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Kinship and Domestic Service in Early Modern Tuscany Some Case Studies

Giulia Calvi

This paper focuses on the relationships between servants and family members and on the shifting boundaries that defined both terms. In the 16th and 17th century weak family members could be confused with servants, and servants could be viewed as part of the family. Affection and obligations towards kin were represented mainly in terms of dependence, deference and hierarchy, and were therefore rooted in a broad terminology concerning servitude and service. I shall also consider issues regarding the self-fashioning of servant identities, both in objective (i. e., expressing an external point of view) and subjective terms.

1. Legal discourses

Narratives describing both perspectives, namely, people talking about how they gradually came to be treated as servants and what that experience meant to them, generally express a sense of humiliation, isolation, loss and shame. In order to gain such a prospect on family relationships and roles bordering on servitude, I think we have to stress a flexible approach to both family and individual life cycles which encompass regression and loss of status as well as emancipation and construction. In other words, family life-cycles crisis tended to blur the boundaries between roles, by encouraging the emergence of disquieting figures – widows, orphans, natural sons, concubines – which could threaten the household's cohesiveness unleashing conflicts over patrimony, lineage and identity. Angiolina Arru has emphasised the need to overcome dichotomies which tend to produce rather simplistic interpretations in this field, in order to shed light on the margins of family life, where borderline situations and identities become visible and where ambivalence and ambiguity set the tone.¹ Apart from

¹ Cf. Angiolina Arru, *Il Servo. Storia di una carriera nel Settecento*, Bologna 1995; for general overviews cf. Ratna Saptari, *Rethinking Domestic Service*, in: *International Review of Social History*, 44 (1999),

general definitions, in *ancien régime* societies legal discourse carefully analysed individual situations and aimed at detailing contexts, living conditions and status. Orphans, widows, natural and illegitimate children, as well as concubines were often considered and treated as servants: such conditions generally affected young members of a family and therefore we can consider adolescence and early youth as a particularly fragile age, one in which dependence and obedience were built into adult expectations and were made to coincide with attitudes of deference and service.²

Legal discourse went in the same direction, equating sons with servants. Giovanni Battista De Luca in a widely-circulating juridical summa stated that: Strictly personal servitude stems from *patria potestas* according to which in Roman civil law a son is compared to a servant as both are deprived of the capacity to own property, so that anything that they might acquire or inherit is entrusted to the father or to the master. Moreover, the father holds the same *potestas* over his son's life as the master over his servant.³ By the 17th century however, things had changed as fathers and masters no longer retained any right over their son's and servant's life (save for moderate correction). Therefore sons and daughters, just like servants, lived in their father's home in a condition of "passive personal servitude" which legal discourse equated to that of the vassal to his lord.

On the other hand, the legal definition of servant was rather shifty. In a well-known compendium of Tuscan legislation both male and female servants were considered "strictly speaking those who live in their master's house and eat his bread and drink his wine."⁴ Salary appears to be an exception to this general rule. Indeed "other servants

77–85; Tim Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender 1660–1750: Life and Work in the London Household*, Harlow 2000; Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux and Ludmilla Fialova eds., *Le Phénomène de la domesticité en Europe, XVI–XX siècles*, Praga 1997; Sarah Matthews and Sabina Brevaglieri eds., *Monaca, moglie, serva, cortigiana*, Firenze 2001; Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux ed., *Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity: Understanding the Globalization of Domestic Work, 16th – 21st Centuries*, Bern/Berlin 2004; Raffaella Sarti, *Forum: Domestic Service since 1750*. Introduction, in: *Gender & History*, 18, 2 (2006), 187–198.

