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*People and Property in Florence and Venice*

Comparisons between Venice and Florence are a classic theme in Italian Renaissance historiography. The similarities and contrasts between family and housing structures in the two cities constitute a subject of great interest, even though it has been hindered by some fundamental differences in the sources available. For Venice, for example, there is no systematic report like the Florentine sources available. For Venice, for example, there is no systematic report like the Florentine sources available. For Venice, for example, there is no systematic report like the Florentine sources available. For Venice, for example, there is no systematic report like the Florentine catasto identified.

5.1 Cesare Vecellio, Family Portrait, Venice, 1550s

The painting portrays various members of a family from the Veneto, ranging from a small child on her mother’s lap to the figures of the old man in the foreground representing the patriarchal head of the family. The bonds of blood and affection are highlighted through the gestures connecting different members of the group. The coat of arms has not been identified.

There are very few family record books (libri di registers), in which the head of the family wrote down important events, such as births, marriages and deaths. Consequently, notarial records, especially wills, have been privileged. This has unexpectedly brought to light the importance of ties among women in the relationships between families, an aspect that is less apparent in the Florentine family record books kept by the patrified families. 1 We should not, however, define these two cities by their sources and the varied perspectives they disclose. In fact, the typical structures of the family are very revealing and form a necessary starting point for an investigation of the household and ways of living within it.2

DOMESTIC SPACE, GENDER AND OWNERSHIP

The house is such an identifying location for a family that the very word itself, casa, embodies the dual semantic meaning of a habitable building and the group of individuals living in it, in residence and family intended, particularly in wealthy social groups, as a line of descent and, in a broader sense, as a lineage (plate 5.1). For elite families the identification of casa (house) with casa (family), often manifested by the presence of family coats of arms on the façade, was reinforced by the ownership of the building and the convergence of several nuclear families of different generations living under the same roof. Not everyone, however, owned a ‘family house’. Late-medieval tax records, such as the famous Florentine catasto of 1427, clearly demonstrate that within working-class families cohabiting groups were much smaller, with less complex structures, and were generally based in rented houses or parts of them.3 While a degree of residential mobility characterized the experience of the less well off, the ‘immobile’ house was a symbolic as well as a material possession for the family and preventing them from being dispersed.

The communal statutes of central and northern Italy appear to provide a conclusive answer: between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries a new legal system excluded women from owning immobile property belonging to the family line, and accorded it exclusively to men. Daughters and sisters who left home in order to marry or enter a convent received a portion of the inheritance, in the form of a dote, or dowry, calculated on the basis of the family’s mobile goods. Among the land-owning elites, daughters were provided with money, while the rest of the inheritance was divided equally between all the sons. But attempts were made to preserve the integrity of strategic goods, as well as symbolic ones, such as any houses, towers, city palaces (palazzi) or castles situated on the land owned. In Venice, however, some immobile goods were more easily accessed by women: these were de foris goods, located outside the city, and were the first items from a dowry to be returned to a widow on the death of her husband, as was customary. De foris and mobile goods were as one in Venetian law, resulting in the paradox that immobile sites on the mainland were considered to be ‘mobile’, and therefore inheritable by women, while houses and palazzi built in the lagoon, on the uncertain divide between earth and water, were ‘immobile’. Retaining urban palaces within the family and preventing them from being dispersed along the female line was a common preoccupation among European patricians and nobility. In Venice, where the hunt and buildable environment, shored up from the waters, was so precious and limited, this strategy became a necessity for survival.

Legal records confirm that this was a universal phenomenon. In Venice very few houses were included in the dowries of the daughters of the elites marrying for the first time. If the dowry could not be given in money, it was preferable to relinquish land than to hand over built property. On his deathbed a father generally preferred to leave the family house to his sons. Matteo Sforza’s will of 12 October 1429 is emblematic of this desire to keep the family house within the line of direct descent and, in the absence of heirs, within the lateral

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branches of the family line.

I wish that the house where I live in corso Strozzi should be left to my sons and their descendants and that it should never be sold or given up in any other way, except to my descendants in the male line, and if they fail, to the descendants of Filippo di Messer Leonardo, and if they fail, to the descendants of Messer Euchicheo degl’Strozzi.¹

If these various male candidates were lacking, Matteo Strozzi preferred to leave the house to the city's two great convents of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce rather than to allow it to be dispensed forever by the female line. A piano bequest to the church had the added advantage of supporting his desire for eternal life. There are many similar examples in male wills but here we will limit ourselves to examining the 1542 will of the Venetian patrician, Giacomo Corner, who left the ‘Ca’ Grandà Corner, which he had built and owned, to nepotism (forever) to one of his eldest sons to the next born from a legitimate marriage to a woman who was a great grandchild of his daughter. Especially if they were the only children – could, in practice, inherit urban property and include it in their dowries. This is what happened, for example, in 1542 with Marietta di Nicolò dalla Seda, who gave her husband, Gerolamo Tappolo, a house on two floors with a courtyard, well and its own access to the canal, valued at 700 ducats and located in the Venetian parish of Santi Apostoli.¹² There are also examples of property forming part of dowries originating from the dowry of the mother. This was possible either because it had been returned to the mother herself or when she was widowed or because she bequeathed it directly to her daughter.¹³

