# Contemplating *Upon the Children*

*Bernadette Waterman Ward**

PREFACE: With the help of eight actors, I presented a draft of my drama *Upon the Children* at the St. Paul conference of University Faculty for Life in June 2023. The theme of the conference was "Policy Considerations Post-Roe." Since I am not a lawyer or political scientist, my thought turned to the roots of the problem, most of all in the issues surrounding fatherhood. A scholarly sociological paper on fatherhood would take me outside my discipline. Fundamental to the discipline of the study of literature is the idea that the most effective way to say something is often by telling a story. Therefore, I wrote a play.

*Educated at Harvard and Stanford, Bernadette Waterman Ward is a Professor of English at the University of Dallas. She wrote *Eliot's Angels: Rene Girard, George Eliot and Mimetic Desire* (2022) and *World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins* (2001). A past president and current secretary of the St. John Henry Newman Association, she has served on its board for more than two decades, and she has written numerous articles on Newman. On the board of scholars for the Hopkins Quarterly, she writes frequently on Hopkins. She is president of Phi Beta Kappa, Eta of Texas. She is also on the board of University Faculty for Life, and in that capacity has published on more recent literature. She has published one drama, The Crack in the Door. She publishes and performs poetry as part of the Bonehouse Collective. As a volunteer, she teaches English to immigrants.

MY PLAY INVOLVES THE INTERACTIONS OF FIVE CHARACTERS: Giambattista, Mariah, Blaise, Juliet, and Martin. The center of the action is a character I named Giambattista Winter. I chose the Italian name Giambattista, or John the Baptist, partly because, as the character Martin says, 'He was sanctified in his mother's womb." The Biblical John the Baptist is part of the action of the

story before his birth, as he leaps in the womb when his mother Elizabeth receives a visit from Mary, the mother of Christ. John grows to be a prophet in the wilderness, calling upon people to recognize and repent their sins. Eventually, he rebukes Herod Antipas for a sexual sin; Herod has married his brother's wife, Herodias. Condemning the incest puts him in prison. The play's Giambatttista faintly recalls that Oscar Wilde wrote a play about the daughter of Herodias, who dances so well that he asks her to name any present and it will be given. She requests John's head on a platter, and he is beheaded.

John the Baptist is an image of bold willingness to offend against corrupt authorities, and a similar moral passion drives my character. However, Giambattista is no holy prophet. Indeed, he is an atheist who is attending a Catholic college because he wants to offend his father. There is irony in his name, because the manner of his conception effectively cursed him in his mother's womb-for-rent. His anger is the driver of the main moral argument presented in the play, and it has to do with the formation of his family.

Giambattista was conceived to an order placed by two gay men: a prosperous and cultivated writer, Conrad Winter, and his lover of four years at the time, Grigor Yefimovich Kholodnostov. Again, the names were chosen carefully. Josef Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, chronicling unacknowledged slavery in the Belgian Congo. The syllables of the first name evoke slang for deceit and faddishness. His approach to parenting I associate with imagery of cold in the play, hence "Winter" as a surname. "Grigor Yefimovich" is the name by which his friends and acquaintances called the devilish Russian monk Rasputin, who preyed on the family of the last Russian czar. Still ferociously aggressive after cyanide and gunshot, he died under the ice of the frozen river Neva. "Kholodnostov" turns a word meaning chill—especially social coldness—into the shape of a Russian surname. Giambattista was implanted into a woman of whom he knows nothing save her dark-skinned appearance in the background of a photograph at his birth. He has had two nannies. One, a Filipina, was apparently getting "too attached" to the boy, so his fathers dismissed her and took the five-year-old to Europe. (I envision them taking him to museums to see works like *The Feast of Antony and Cleopatra*, by their favorite painter, the eighteenth-century Venetian School master, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, for whom the baby was named.) Upon their return, they hired a new nanny, a Mexican

woman unnamed in the play but known to me as Señora Santos. Giambattista goes for daycare to the house she shares with her husband Modesto and their many children; only Modesto comes into the story by name, and only through Giambattista's narrative. Nevertheless, his house is where Giambattista sees a man taking action according to paternal responsibility.

Conrad and "Griggy" have a fairly common sort of open gay marriage: sexual affairs are allowed, but outside emotional connection must be policed. Conrad's outside sexual contacts mainly serve his professional advancement as a writer in the high-end publishing world. Giambattista has resentments toward both of them, but most of all toward Conrad, who depicted him as a political tool for gay rights in a series of articles written after the pattern of the essay about "acquiring babies," written by Dan Savage, "Status is . . . for Gay Men, the Baby."[1] The remote genesis of this play is my casually reading that article in 1998, and thinking, with lead in the pit of my stomach, of what it would be like for this child as a teenager reading, "My little status item spat up on me this morning . . . .assumptions can be made about a gay couple's finances if they have acquired a human infant to love, protect and accessorize." Savage evidently relishes his own emotional coolness and stylish irony in accounting for the desire to be a parent:

> That so many gay men are having children at this moment is perhaps the best evidence that we are coming out of the AIDS-crisis bunkers. And many of us have decided we want to fill our time with something more meaningful than sit-ups, circuit parties and designer drugs.