2 Cf. Michael Mitterauer, *Servants and Youth*, in: *Continuity and Change*, 5 (1990), 11–38; Andrea Doveri, "Padre che ha figliuoli grandi fuor li mandi": Una prima valutazione sulla diffusione e sul ruolo dei "garzoni" nella campagne pisane dei secoli XVII e XVIII, in: *La popolazione delle campagne italiane in età moderna*, Bologna 1993, 427–449; Franz W. A. van Poppel, Michel Oris and James Z. Lee eds., *The Road to Independence: Leaving Home in Western and Eastern Societies, 16th–20th Centuries*, Bern 2004; Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, *Servants in Pre-Industrial Europe: Gender Differences*, in: *Historical Social Research*, 23 (1998), 112–129; Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England*, New Haven 1994.

3 Cf. Giovanni Battista De Luca, *Il dottor volgare*, Roma 1678, vol. IV, cap. II: Della servitù passiva della persona solita esplicarsi al nome o termine di cattività o di schiavitù; e di quella del figlio verso il padre, o del vassallo verso il padrone, e simili; *ibid.*, 22, 26f (this translation and the following G. C.); see also Gigliola Di Renzo Villata, *Persona e famiglia nel diritto medievale e moderno*, in: *Digesto*, 13 (1996), Civile, 458–527.

4 Marc'Antonio Savelli, *Pratica universale*, Firenze 1696, ad vocem *servitori*, 373, note 20.

instead of bread and wine receive some money or other things outside the home.”⁵ And yet, in Tuscany “servants should be actual and salaried.”⁶ *Attuali* (actual) meant living in their master’s house, not having a family of their own and enjoying the privilege of carrying weapons in their master’s company, while *inattuali* were “imperfect” servants, those who – like country labourers – lived with their own family in separate homes. Salary depended on a set of varying circumstances: first and foremost on a written contract, which hardly ever existed. And yet only a written agreement could put a servant in the position of legally claiming his or her pay. In Florence a law enacted in 1564 stated that

[h]aving experienced the abuse and disorder daily caused by male and female servants as well as nurses and similar persons who serve their masters for a salary and who have postponed claiming a written paper from their masters’ heirs, and because such persons believe that in order to receive their salary it is enough to produce any sort of old statement and, claiming for a large sum, in the end they get a miserable amount of money, all this happens because many don’t keep their accounts up to date. And considering that those who keep servants and nurses have the means of paying them regularly, and that those who serve for a salary are poor and it is unlikely that they want to receive a delayed payment, in order to regulate such abuse and disorder, the officers of the Grascia order that the male and female servants, nurses and apprentices, if they have not filed suit against their masters, must ask for their pay within 5 years of finishing service, or they can no longer claim it as it shall be invalidated by prescription unless they can produce a written agreement.⁷

In this case the city’s statutory norms concerning general creditors, which allowed for a 16-year period, applied. Jurists insisted that the time span which allowed servants the right to claim their salary had to be explicitly spelled out in the local town statutes. Otherwise one had to revert back to Roman law which fixed a 30-year time span before such requests were invalidated by prescription or to different local norms. Indeed Italian town statutes presented a wide variety of local variants concerning this issue, and the five years which Florence decreed as legal period within which servants could claim their pay was one of the shortest. In Siena, for example, a century later, the statute of merchants decreed that salaries were not invalidated for a period of 25 years. In Rome the validity period lasted 16 years, while in Bologna and Verona salaries as well as many

5 Savelli, *Pratica*, see note 4.

6 Savelli, *Pratica*, see note 4, note 21.

7 Lorenzo Cantini, *Legislazione toscana, Firenze 1800–1808*, V, 148, “Provvisione degl’Ufficiali di Grascia con cui si determina in quanto tempo si prescrivino i salari de’servitori, delle serve e delle balie”, 13 ottobre 1564.

other types of credit could be claimed within ten years. Sometimes labourers were allowed specially short periods for claiming their pay. Thus in Venice, the city statutes proclaimed an overall 30-year period before most credits, rents and loans were invalidated by prescription, reducing it to five years in the case of worker's salaries.⁸ The trend seems to move in the direction of defining shorter periods aimed at specific forms of credit, presumably in order to establish the relation of masters and servants on a clearer and more solid monetary grounding, 'modernising,' so to speak, what appears to have been the prevailing model where no salary or a delayed, highly irregular and only partly monetary compensation was offered in exchange for service. Jurists insisted that salaries had to be small as "all the other comforts which a servant receives have to be taken into account."⁹