The house a woman received from her family when she married did not always become the couple’s residence. In 1442 the dowry of the young wife of the Florentine notary Giovanni Bandini included a house worth 200 florins, inherited from her mother. However, her husband was eager to emphasize that they were going to live ‘in my house’.¹⁴ During the following years, while they lived in his house, he managed his wife’s property, which he was also able to use as he thought best. If, however, money from a dowry was invested to acquire a family home, it became a form of ‘wifely’ (uxorilocal) residence so that the new family was established in a property belonging to her.¹⁵

The most common experience for a new bride was to move into her husband's house and live with his family. The daughters of Venetian patricians and citizens were destined to leave their fathers' houses between sixteen and eighteen. When she moved into her new home, the young bride took many family possessions with her typically, her trousseau, jewellery, a ‘wedding chest’ or some other pieces of furniture (plate 4.2). Francesca Michiel, the wife of Domenego de Zuanne, a ‘ship owner’, even took her own portrait with her.¹⁶ It was customary in Venice for the bed to feature in inventories of marriage dowries, and it was always ‘furnished’, that is, equipped with bedding. This included ‘gold curtains’ like the ones owned by Medea Morosini, who married Francesco Becichoni,¹⁷ or ‘two cushions and two kobers’ as in the case of Ludovica Scotto, a widow who was remarried to Cornello Zambelli.¹⁸ The same bed sometimes reappeared in women’s wills, bequeathed to a grandchild or errant for her marriage or to a charitable institution. In Florentine patrician households, however, women contributed very little to the furnishing of the nuptial chamber, which were normally provided by the husband. In this intimate space belonging to the couple, brides only typically chose their trousseau up until the mid-fifteenth century these itinerant pieces of furniture followed new brides – and eventually also widows – as they moved from one house to another. Later on, they were acquired by the husband and remained in the chamber.¹⁹ The bed, the most permanent element of the room’s furnishings, does not feature in dowry inventories and a widow was only able to continue sleeping in it if her husband left it to her in his will. Very personal items were brought by new brides into patrician Florentine houses, duly inventoried and valued. These formed part of their dowry and could be reclaimed if they were widowed. In the country or among the city’s lower-class neighbourhoods of workers and peasants followed a less standard pattern, consisting of fewer, more utilitarian objects. This reminds us that for these social groups setting up home required a concerted, joint effort on the part of the couple after the marriage.²⁰

Studies on the Renaissance home have been keen to point out that domestic spaces were organized very differently according to the gender of the occupants. Alberti’s possibly unrepresentative precepts go so far as to suggest that wives were to have no copyhold. With the key to the study, the supreme male space, while husbands did not even set foot in the kitchen, the ‘queens of the house’ reigned undisputed.²¹ Among the elites, the type of inheritance, the residence of the married couple (whether in the house of the father or that of the husband) and the ownership of the furnishings gave a decidedly male imprint to houses at a material and symbolic level. Although this does not mean that women were only ‘guests’ in their homes, the fragile nature of their connection with houses is demonstrated by the fact that their residence, use of spaces and domestic furnishings were matters for negotiation.

⁵.2 Box with the arms of the Buondelmonte family, Florence, 1460 (cat.119)
DOMESTIC SPACE AND FAMILY CYCLES

The fifteenth-century Florentine catasto and the sixteenth-century Venetian Stati delle anime (registers of family members listed parish by parish) show that Florentines and Venetians mainly lived in relatively small family groups. This evidence goes against the monolithic image, so idealized by the wealth of an extended family living side by side in domestic harmony.  

