only by your passions.
Go, you are not worth my grief,
you worthless wretch;
in my contempt I could
crush you beneath my feet! . . .

The crowd calls: “Bravo!” But moments later they realize this is no act as Canio seizes a dinner knife and stabs his wife. Her lover leaps to the stage and is also struck down by Canio. The audience moves to disarm Canio, and an actor announces: “The play is over!”

Battered women will find many details convincing: Canio’s drinking, his superficial male bonding, his sense of entitlement and self-pity; his taunting that Nedda amounted to nothing until he lifted her up and gave her a name; Nedda’s fear of her husband’s brutality, along with her belief that he could read her mind; her yearning to be free as a bird, but also her readiness to submit that makes her vulnerable to the next suitor:

I give myself to you:
you alone shall rule me,
and I take you
and yield myself completely.

Enormously successful, the production secured its author’s fame and seemed to feed a cultural craving for domestic violence as art. Did Leoncavallo simply portray violence as normal and entertaining? Or could the shock of recognition help his audience perceive more clearly that this unacceptable behavior needed to change? Could art contribute to a shared intention to reform and civilize the culture?

Civilizing Legal Violence

As the decades passed, I stayed in touch with many of the mothers and children I had met at the Women’s Center. Some helped me write their stories. One of them, Carla, had put her children to bed on a November evening in 1978 before asking her husband for a divorce. He pulled out a gun and shot her in the head. As she recovered in the hospital, his *goombahs* got him out of prison, she said -- using Italian-American slang for mobsters. He insisted that she come home and drop the charges against him. She did.

Divorced by 1986, she brought a motion against him for his ongoing threats, harassment, and insulting comments to the children about her new boyfriend. The judge ruled for her ex and warned that he would sentence Carla to a year in prison if she allowed her boyfriend to stay overnight when the children were there. The *Boston Globe* reported her ex-husband’s delight with the decision: “I am a man of old-fashioned morals” (Doten, p. 53).

In chambers, the self-important but ignorant judge told the children: “Maybe if your dad and mother had come in here in the first place, we might have helped

them stay together” (Parrillo, pp. 16-17).

Carla appealed his ruling, but the state supreme court sustained the judge. The Rhode Island affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union sought a hearing before the U.S. Supreme Court, which declined the case. Rhode Island’s double standard still permitted men like the police officer who falsely accused his ex-wife of being a “druggie” to have a live-in girlfriend care for the toddler he had won.

Meanwhile, the case of the boyfriend forbidden to stay overnight made international news. Late night talk shows did not mention the history of domestic violence. The Providence Newspaper Guild satirized the story in their 1990 “Ocean State Follies,” attended by some 1500 people, including the governor, the now notorious judge and his extended family at an Italian-themed venue in Swansea, Massachusetts, the Venus de Milo banquet hall. Amateur actors performed the skit featuring a woman in a muumuu with her hair in curlers. She stands under a red light while her teenage kids sing: “The judge thinks Mom’s a big *putana*” — Italian for whore. The mother on stage groans: “I might as well live in Italy.”

The court and newspaper guild found the case hilarious. None of them grasped the full story. This could be a textbook case about the deadly consequences of ACEs -- Adverse Childhood Experiences -- that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now take seriously. Court officials seldom recognize how the outdated and discredited practices at family court ruin children’s lives by exposing them to dangerous abusers who fill them with fear and stress, often causing lifelong illnesses and early death (Felitti, 1998).

I learned about Carla’s childhood poverty, hunger, abuse and neglect; her imprisonment at fifteen in a motel where she was repeatedly gang-raped; her marriage and motherhood at seventeen; getting shot by her husband at twenty-two; her children’s encounters with their father’s violence and their own run-ins with the law before her daughter died of a drug overdose and her son killed himself with a bullet to the head at 22--after acknowledging that he had seen his mother shot when he was five.

Sometimes these stories also had Italian-American heroes, like the male nurse who was an emergency medical technician on duty the night Carla’s husband shot her. He came in the ambulance, staunched the bleeding, and saved her life. Later elected state senator and then mayor of the town, he never forgot the incident and described the rescue to me in detail more than three decades after the shooting. He also confirmed a rumor I had heard that he had recently confronted the shooter and stopped him from bragging to a group of men about what he had done to his wife.

The Deputy Sheriff, the Protégé, and the Guardian Angel

Was some algorithm of abusive power perfected like a work of art in the Italian Renaissance and codified into daily practice at Rhode Island’s family court? I wanted to understand what happens to those who live under the constant threat of volcanic eruptions not only in their homes, but in the demoralizing culture of a courthouse where coercive control has become an art form. Three Italian-American men who worked there illustrate this in different roles.