A master's financial situation could also infringe upon the servant's chance of receiving a wage, as "Servants can not claim a salary from a master who can not pay them." In such cases both "male and female servants are allowed to take and keep an equivalent amount of goods belonging to their master," if they have no other means of getting paid.¹⁰ Isabelle Chabot has shown how up to the 16th century young female servants often coming from the countryside and working in the Florentine *palazzi*, were generally not acknowledged as workers by their masters who tended to benefit them with a small dowry *amore Dei* rather than with a salary. Such widespread social practices underline both the difficulty of conceiving domestic work as a profession, especially in the case of women, and of placing servants on the same social standing as labourers.¹¹ Interestingly enough, legislation did not mention liveries in the definition of a servant's personal attire, although contemporary sumptuary legislation did, but only the right to carry the same weapons as their master, when in the latter's company.¹² Living and eating under the same roof as their master were therefore the basic requirements for servants to be identified as such. However, such minimal requisites could and did concern others living in *ancien régime* households: indeed an illegitimate son, as we shall soon see, could also be identified on the basis of such tenets. So, if salary and livery were not distinguishing features in everyday life, what distinguished a son's identity from that of

8 Cf. Cantini, *Legislazione*, see note 7, 149.

9 Savelli, *Pratica*, see note 4, 373, n. 22.

10 Savelli, *Pratica*, see note 4, 24.

11 Cf. Isabelle Chabot and Massimo Fornasari, *L'economia della carità. Le doti del Monte di Pietà di Bologna (secoli XVI–XX)*, Bologna 1997.

12 Cf. Cantini, *Legislazione*, see note 7, XV, 115, 16 agosto 1619: "Bando e ordine del modo di tenersi per li padroni in dar nota dei loro servitori nella Cancelleria del Magistrato degli Otto per portar l'arme." A similar law was enacted in 1611 obliging masters to notify their servants; see also Raffaella Sarti, *Comparir con 'equipaggio in scena'. Personale domestico e prestigio nobiliare (Bologna fine XVII–inizio XX secolo)*, in: Cheiron, 16, 31/32 (1999), *I giochi del prestigio. Modelli e pratiche della distinzione sociale*, 133–169.

servant, how and where did the *ancien régime* language of deference, obedience and service draw the line between the two?

2. Narratives and domestic interiors

Let us follow the lawsuit which a noble Florentine widow, Caterina Almeni del Rosso brought in 1705 against a young man whose name and identity were uncertain and had to be legally defined.¹³ Caterina Almeni was acting on behalf of her only son whose patrimony could be endangered by the presence of a male cousin, the only son of his uncle Giovan Francesco del Rosso. The proceedings therefore concerned a young man, accused of not being entitled to the Del Rosso's name, lineage and wealth because of his status as servant, not son.

Uncle Giovan Francesco had never married and lived alone in his Florentine house with some servants and one Giulio Cesare, a young man claiming to be his – presumably natural – son. The lawsuit is therefore centred on the issue of defining a servant's versus a son's identity. However, as Giulio Cesare was no longer living in Florence, his words are not recorded in the proceedings and other witnesses testify in his favour, leaving us with a sort of group narrative: a shared view concerning domestic relationships, the use of domestic space, and language.¹⁴

Let us first follow the way in which Caterina, the widow, states her argument. It is largely concerned with the issue of space: did Giulio Cesare eat at the same table with the other servants and did he share a bedroom with them? Living in the same house – she claims – is not enough to be considered somebody's son. What a witness needs to know is “if the young man was free to sit or move around in the house in the same leisurely way that a master rather than a servant does.”¹⁵ Calling someone father or son is not a sufficient clue, as appropriate behaviour, not language alone, must distinguish those who serve from those who don't. For example, did the old man ever share his “secrets” and intimate thoughts with the young one? “My brother in-law Giovan Francesco del Rosso,” Caterina claims, “is a noble Florentine. He is a prudent and honourable man and it is unlikely that he ever called Giulio Cesare ‘his son,’ who was born of another family altogether, that of the Diotallevi.”¹⁶

13 Cf. Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), Magistrato dei Pupilli et Adulti del Principato (MPAP), F. 2420, 6f, 29 maggio 1705.

