

The Savelli Murder Project: Narrative

Thomas Cohen
History
York University

A Story

On the last night of her life, Vittoria Savelli wore an old shift. She lay in her bed, in her quirky little bedroom cut concave by the ballooning indoor wall of the old round tower of her husband's castle. Now, on the last night of his life, toward his end, Troiano Savelli wore nothing at all. He lay in the same room and bed, atop Vittoria. One can only surmise what tenderness or elation mingled with the thrills of their sexual union. Alongside good feelings, there may have been as well a wary undertow of fear, for Troiano, despite his surname, was not Vittoria's husband. This then was adultery. That was already bad enough, and, to make things worse, the act took place inside the husband's house. To make matters yet graver still, Troiano was neither wholly noble, nor even legitimate, for he had sprung of a union between the local lord and a peasant woman. But, worst of all, Vittoria and Troiano, in their bed, wallowed in incest, for Troiano, son of the husband's father, was his brother. None of this had deterred the lovers from their reckless union.

So begins a story, set in the Roman foothills, in July, 1563. The tale can go forward, to the crash with which, by torchlight, the husband, dagger in hand kicked in the lovers' door, and, escorted by his servants, first made indignant speeches and then slaughtered his wife and bastard brother. And it can go back, to the marriage of the hapless couple, five years earlier, to the birth of their daughter, to the beginnings of the love-intrigue eight months back, at Christmas, and to all the indiscretions that spread the word in village and in castle. After the carnage, wrought under the wide eyes of terrified serving women, would come the curious ceremonies of closure and equilibration: the peremptory sealing of the mortal chamber, of the castle, and of the entire village, and then the long wait, for two July days, while the corpses rotted and the anxious captive peasants traded in wild rumours, until finally, like a magic prince in a fairy tale, Vittoria's brother, Ludovico, appeared outside the gates and unlocked the three accursed circles -- walls, castle and room, sealed by the killer's dire instructions. Only with the sibling's advent could the village and the castle move from frozen horror to grief, explanation, blame, and reconciliation.

A Lesson

This story is one of many I have picked up in the Archivio di Stato in Rome, unravelling the tortured chronology and the array of characters and motives from the often contorted, always lively testimony, taken verbatim, of witnesses to criminal trials. For years, I have reconstructed obscure moments from the Renaissance Roman past, in the pursuit of the cultural anthropology of that very Mediterranean, very honour-besotted world. I have used these tales to chase down values, habits of seeing and explaining, patterns of making friends and enemies, and habits of transaction of every sort. I have also shaped my tales, as a writer, with esthetic goals in mind. We historians, and our publics, love a story.

Ever since, some 15 years ago, I first fetched back Roman trials, I have also used them copiously to teach. In general, I prefer the stories raw, not reconstructed. When possible, I give them to students in the original Latin (for the questions) and Italian (for the answers). With the very best students, I use facsimiles of the manuscripts themselves. It is wonderful material, for there is nothing like sex, violence, death, and skulduggery to hold the student mind. And a trial, with its contradictions, gaps, sly evasions, and abundant loose ends stimulates the mind and rewards close reading, systematic collation, and mental stretch.

This past May, I had extraordinary luck. I had known the Savelli murder trial for several years and so, three years back, had stopped in Cretone, the village of the crime, to look the castle over. I had found it

in the midst of scaffolding and rubble, under energetic reconstruction. A few friendly words with workers led my wife and me to the site architect who, on hearing of the ancient crime, agreed to take the two of us around, to see if we could track the corpses down. We three went everywhere, from basement to attic, to no avail. But then, this year, Roman contacts took me to Dottressa Fiora Bellini, an art historian curator of [Castel Sant'Angelo museum](#), on the Tiber bank, and cousin of the present owners of Cretone castle. Fiora, with typical Roman hospitality, not only fed me cake and coffee, but led me to two treasures: the circa-1900 blueprints of the castle, and the head architect of the recent restoration. The blueprints were a treasure; they showed all four facades, both before and after a restoration, two internal elevations cutting north-south and east-west, and floor plans of all five levels of the edifice. As for the architect, it turned out he had a little apartment in the newly renovated building, on the mezzanine --level four, and the *gentilezza* to offer three importunate Canadians a tour.

A few days later, Signor Tarquini, the architect, met my family at the castle door, and again we made the rounds, learning countless quirks of the building's evolution. But at the end, we were still baffled: where did the husband sleep? Where the anguished damsels and the little girl? And where was the upstairs window from which the bastard lover had let himself down the outside walls by cords into the helpful arms, window, and bed of his married paramour? It was only on the last morning of our research trip, as I photographed the blueprints on my Roman balcony, before restoring them to Fiora at her castle office, that suddenly, like Archimedes, I caught on. The little southwest window atop the round tower! From there to the roof, now removed to make a terrace, and from the roof to the north face to the corner window....!