The 14-year-old boy who sat outside the girl’s home calling her name became a prison guard, then a juvenile corrections officer, and finally, a deputy sheriff. He built an arsenal of assault rifles and deadly weapons at their home. After their divorce, she told me how he bragged about “owning” family court. He may have witnessed activity behind the courtrooms that gave him unusual power over judges

and magistrates. He also had a plumbing business on the side and installed lawn sprinklers for court personnel. She gave me his business card with the phone number where customers allegedly left messages with a clerk while the deputy sheriff kept order in the court.

He was not an easy man to live with and once reduced their muscular son to tears with a martial art hold. On a family trip to Florida's Walt Disney World, he allegedly caused a public scene by wrapping their older daughter's long hair around his clenched fist, forcing the teenager to her knees. When they returned to Rhode Island, his wife had him served with divorce papers. He came home for his guns, and she called police, who cordoned off their block, detained the man, and removed a truckload of 29 guns and ammunition from the family home (Cranston Police Department, 2001, p. 3). Police were baffled when the family court's general magistrate ordered them to return his guns. They knew his wife needed a restraining order. But she feared going to court to get one.

A police detective told me that he thought she was paranoid until he accompanied her and saw the way judges responded in one courtroom after another. Seven judges recused themselves from signing a restraining order against the deputy sheriff. The police detective angrily confronted the chief judge: What was going on at his courthouse?

After the divorce, the deputy sheriff demanded visits with his ten-year-old daughter. The girl's therapist and pediatrician expressed grave concern. A police dispatcher told me he had apologized to the girl's mother for dismissing her previous 911-calls after they started getting similar calls from the deputy sheriff's girlfriend, who had a history of drug arrests.

The chief judge introduced me to the next man among these three courthouse professionals. He was the cousin of a state senator. The chief had hired him like a protégé to help with difficult custody cases.

The protégé took a personal interest in the deputy sheriff's case and told me he was searching for a psychologist who "understood alienation" -- a defense strategy that claims children who fear their fathers have been alienated, brainwashed, and coached to lie by their mothers. The protégé soon found a young psychologist in a small country office and trained her to serve as guardian *ad litem*. Other states call this a "law guardian" or "evaluator," but Rhode Island courts still prefer Latin terms, conferring a quasi-religious sense of awe and significant confusion about their purpose.

Her first custody case would be the deputy-sheriff's, which grew more challenging when police found his live-in girlfriend handcuffed, incoherent, and beaten in their kitchen with a broken nose, eye-socket, and other injuries (Mayerowitz, 2004, p. A1). State funds for victims of crime provided her reconstructive surgery. Then the girlfriend stopped coming to testify against the deputy sheriff and moved back with him.

Superior court dismissed his felony charges, and the deputy sheriff returned to family court to demand visits from his youngest child. He got help from the court's new guardian ad litem. Her report noted the deputy sheriff's "tendency to engage in verbal arguments with romantic partners" (Meyerson, 2005, p. 44). But after only a few conversations, without even visiting his home, she affirmed his self-assessment as "a happy, calm, and 'level' person" (p. 12). She urged the court to stop the girl from seeing her therapist and pediatrician and to give her to the father's "sole physical care," allowing her mother only one supervised visit a week (p. 46). Instead of recognizing the mother's symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as

evidence of her ex-husband's character, she theorized that the woman's unwarranted fear and watchfulness had poisoned the girl's relationship with her father.

The psychologist, empowered as guardian ad litem, testified on the witness stand that she was confident no legal charges remained against the father. Why? Because his lawyer said so, she stated, adding sweetly that she had never known a lawyer to lie. Coughing swept through the courtroom, since laughing outright will be punished. I attended court because I could not afford to pay for transcripts, and here was my reward: That fit of coughing was the kind of courtroom drama that never appears in the written record.

This naïve young woman deserved a standing ovation for her theatrical performance. The general magistrate extravagantly commended her work and invited her to his chambers as he left the room. Her testimony brought lawyers flocking to request her new business card. The deputy sheriff did a touchdown dance in the aisle.

The large young man who took the seat beside me in the crowded courtroom did not laugh. I recognized him as the oldest child of the deputy sheriff. I had seen him in the news, rushing his father away from the courthouse. I heard his father phone him in the corridor and summon him to court. A father himself, the young man seemed emotionally exhausted. My heart went out to him. His hands lay in his lap, his fingernails bitten down to the flesh.

"What do you love most in life?" the deputy sheriff had demanded of his wife in a secluded corner of the corridor during their divorce hearing, she told me.