14 On domestic space, see Raffaella Sarti, *Europe at Home: Family and Material Culture 1500–1800*, New Haven 1999.

15 ASF, MPAP, F. 2420, 6f; cf. Linda A. Pollock, *Parent-Child Relations*, in: David Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli eds., *A History of the European Family*, vol. 1: *Family Life in Early Modern Times, 1500–1789*, New Haven 2001, 191–220; Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Service and the coming of Age of Young Men in Seventeenth Century England*, in: *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), 41–64.

16 ASF, MPAP, F. 2420.

Three illiterate workers testify in Giulio Cesare's favour: a barber, a surgeon and a postman. The first, a barber who used to shave the young man at home, told of having heard the servants and Signor Giovan Francesco call him "son." Signor Del Rosso paid the barber himself an unusually large sum (one giulio) and "I think he gave me the money because he treated Giulio Cesare like a son, not a servant."¹⁷ Prices obviously changed according to one's social standing. All three witnesses stressed the importance of dress in defining a servant's identity: "One day," the barber testified, "as I entered the house, I saw Giulio Cesare trying on a new suit that the tailor had just delivered."¹⁸ The surgeon also admitted that he could not tell whether Giulio Cesare was a servant, as he had never seen him wearing a livery and the postman recalled having met both men in the street and "the young one was very well dressed."¹⁹ The barber also saw Giulio Cesare and Giovan Francesco riding in the same carriage. The young man had a tutor who taught him how to read and write and no witness ever saw him sign his name as "Giulio Cesare Diotallevi". The barber concluded his testimony saying that he had heard people mention that Giulio Cesare was Signor Giovan Francesco's "natural son and I cannot say that the latter treated him like a servant."²⁰

It is interesting to note the various items which, in each of the witnesses' narratives, structure a servant's identity – as the postman effectually stated: "If in somebody's house I saw a servant and the master's son I would certainly know how to distinguish one from the other, looking at the way they dress and at the way they are treated."²¹ In this urban patrician household work, working time and salary are never taken into account, and they seem to be totally irrelevant in the making of a servant's identity. Other practices are far more important and they shed light on social and cultural values not geared to discipline, control or gain. Thus the use of domestic space (being able to move around the house, to sit and walk freely), communication (sharing secrets), sociability (eating together, riding in the same carriage, walking in the streets), consumption and attire (dress, livery, elegance, fashion) belong and make sense in an aristocratic world where ritual and deference, hierarchy and status, credit and protection structure social relationships and identities, rather than the bourgeois economic ethic of work and salary. As Bernard Lepetit wrote: "En considérant les identifications et les assignations identitaires comme les produits, d'une durée variable, de l'interaction sociale, elles confèrent aux identités sociales l'utilité et la malleabilité des catégories de la pratique."²² The language of dispute and conflict that we find in juridical sources indeed meets Lep-

17 ASE, MPAP, F. 2420, 17, 19.

18 ASE, MPAP, F. 2420, 19.

19 ASE, MPAP, F. 2420, 9.

20 ASE, MPAP, F. 2420, 19f.

21 ASE, MPAP, F. 2420, 9f.

22 Bernard Lepetit, *Histoires des pratiques, pratique de l'histoire*, in: idem ed., *Les formes de l'expérience. Une autre histoire sociale*, Paris 1995, 17.

etit's "orientation pragmatique" where social identities and social ties are not defined by fixed and naturally given qualities, but rather by practice and use.²³ Thus in the court case we have just analysed, all witnesses defined servants and sons according to individual experience, memory, behaviour, social intercourse and public opinion.