And so my pedagogical device. First-year History courses at York are unusual, for they offer small groups narrow topics, using them as a device for teaching critical skills and historical method. We put our surveys in year two. Mine, History1000B, spends a whole year on Michelangelo's Rome and Pepys's London, delving into the politics, high culture, institutions, and social anthropology of the two cities. This year, my thirty students have had the [murder trial](#), the shreds of [notarial records](#) of the Savelli household, and the [blueprints](#), all eleven of them. And, as icing on the cake, my tourist [photos](#) of the village and its splendid setting and of my wife and daughter clambering all over the hulking castle, looking for the scene of the crime. The assignment: find those corpses, and with them unlock the entire story. Three main tasks: make a full timeline, from start to finish. Make a full roster of all participants, with everything you know about each. And annotate the blueprints, showing every event: the lovers, the spies, the maids, the fateful window, the chambre of the carnage. And then write an essay justifying all your judgments. Students worked in teams and shared a collective grade. We took class time for comparing notes and trading hunches. When the York strike threw all pedagogy into turmoil, I used the project as a device for class solidarity, bouncing hints by email to all and sundry. At one point, I summoned all the students to a meeting, off campus, in an Italian pastry shop where, over vast trays of panettone and countless cups of caffè latte, they compared notes and speculated as to where the page had lurked before tossing pebbles through his master's window: "It's time!"

The project was a tremendous success. It taught many lessons at once. Perhaps the most important was liberation: my students were not just learning history, but also making it, in that word's second sense, "story." The experience demonstrated perfectly how much of what they read in books and articles is a work of more or less authoritative reconstruction, an artifice of intellect, and no mere report of truth easily known. Thus, by virtue of the Savelli murder project, my year-one history students were admitted to the loose fraternity of real scholars. A second lesson, one stressed eternally in what I teach, was the importance of details. Eye counts, be it to words, or to blue prints. A third lesson was spatial thinking, and the tricky move from two to three dimensions. A fourth was the application of small to large and back, that is, connecting details of one story to all that they had learned about Renaissance Rome and its values and patterns of action. A fifth lesson, much enjoyed, was the contemplation of narration as an intellectual device. Where to start the story? The beginning? Perhaps! Or the end? Or in the middle, with flashes back and forward for intellectual coherence? I evoked cinema, a narrative form they know better than print, and invited them to take an imaginary camera in hand, zooming, panning, tracking, and making segues. And who should play the martyred wife? "I'll be the wife," said one spirited youngster, "and Tom Cruise can be my lover!" In no time, it was Harvey Keitel or Arnold Schwarzenegger for the

brutal husband, but then, of course, all our cinematic fantasies threw us back, as I had wanted, to the thought that any narrative and casting, however dusty-dry or decadent and juicy, is always a "work of interpretation."

The exercise spun out further. One student, without informing me of her intentions, took the blueprints and a lot of cardboard and papier mache, to her grandmother; the two of them built a very exact [model of half the castle](#), "anatomically correct" (well, mostly) in profile and floor plan. A graduate student who is helping with the class wrote up the case --interlocking flashbacks, as a study in grief and reconciliation, and then gave it with great panache at a local conference. She garnished [her talk](#) with the student's model, as did I at a different session, same story, but pondering liminality, among professors. My model-builder came along and marvelled at the intensity of scholarly debate. I had hoped to have one last session, where each student wrote his or her own first paragraph of a narrative; an annoying blizzard wiped that project out. Later, the graduate student read the class her paper, in an attentive room, as an example of what young scholars do and a lesson in the esthetics and logic of interpretation. And on the midterm, an [essay question](#), optional among several, asked students to reflect on lessons learned.

As a follow-up, in second term, my class has moved to seventeenth-century London, where the central document is Pepys's diary. Alongside the diary's fact, they have the recent fiction, *Jem (and Sam)*, a novel by Ferdinand Mount. So, all the while they mine the diary for social and cultural history, they also ponder the mechanics and the truth, if any, of a work of imagination only loosely tethered to the historical record. Having "been there" themselves, they understand what the historical novelist is working with.

Utility of This Model

What I did here is hard to replicate; the blueprints were a stroke of crazy luck. But maps and urban panoramas can also serve. What a teacher needs is a combination of the spatial and the verbal, and a puzzle in need of solving. Where did Columbus first touch shore? Why did the French not see the English climbing to the Plains of Abraham? Where was Marco Polo camped? Ideally, multiple voices and varied images make the quest more interesting, and more useful, for they then demand sifting and collation. As for the story, best of all is one not yet told; the blank page liberates the students from the authority of print and screen.

[Click here](#) for references, links and further information about the Savelli Murder Project in History 1000B.