This quotation follows his attitudinizing about having a responsibility to make sure that "the sanctity of his family is respected." What is missing is, of course, a real moral connection between himself and the purchase he explicitly considers the boy to be. This traffic in children who are made, not begotten, is not *precisely* slavery—like the human exploitation that burns at the basis of *Heart of Darkness*—but it is in fact a similarly cynical enjoyment of reducing some human beings to existing as the tools of others' pleasure.

---

[1] Dan Savage, "Status is . . . for Gay Men, the Baby." *The New York Times Magazine,* November 15, 1998. https://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/15/magazine/status-is-for-gay-men-the-baby.html

To alert the audience to that horror, Griggy's part in Giambattista's backstory is an even more glaring example of reducing human beings to instrumentality. Griggy's sexual contacts are more purely carnal than Conrad's. During Giambattista's childhood he took to picking up male prostitutes among the teen runaway population of Manhattan, where they live. Addicted to pornography, Griggy shares his pleasures with his legal son. Modesto sees the texts and destroys the phone. Soon after, Conrad discovers that Griggy has been moving toward seducing the boy, and he turns Griggy in to the authorities. Giambattista acknowledges the virtue in this defense of his childhood, but cannot forget that Conrad condoned Griggy's abuse of the young until it began to touch Giambattista. Conrad articulates his reasoning in a way that matches what a woman named Rilene said about witnessing (adult) incest at a homosexual gathering she was attending with her lover:[2]

> I had a kind of visceral reaction, and I was really shaken, and I kind of said to Margo [Rilene's lover], "Are those twins that are making love to each other?", and she said, "Yeah," and I said, "Do you think that's right?" and she said, "Well, you know, if we start judging them, then people can start judging us." It was one of those points in time where my conscience was alerted to the point that I really, I had the opportunity. It was blatant enough that I had the opportunity to step away. But I didn't.

The idea that disapproval of any kind of sexual indulgence is the act of an oppressor, a violation of some essential liberty, is not exclusive to the homosexual community. It is, for instance, one of the leading notions among the brutal blackshirts who have called themselves, without ironic intent, "Anti-fascist"—because they have redefined "fascist" and "Nazi" to mean something entirely different from the historical meaning, as Heidegger redefined "nihilism" to mean "belief in truth and being." [3]

---

[2] *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, video produced by Courage, the Catholic group for chastity among Catholics with same-sex attraction, (2015) minutes 39-41.

[3] "He gives the forgetting of the question of Being and the ascent of metaphysics the name *nihilism* because metaphysics treats that question as if it were nothing." Gregory Fried, "The King is Dead: Heidegger's Black Notebooks, *Los Angeles Review of Books* online, September 13, 2014 (https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/king-dead-heideggers-black-notebooks/)

Both because he rebels against the separation between childbearing and parenting—in fact, between sex and children, though he does not know this at first—and because he has no grounding from which to rebel, Giambattista is a dangerous character. He wants to make proper judgments. He wants rules and guardrails, but he has no guidance apart from his feelings of disgust at the wrongs he can identify: hypocrisy, lechery, and the tyranny of lies. In the play, he is courteous and polished, but wily and vengeful. His rage moves most of the plot. Disgusted with hypocritical administrators at a school that advertises its conservative Catholicism, he involves his roommate Blaise in entrapping a professor who preys on young men sexually, planning the event in such a way as to corner the administrators so they cannot conceal it. Then he plans an act of vandalism against a monument to gay rights that his father favors; in this he fails, and only injures his roommate Martin. Lastly, he forces Blaise to confront the deadly cruelty into which he has fallen by fathering a child without caring for any children that might result from his action.

It is only after his dangerous and even arrogant gesture to correct Blaise that the college officials haul him into a hearing to suspend him. He knows he had other motives in entrapping the professor and rebuking Blaise, but the rage underlying all three events was a festering resentment of his father. He wanted to shame his father even to the extent of becoming a damaged trophy. Resentment has entrapped him in self-destruction as surely as Griggy's lust and Conrad's Envy-turned-Pride. In recognizing that his righteous anger has itself made him insensitive to the damage he causes others—especially Martin—he begins to learn forgiveness. His turn to this new position is the central moral action of the play.