3. The margins of family life. "Filius naturalis vel servus"

Legal traditions and city statutes distinguished the natural children of two unmarried adults (*solutus et soluta*) living together, from the illegitimate offspring of an adulterous relationship. Natural children were often born to servant mothers and according to some local juridical traditions they "followed the mother's condition." Roman law tradition moved in the same direction, transmitting the slave status of the mother to her child borne out of wedlock. Moreover, in some city statutes, children borne from unmarried parents were equated with servants ("filius naturalis vel spurius aut servus").²⁴ The juridical status of a natural son was closely linked to his father's identity which had to be investigated on the basis of five tenets: public opinion, name, documents, behaviour, and resemblance. In Florence the city statutes prescribed that both paternity and filiation could be ascertained on the basis of four formal written declarations stating "publica fama" with no further specification, and that a natural son born "ex legitimo concubinato" had a right of inheritance over his father's patrimony if he died intestate.²⁵ Sometimes, especially in wealthy families, natural sons were tacitly legitimated and lived in the same house as their father. Living under the same roof, therefore, could be a clue and yet, within the *ancien régime* household, domestic space was by no means a neutral dimension lending itself to functional organising patterns, but was distributed according to precise hierarchies of status and privilege, with regard to legal traditions, custom and local practices.²⁶ Heads of households spelled out in their last wills endless chains of obligations built into *fidei commissum* conveyed to their male heirs, often bequeathing rooms, kitchens, passageways and landings to poor relatives, cadets or faithful servants. Space had to be shared and allotted, and jurists painstakingly dissected the "servitù dell'abitazione," that is, "practical questions regarding ways of living and the faculty of living with others."²⁷ In legal literature often

23 Lepetit, *Histoires*, see note 22, 13.

24 Nino Tamassia, *La famiglia italiana nei secoli decimoquinto e decimosesto*, Milano/Palermo/Napoli 1911 (repr. Roma 1971), 221.

25 *Statuta populi et communis Florentiae ... anno salutis MCCCCV*, 4 vols., Fribourg 1778–1781, vol. II, rubr. II.

26 Cf. Giulia Calvi, Maddalena Nerli and Cosimo Tornabuoni, *A Couple's Narrative of Family History in Early Modern Florence*, in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, 45, 2 (1992), 312–339; idem, *Il contratto morale. Madri e figli nella Toscana moderna*, Roma/Bari 1994.

27 De Luca, *Dottor*, see note 3, vol. IV, cap. VIII, 88: "In questa servitù dell'abitazione, le questioni, le quali cadono in pratica, riguardano solamente il modo di abitare e anche se ciò porti facoltà di farvi

quoted examples concerned “gentleman living in their *palazzo*, bequeathing an apartment, or a few rooms with the use of a kitchen as they usually give their *servants* or *relatives*.”²⁸ They also concerned male heirs obliged to share the house they inherited with someone else. Domestic space therefore could contain social relationships of proximity and dependence, and obligations concerning space were connected to those regarding kin.

Let us then recall once more Caterina’s lawsuit against Giulio Cesare where the issue of domestic space and its use was central to the whole debate. At this point we can almost hear the widow voicing the worries which presumably prompted her to file the lawsuit: what if Signor Giovan Francesco del Rosso, her brother in law, left part of his house to the young man (natural son or servant)? What if her only son and heir to the whole Del Rosso patrimony, might have to accept a “*servitù dell’abitazione*,” sharing it with Giulio Cesare – del Rosso or Diotallevi? We cannot answer such questions as there is no final sentence among the proceedings and we can therefore assume that the contending parties probably reached an informal agreement.

4. Concubines

Working with fragments can sometimes allow us to draw sketchy profiles. Borderline identities and practices are indeed difficult to trace and we have to work our way through scanty bits of evidence.