"My children!" she had exclaimed in tears. "I'll give you anything. Just don't hurt the children." After 28 years of marriage, she was terrified enough to accept his demands. She would not take alimony, and he would not pay child support.

"Watch what I do to them!" he allegedly shouted. "I will destroy each and every one of them." After that he often stared at her in court as he insisted on visits with their youngest. He would hold up one finger with a smile. He now controlled the two oldest children. Only one more to go.

Years later, the former deputy-sheriff used that bogus guardian ad litem report to convince the girl that her mother had caused all their problems. By then, the son had died driving home from work on an icy road. The mother showed me the bitter text messages both daughters had sent blaming her before they disappeared into the air force.

I saw other children grow up to align themselves with their tormenters while expressing implacable hatred toward any form of weakness. When one parent is powerless to protect you, and the court refuses to help, then what else can you do, but make an alliance with the more dangerous parent? Your brain's most compelling task is to keep you alive.

The naive psychologist trained by the protégé had long ago moved into an expensive downtown office, where she counsels court-ordered sexual abuse survivors to "reunify" with their molesters and victims of domestic violence to "co-parent" with their assailants.

By 2010, as the ailing chief judge prepared to retire, his protégé's days at the courthouse were numbered. He had risen to assistant court administrator, making over \$105,000 a year. He had worked on a training manual for guardians ad litem that promoted parental alienation theories (RI Bar, 2004). He had become chief mediator and taught mediation at Roger Williams University Law School. But after his patron retired, his college and law degrees proved to be fraudulent. State police

sent me confirmation that the protégé never was prosecuted. He had served under the limitless discretion of the chief judge. He claimed to have mediated 750 divorce and custody cases before he was forced to resign in 2011 (Gavigan, 2011).

Rhode Island's family court still bestows unseemly power on guardians ad litem. My third example of an Italian-American man's control over custody cases starts at the imposing conference room of his law office. Its sports décor seems to pump his competitive spirit. Autographed photos of champions and celebrities create an aura of success. Family law is a game to him, and he plays to win.

At a college basketball event years before, he was accused of taunting a visiting player and allegedly provoked a chair-throwing melee that got written up in the news (Stanton, 1988). Whether or not he was guilty, the tendency to taunt and provoke remain hallmarks of his practice.

Around his enormous conference room table, stacks of files spilled against the walls on the day one mother met him to find out how he would handle their custody case. According to her, the lawyer pointed to one huge pile and threatened her: "See this? This is another case where one parent didn't want to go along with things. This father kept writing and insisting that facts be heard, that something was going on!"

She says he warned her: "I have the power to file motions and drag this on until the fees go from \$5,000 to \$25,000 to \$100,000! We can make this a \$100,000 custody battle!"

"That parent is bankrupt," he allegedly continued. "His kids had to be pulled out of their private schools and all their activities. Now they hate him for it, don't want to visit him. So, he lost anyway. We can do that," he concluded forcefully. "Or we can do it my way."

I had heard about this guardian ad litem's conference room from other parents who described the sports décor and stacks of files, the autographed photos and the threats. Theories about alienation may be persuasive to him, since that seems to be what he does to families.

In this case, he was supposed to represent the best interests of the 12-year-old daughter, who misunderstood his title and called him a "guardian angel." In fact, the girl seldom saw him and said he ignored her fears. The two times he came to their home, he brought a supervisor, who turned out to be his mother. He seemed to worry about alleged improprieties when meeting with children. Soon he persuaded the judge to assign that part of his job-description to a psychologist, who later acknowledged participating in regular meetings with a group of lawyers and therapists to discuss "strategies" for handling various custody cases.

Can an Ethics Advisory Help to Civilize Rhode Island Family Law?

In August 2009, the state Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Panel issued an advisory opinion at the request of an anonymous "inquiring attorney" who "serves as a guardian ad litem in divorce and custody cases" and "together with a group of other lawyers and mental health professionals, proposes to create a not-for-profit organization to provide psychological services, visitation services, parent-education training, co-parenting/mediation services, and guardian ad litem representation" (R.I. Supreme Court, p. 1). The panel concluded it would violate professional ethics for Rhode Island lawyers to participate in such a multidisciplinary business.