The lust of Blaise, and his clumsy attempt to escape its consequences by lying, ignites Giambattista's harshest plot to punish an offender. The name "Blaise" seems to mean "flame"; its root, however, is a word meaning "stutter."[4] I surnamed him "Wilde," referring both to the adjective and to the Victorian writer who betrayed his wife and children for more exciting sexual adventures with men. Blaise is at first simply adventurous, a risk-taker who loves mountaineering. He has been raised by a strong father and mother, but

[4] https://nameberry.com/babyname/blaise/boy

he has a moral deficiency: his phone has entangled him in pornography. Blaise sees no harm in viewing unreal images of sexualized women. He has been isolated from actual women and girls by the confinement imposed by the pandemic. The pornographic images present women as disposable commodities, for whose degradation he feels no responsibility. (He presumes that the women are appearing voluntarily, which is not always the case—though indeed sometimes it is.) The commodification of women and the commodification of purchased children Giambattista recognizes as related evils.

Blaise does not think that the attitude that pornography has fostered extends to real women whom he meets, but he learns otherwise. Blaise impregnates his girlfriend Juliet on an outdoor trip, when they are trapped by a storm and must spend the night in the same sleeping bag in a snow cave. The opportunism is imaged by the chilly locale; he has not connected his sexual activity to warm love, to the real practice of fatherhood. Confronted with his evasions by his own father, an ex-Marine who demands that Blaise take manly responsibility, Blaise eventually goes to meet his infant daughter and asks Juliet to marry him. Several readers thought this was too pat an ending, though it follows the classic comic pattern. As the play is revised and cast into verse, I will have to solve the problem of developing the subplot of the relationship between Juliet and Blaise adequately. It will take some careful writing to keep the pregnancy plot from overwhelming the main moral plot involving Giambattista and forgiveness.

Juliet Rask has a last name meaning "hasty" in Norwegian. Her first name comes from the Shakespearean heroine, who is deliberately made shockingly young by Shakespeare in a play about imprudence and intemperance.[5] Like Blaise, she has felt isolated in the pandemic lockdowns, and like him, she has married parents. However, there is a flaw in her upbringing. Her parents are frightened perfectionists who treat breaches of decorum almost as seriously as moral offenses; like the parents in *Romeo and Juliet,* they do not understand their daughter's real desires. They cherish merely abstractions about what a young woman ought to be. Shut off from the real world—and probably too immersed in movies, though that has not

---

[5] Joseph Pearce, "Romeo and Juliet in a Nutshell," *Crisis Magazine* online edition, July 31, 2021.

come into this version of the play—Juliet is overwhelmed by how Blaise has done exciting, even heroic things. Like her namesake in the play, she falls into the arms of a young man whose sexuality fixes on the objects of his sight, and whose temperament is hasty and unstable. He represents to her the reality that the lockdowns kept out of her life; but he himself has not been operating entirely in reality, especially through his use of pornography. Juliet thinks in abstract romantic terms, which need to be communicated more fully in the play; Blaise has seen images of many female bodies but has not even imagined the interior life of a real woman. He has never realistically confronted the emotional or physical risks of real sexual contact. I must in the next draft communicate her sentimental ideas about the inherent connection of sex and love, perhaps with an acceptance of the current gay slogan “love is love.” Neither Blaise nor Juliet has thought of sexual love in terms of service to another or to the resulting children. He has miseducated himself; she has been enmeshed in abstractions, symbolized by her father’s insistence on wearing a mask even in Zoom meetings. Readers suggested that I give her more maturity after the birth of the child, and this does seem like an opportunity for exploring how distress can shock one into maturity.

Mariah also has symbolism behind her name—fully Mariah Jo Mallory. The surname, never used in the play, is both literary and sorrowful in its associations. The backstory of her name is that her middle name honors her mother’s brother Joe, a bachelor and computer scientist who shares the house and pays most of its mortgage. Without much authority over the twin sisters, he loves them and tries to do his best for them while their intemperate and harsh mother deals with the complications of chosen single motherhood. I gave him the name of the name of the legal father of Jesus. *Mariah* and *Jo* are also part of the lyrics of a popular song, "They call the Wind Mariah" from a Western-themed musical, *Paint Your Wagon*. It is about a man who has abandoned the girl he loved, and the relevant verse is, “the rain is Tess, the fire is Jo, and they call the wind Mariah.” Fire and wind are associated with the Holy Spirit; my character is open to spiritual influence far more than Giambattista, Blaise, or Juliet.