I will now introduce another narrative of illegitimacy and concubinage. It is told by a woman and verges on the ambivalence between the experience of servitude, illicit sexuality and domestic duties. An elderly widow, Maria di Pasquino de’ Bernardi from Pisa aged between 56 and 60, speaks of her own life, remembering her childhood and adult years in a humble and painful tone, stressing the difficulty and loneliness of her experience. In November 1631 when she is summoned before the magistrate, the plague has ravaged large parts of Tuscany and is about to reach its highest peak. Maria di Pasquino has probably just recovered as her opening words recall that frightful experience: “I have been so terribly ill that I almost lost my brain.”²⁹ Then going back in time, she remembers her father: “My father lived from the income of a house and some fields he owned, but he was alone and had me as his only child.”³⁰ After the death of her mother, Maria was brought up by a neighbour, then put in a convent and then in the house of Carlo Mancini, a local granducal administrator.

abitar altri in suo luogo, per via di affitto o di donativo, e se porti proibizione all’erede, o ad altro proprietario, di potervi abitar lui, o d’introdurvi altre persone, o di poter vendere la proprietà.”

²⁸ De Luca, Dottor, see note 3, 91 (emphasis in translation my own).

²⁹ ASE, MPAP, F. 802, 318f.

³⁰ ASE, MPAP, F. 802, 316.

In his house at first I was both master and servant, but then he took a servant and brought me to Florence and then back to Mugello. I bore him nine children of which only one is living ... I followed Signor Carlo when he was named captain in Pietrasanta and did everything he needed, I served at the table and cooked ... I sewed and had the key of the chest where the money was. In the house there was a servant Caterina and Signor Carlo paid her 3 or 4 scudi each month and he kept all the accounts ... In his will Signor Carlo left me a monthly legacy of 4 scudi and the woollen and linen cloth I need.³¹

It is striking to note that Carlo Mancini left the woman he had lived with for over twenty years and who had born him nine children and his only living son, the pay of a servant.

In the later years of her life Maria, under the influence of a Jesuit confessor decided to stop living in sin:

For the past six years I have had no intercourse with Signor Carlo after the Jesuits came to preach in Mugello. We both promised to end this sinful life and went to confession and communion. ... Still, since I ate his bread and drank his wine, I was obliged to follow Signor Carlo and I lived with him as a servant and did everything that he needed and I breastfed my son. The agreement with Signor Carlo was that we should marry, but he did not keep his promise and Father Luigi Bandi, a Jesuit, insisted that we marry. But, because I have the utmost respect for Signor Carlo Mancini and his lineage, I never wanted to insist. I told the Jesuit father that I am not his equal and the Jesuit said to me that I am the cause of my own ruin.³²

From then onwards Maria describes her life as that of a servant as she no longer had a sexual relation with Signor Carlo, thereby implying that this is the difference between a concubine and a servant. Her son, Carlo, was legitimated by his father who named him sole heir to his patrimony. Thus the legal emancipation of the son stands in contrast to the mother's humiliating existence where the premature loss of her family, loneliness, the death of eight children and a total lack of self-esteem kept her in the condition of a destitute servant.

5. Orphans

Children and adolescents, especially if they had lost their father, could easily regress to a servile condition. In Tuscany the Magistrato dei Pupilli (comparable to the English

³¹ ASF, MPAP, F. 802, 316–318.

³² ASF, MPAP, F. 802, 317f.