In fact, family court lawyers have been doing this for years, designing court orders that mandate costly evaluations, supervised visits, and "therapy" sessions

that benefit these court professionals and their cohorts while obstructing justice and harming families. A National Institute of Justice study found that evaluators, judges, and lawyers without specific domestic violence training tend to focus on unscientific alienation theories and a myth that mothers often make deliberate false reports (Saunders, 2012). These widespread mistaken beliefs lead to decisions that hurt children. A new study for the National Institute of Justice finds that mothers make deliberately false reports less than 2% of the time, and yet alleged abusers win 69% of domestic violence cases and 81% of child sexual abuse cases. The courts disbelieve 94% of child sexual abuse reports. When the court relies on evaluators who are oblivious to domestic violence research, judges do not recognize the ways abusers use coercive control. The consequences for children and society as a whole are devastating (Meier, 2017).

Italian-American Heroes

Although the three court professionals I describe here—the deputy sheriff, the protégé, and the guardian ad litem—are Italian American, I also found Italian American heroes, like the police detective who accompanied the woman to seven courtrooms before confronting the chief judge and demanding a restraining order.

I recently watched an Italian-American judge patiently explain legal requirements to a superior court jury when two young sisters dared to testify against their grandfather's abuse. When the old man tried to take control by attempting suicide, the judge steadily guided jurors through thorny issues and received a verdict against the accused. During breaks, when the jury was out of the courtroom, the judge sometimes returned without his robe to talk with visitors, conveying both his humanity and his reverence for the law.

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” an old adage advises. But some heroes choose to challenge the harmful behavior entrenched in their own cultures. In the slums of Rome a century ago, the physician Maria Montessori created a revolutionary way to educate children that remains transformative today. Instead of the coercive methods common to schools and churches, Montessori taught teachers to observe children's natural curiosity and to create environments that nurture children to become empathetic, self-directed critical thinkers.

“One of the first things that a child learns in a healthy family is trust,” Fred Rogers began his 1969 testimony to the Senate Subcommittee on Communications, chaired by Rhode Island Senator John Pastore, a lawyer who had been the first Italian-American elected governor in any state. Repeatedly re-elected, as governor and then as U.S. senator, Pastore served without a hint of scandal.

In their Congressional encounter on *YouTube*, (Deibler, 2015) the senator has clearly never heard of Rogers, who has been visiting homes across the country for six years in his daily half-hour public television show, speaking gently to children about “the inner drama of childhood.” His quiet voice instantly gains Pastore's respectful attention, and the senator says he would like to see the show. President Richard Nixon has threatened to slash the budget of public broadcasting. But there is more at stake here than money. A significant cultural shift is underway in the hearing room.

An Italian-American man who has held onto his integrity while reaching the pinnacle of American power opens himself to a hopeful new possibility and finds deep satisfaction in the encounter. This has to do with that “good feeling of control,” says Mister Rogers, that children need to know is available to them, too. “Feelings are mentionable,” he says, “and manageable.” Showing children how

they can do it will be “a great service for mental health.”

He relays a song, beginning with a child’s question:

“What do you do
with the mad that you feel
when you feel so mad
you could bite?
When the whole wide world
seems, oh, so wrong,
and nothing you do
seems very right? ...
It’s great to be able to stop
when you’ve planned a thing that’s wrong,
and be able to do something else instead
and think this song:
I can stop when I want to!
Can stop when I wish!
Can stop! Stop! Stop! Anytime!
And what a good feeling, to feel like this!
And know that the feeling is really mine!
Know that there’s something deep inside
that helps us become what we can...!”

The senator is moved. “Well, I’m supposed to be a pretty tough guy,” he says, “and this is the first time that I’ve had goosebumps for the last two days.” The laughter reminds us that history is being made.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Pastore says twice, then adds: “Looks like you just earned the twenty million dollars.” Two men together had shifted popular culture for the sake of children. Decades later, it still feels remarkably good.

It is time to stop the abuse of power and the *mammoni*’s sense of entitlement at family court. As humanity evolves, we recognize the harm done by coercive control and adversarial mindsets. Together we can become a civilized culture that celebrates trust and the responsible use of power. Together, we can grow ever more skillful at making our relationships a living work of art within our families, communities, courthouses, and nations.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anne Grant edited New York City NOW's Report on Sex Bias in the Public Schools (1971) that helped to secure Title IX protections against educational sex discrimination. She earned two Emmy Awards for television productions on women's history and co-educational sports. Ordained a United Methodist minister in 1981, she pastored churches for more than twenty years. As executive director of the Women's Center of Rhode Island (1988-1996), she learned about the problems facing battered mothers and their children in state courts and agencies. Anne has been named a recipient of Rhode Island YWCA's Women of Achievement Award for 2017. She studied English literature at Barnard College (B.A., 1968) and Brooklyn College (M.A., 1976), and graduated from Union Theological Seminary in New York (M.Div., 1982). She lives in Providence and can be reached at agrant275@gmail.com

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