Mariah’s backstory is nearly as sad as Giambattista’s. She meets him while they are both studying *Frankenstein*. Both reveal that they are test-tube babies. She has less anger at her mother for her treatment after her birth than at her immediate physical ancestors. She resents that her egg and sperm

"donors" sold their parenthood without any care for what would happen to the children thus generated. This thematic strain runs through every one of the characters, but Mariah articulates it. Juliet gives no thought to children, dreaming only of the experience of love; Blaise does not connect fatherhood with his more carnal sexuality; Giambattista despises pornography, homosexual relations, and the business of the acquisition of designer children as all part of the same package. Mariah condemns her physical ancestors for selling her instead of attending to their parental connections, and her mother for spending the money that tempts people to engage in this abomination. Like Giambattista, she is angry, but her uncle Joe has held her back from self-destruction.

Her anger has to do with the connections that she has been denied and the killing that has engulfed others to whom she is physically related. She has one living sister, her twin, but knows that many others, siblings or half-siblings, probably still live somewhere unknown to her. She also knows that many of them have not been allowed to live, existing either in a frozen state or destroyed though the abortions that are demanded by the corporations that handle *in vitro* pregnancies if too many of the fertilized eggs implant. Unlike Giambattista, who knows his physical father is one of the men who raised him, Mariah does not know her birth parents, and she feels keenly the lack of connection. Her sister Cindy, feeling the same rootlessness, has tried to either destroy or invent herself in various ways, and as the play opens is claiming a transgender identity. The audience never sees Cindy, changeable as the moon goddess behind her name, but they hear of Mariah's anxiety. Mariah has picked up some of her Uncle Joe's quiet Catholicism, and therefore is not as rootless as Cindy. Mariah holds to a religious identity, however faintly transmitted. The fatherly love of a man who is not her father has saved her, and she is because of him open to spiritual counsel.

That counsel comes from Martin Flambeau. His surname means a flaming torch; his Christian name comes from St. Martin de Porres, a Dominican friar who could make peace even among animals. Yet the name is also martial, meaning "dedicated to War." Martin is interested in "spiritual warfare,"—he speaks freely of battling demons—and he intends to be a monk. Martin comes from a healthy African-American family whose grandfather lives with the parents and their five children in New Orleans. His father has trained him in his construction business, which specializes in

hurricane repair. Martin is rather intemperate in expressing his conservative political opinions, proud of the way his family's strong, even rigid religiosity has saved them from the disorder that has plagued his extended family.

Martin is the spiritual anchor of the play. He convinces both Mariah and Giambattista that although their parents arranged their lives artificially, God has willed their existence. This is a morally healing concept for them. It allows Giambattista to acknowledge his origins in his father's pride and political machinations, but he gives the primary responsibility to God—and therefore can stop desiring to punish Conrad. It allows Mariah to look for the good in her existence when she can only see, in worldly terms, that she is the result of a mistaken judgment made by her mother—that children would soothe her pride and solve the shame and loneliness that sprang from her inability to form a family with a man. Once Mariah takes up the idea that her existence has some higher origin than the various corruptions of her biological and legal parents, Mariah is able to see the good in her mother's care for the twins who disappointed her rosy-imagined future.

Martin and Mariah are able to step in when the panicked Juliet and Blaise are considering abortion. Mariah seizes the good her mother has managed to do as a single mother and offers to care for the child. Martin calls Blaise to parental responsibility, and at his cue Giambattista arranges his dangerous confrontation with his abandonment of Juliet. The ending is perhaps oversweet; the child is born, and Juliet and Blaise intend to raise the child together. But the real victory, as Martin articulates, is the power of forgiveness that Mariah and Giambattista are able to seize.

The play infuses that story of spiritual success with the evils of our time. The characters articulate the connections among commercial sex, pornography, commercial pregnancy, and child abuse. The subtler undermining of identity by the disconnection between sex and family, creating a desperate need for self-definition, haunts the background. The characters whom the audience sees most clearly exhibiting this attempt at self-invention are Conrad and his college roommate Willie, who visit Giambattista on their way to their college reunion. Conrad defines himself by his accomplishments—material that Giambattista is determined to deny him in his own case. Willie defines himself by belonging to political or sexual or collegiate in-groups. His eagerness to show off his Harvard credentials

makes him ridiculous, despised by the young men with a more stable sense of identity—though in the case of Blaise, not more stable morals.

The play needs work on pacing. It needs some re-examination of sections of harsh language, and some matters of plot need restructuring, especially to give Juliet more stature and maturity. It needs work on beauty in its language, probably by being cast into verse.

Nevertheless, this early draft has made it possible for me to work out some thematic connections, by way of story, that were not obvious to me until I traced them in the lives of characters whose distress I could imagine and explore. I hope it has opened some fruitful areas of thought for the necessarily small audience of UFFL members. For their advice and help I am grateful.