Court of Wards) took charge of orphans under age as well as widows, and its archive is an extraordinary source for the study of childhood and early youth in Tuscany between the XV and the XIX centuries. Wards entrusted to guardians who received alimony and were supposed to educate the children sending them to school or to a shop where they might learn a trade, were often used as servants in the guardian's own household. They were also put to work as rural labourers and shepherds. Some of those children wrote to the Florentine magistrate denouncing such unfair treatment often motivated by the guardian's will to gain the alimony which was paid on the ward's behalf, using it for his own private needs. Thus in 1638 three adolescents, two brothers Pietro and Francesco Cannesi and their sister Fortunata, after their father's and mother's death, had been entrusted to their uncle, who received eleven scudi a month for bed and board. Notwithstanding the magistrate's sentence which prescribed that the two boys be sent to school and the girl placed in a monastery for her education, the three children had never left their guardian's home. Their eldest brother Bastiano, coming of age, had filed a suit against his uncle, claiming that he had unjustly embezzled the maintenance, not giving his brothers and sister any education. Therefore, the magistrate summoned the three children who could finally speak for themselves. This is how, in the final report, Francesco is described: "the boy is tam quam tabula rasa in qua nihil est depictum". His brother Pietro, "crying and sobbing desperately said he could very seldom go to school, but had to go to the market every day and carry heavy weights. He was dressed miserably." Fortunata, their sister "has the right age to enter a convent so that she may learn how to read and write. She is a quick and intelligent girl, but in her uncle's house no one can teach her anything."³³ Gradually, following the case, we learn that the two brothers became what we would call "juvenile delinquents" and Fortunata developed into a melancholic with a tendency to mysticism.

A similar story concerns another 14-year-old adolescent, Bartolomeo Bussotti, entrusted to a guardian named by the *Magistrato dei Pupilli*. They lived in the countryside and it is Bartolomeo's own voice that we hear describing his harsh existence as a country labourer.

I've lived in my guardian's house with my sister since the end of the Quarantine. I don't want to go on living here any longer because I have to spend all the time looking after all sorts of animals except goats, and at night I have to go and cut the grass for the animals, and if I don't cut it, in the morning my guardian beats me with a stick saying that he has the authority to do so ... I do not want to be his servant because if I pay him it is not right that I serve him.³⁴

Bartolomeo expressed an unusually sharp awareness of his own rights – indeed the alimony that the guardian received was paid from the ward's patrimony – and the boy

³³ ASE, MPAP, F. 2293, 104.

42 ³⁴ ASE, MPAP, F. 823, 826–828, 8 agosto 1637.

interpreted correctly the reversal of roles that he had been unjustly experiencing. He also accused his guardian of planning a marriage between himself and the guardian's own daughter in order to lay his hands on the ward's patrimony.

6. Widows

As I have mentioned, the *Magistrato dei Pupilli* was also in charge of widows: young women who had not yet reached 25 years of age and were still in care of a guardian, as well as older women who, having lost their husband, were in charge of their children and were often given the usufruct over the family's patrimony. While adult widows who did not remarry generally lived with their children in their dead husband's home, those under age could return to their father's house. The right of "tornata" has been studied especially for the late Middle Ages in Tuscany.³⁵ It aimed at providing young widows, generally with no children, with their family's protection while waiting to regain their dowry and perhaps planning a new marriage. Away from Florence however, in the periphery of the Granduchy, or, as we shall see, in the small towns of the Mugello close to the Apennines, the right of *tornata* could hide a regression to servitude behind the formal staging of family protection.

Another profile emerges from my documents: that of a young woman living in her father's house as a widow with her baby daughter. Once more we are confronted with the construction of a collective narrative, of shared assumptions, borne from that typical *ancien régime* form of social control originated in the concern, sometimes solidarity, of neighbours who watch over one another's lives, indulging the gossip. Lisabetta Giunti, back in her father's home after the loss of her husband, attracted notice in Borgo San Lorenzo. In 1686, when the story takes place, the young widow lived with her child, her brothers and an unmarried sister. Her father was a wealthy man, but kept no apprentices or servants in the house. "When Lisabetta goes out she is properly dressed, but when she is at home she behaves like a small servant," said an old woman living close by.

I hardly ever saw her go out, except when I took her with me to church in the morning. Back from Mass, she undressed and stayed at home all day. She has no other help save myself, when I can. Lisabetta serves everyone in the house: she cooks, cleans the floor, washes the dishes, sews and she does all this every day because from my window I see everything. Sometimes she's had to work so hard that she couldn't even go to church.³⁶

35 Cf. Isabelle Chabot, "La sposa in nero". La ritualizzazione del lutto delle vedove fiorentine (secoli XIV–XV), in: Quaderni Storici, 19, 86 (1994), 421–462; idem, Between Control and Protection. Lineage Strategies and the Widows in Renaissance Florence, in: Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner eds., *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, London 1999, 127–144; Thomas Kuehn, *Law, Family and Women. Toward a Legal Anthropology of Renaissance Italy*, Chicago 1991.

36 ASF, MPAP, F. 2415, 113, agosto 1686.

The local tailor, who went to the house twice a year, testified that Lisabetta's father was a "well-to-do" or rather a "rich" man, and yet "Lisabetta dressed and combed herself, her daughter, her father, brothers and even her younger sister. I saw her setting the table and bringing the food she had cooked with her own hands and I heard her say that she was everybody's servant. She also mended their clothes." Just like a servant, "Lisabetta and her child ate alone in the kitchen."³⁷

An interesting remark that both witnesses made is that, in spite of his wealth, the father kept no servants in the house. Lisabetta's service, just like that of the adolescents we met earlier, confirms the existence of an irregular, less visible, semi-clandestine and at times illegal work force produced by recurrent life-cycle crisis in the family. In other words, orphans and widows, just like natural and illegitimate children, at any moment could regress to the status of domestic servants, both in urban and rural contexts. Minority, lack of legal capacity, physical and psychological fragility are common traits in their early youth. Legal devices aimed at protecting them such as guardianship and *tornata* could turn, if manipulated by crafty relatives, into loopholes for exploiting them.

Yet in some cases and in a later period, young men and women also expressed resistance and refusal. Sometimes, especially in the course of the 18th century, girls voiced a stubborn rejection of marriage, the religious profession and domestic service, perhaps attempting to refuse what appeared to be a 'destiny' decided by others. The last story takes place in S. Miniato, a small town near Pisa, in 1743. Interestingly enough it does not concern an urban milieu, but a poor rural family headed by Ludovico Cantini a farm-labourer who lived with his wife, a blind sister and a young niece who had reached the age of marriage. The girl, Santa, sent a letter to the *Magistrato dei Pupilli* in Florence, expressing in simple and ungrammatical language her clear-cut will: "I have asked the magistrate to summon my uncle. As the decision was that I go and work as a servant, [I declare that] I don't want to go and there is no need to make such a fuss about it. I want my uncle to give me alimony every month. Why doesn't he go and work as a servant?"³⁸ Santa had served a master for a few days and this is what the latter wrote to the local judge: "I declare that Giuseppe Cantini employed Santa as a chambermaid in my service. After three days she fled my home without ever coming back."³⁹ I think it is worth noticing the different terms which, in this brief statement, define domestic service: employment rather than service, chambermaid rather than servant. Was a status of passive personal servitude receiving the formal recognition of a regular employment, possibly settled by a written agreement and a salary as the Tuscan law required? Obviously I have not enough evidence to follow this path.

I would just like to make a final remark regarding the ways in which family relations of service and deference are expressed in the texts I have analysed. Without touching the

37 ASE, MPAP, F. 2415, 118.

38 ASE, MPAP, F. 2301, 214, febbraio 1743.

39 ASE, MPAP, F. 2301, 31 maggio.

long-debated historiographical argument which years ago divided family historians around the issue of emotionally warm or cold *ancien régime* societies, I think it is of great interest and importance to decode and disentangle the complex chains of interdependence that structured the lives of men and women in early modern societies, where the language of dependence and hierarchy, not that of freedom and equality, created asymmetrical ties of devotion and affection.

Scholars generally agree that up to the XIX century servant population in early modern Europe appeared to be “complex and multifaceted”, servant identities difficult to define and that the presence of different kinds of servants in urban and rural households is “precisely one of the reasons why the study of domestic service is crucial to the comprehension of the functioning of early modern societies”.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Sarti, Forum, see note 1, 188.