Like patricians, many Venetian merchants or professionals enjoyed cross-generational cohabitation, perhaps in a rented house rather than a family palazzo. The circumstances of the Ziloi family, however, demonstrate the gap between the ideal of republican family unity and reality. The lawyer Alessandro Ziloi paid an annual rent of 104 ducats during the first decades of the sixteenth century for the tenements in the Campi San’Angelo, where he lived with his wife and many children. According to a custom established by previous generations, he should have hoarded the wife of his only son destined for marriage, as well as any unmarried sons who did not join the Church and, if necessary, their illegitimate children. His daughters, however, would have either left to live with their husbands or joined a convent. Instead, after the lawyer’s death his grandson described the dispersed living arrangements of Alessandro’s children. Some had decided to marry or live in their own house as fraterna. Those who did not marry young relatives on temporary visits, as well as children whose father or mother remarried were not to distinguish between them and any others he might have after her death, ‘for the love we had for each other’. 23 Paolo Orto, the wife of a coal and wood merchant, leaving her inheritance to her children, forbade them to leave with her in favour of their father, because she did not want her possessions to fall in the hands of any children, legitimate or otherwise, that her husband might produce after her death. 24 With words full of love, Camilla, wife of Andrea Frizier, the grand chancellor, entreated her husband with her son Carletto who was a ‘miserable small child…according to my wishes recommend Carlo to you, adding that if you ever remarry no one should hit him’. 25 Hierarchies between or within generations evolved as father children and groups of heirs lived together in different combinations. They were also influenced by the arrivals and departures of various family members, due to business, vocational or study trips, marriages or the deaths of spouses. Hierarchies between cohabiting brothers can be identified through the control of objects, for example, of books bequeathed to children. ‘Also I wish the library that contains many books in Hebrew, Latin and Greek to be shared by all my children, but that my son Alessandro be placed in charge of it’, wrote Bartolomeo Zamberti in his will of 1547. 26 In contrast, another Venetian, the doctor Nicolò Malin, left all his books in Latin and the vulgate to his daughter, stipulating that if any of them were later banned by the Council of Trent, they were to be burnt. 27 Indeed, not everything was passed down to the following generation, and not all objects symbolized family continuity. Objects could even be seen as dangerous. Jacopo Brochardo, a notary at the Curia Foroformi, did not want his heirs to pay the price of his foolhardiness and stated in his will: ‘I do not know where the works and printed portrait of Luther are, but if they are found among my books I should be burnt immediately’. 28

In complex family groups both members of a married couple often experienced an ongoing struggle for independence. This process was also made tangible in terms of the expanding domestic space at their disposal or mother remarried. If the woman remarried, living with their parents to the entire household of which they eventually became owners. Various temporary ‘decrements’ from the conjugal home provide an eloquent indication of the tension posed by the young bride in her husband’s house during the early years of marriage: In Florence in 1574 when Agnola, who had married Amerigo Zatti a few years previously, became severely ill, she sought refuge in her father’s house – the Florentine notary Ser Ventura Monachi – taking with her the only possessions that truly belonged to her, namely her trousseau stored in a chest. For more than a month Agnola was attended and treated by her mother, and then she died on 15 September surrounded by the love of her own family. Among the few Venetian cases of women who successfully resisted the pressure of the agnese Bandeacca Berardi, the first wife of the mercant Gento Dati, also returned to die in the house in Venice where she had been born, a domestic space that clearly expanded long after the death of her husband. She had been married for five years and had not yet provided her husband with a child. Without women sometimes sought a secret or private place outside their home in order to manage their own interests with greater freedom. In 1537 the Venetian Felicita Pegolotto, pregnant with her first child, summoned the notary who was to draw up her will to her father’s house. If she were to have no direct heirs, she intended her belongings to go to her brother and his daughter, ‘declaring that I leave nothing to my husband as I have received nothing from him’. Like Agnola, another Venetian, Pelagia, who was pregnant at the time, preferred to escape marital control by dictating her last wishes at the house of a close relative. The notary Francesco Filiperti revealed the existence of a chest deposited at the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, the trusted institution that was to inherit from her. It provided a form of safe, where this wealthy woman kept her writings, deeds of ownership, credit and some precious objects pertaining to her principal debtor – namely her house was populated by children and youths of various origins children of different couplings including natural or legitimated children, young relatives on temporary visits, as well as children taken for the love of God from city hospitals. Among Venetian citizens, worries regarding the fate of children and youths of various origins children of different couplings including natural or legitimated children, young relatives on temporary visits, as well as children taken for the love of God from city hospitals. Among Venetian citizens, worries regarding the fate of children and youths of various origins children of different couplings including natural or legitimated children, young relatives on temporary visits, as well as children taken for the love of God from city hospitals.

Within working-class groups, at the age of about fourteen but sometimes much earlier, the destiny of male children was decided by apprenticeship. In contrast, the sons of patricians and citizens left home and for ‘the soul of Franceschina Morato, who was within working-class groups, at the age of about fourteen but sometimes much earlier, the destiny of male children was decided by apprenticeship. In contrast, the sons of patricians and citizens left home and for ‘the soul of Franceschina Morato, who was
papers, documents, wealth or items they wished to bequeath to their daughters. In her will Bonda, the widow of a Florentine notary, announced her intention to deposit the troussseau she had amassed for her daughter at Santa Maria Nuova, so that it could not be claimed by the family of her dead husband before the girl married.

The collocation of a young couple with the parents of the bride was not a common practice and it was not always a long-term solution. When he married Niccolò, for example, the Florentine notary Agnolo Bandini rented a portion of his father-in-law’s house, but after no more than four years he preferred to move to ‘his own house’ in order to escape an overly interfere father-in-law.31 This type of collocation became less temporary when the dowry of an only daughter, the heir to the family fortune, was involved. An elderly uncle could assert, in the dowry contract of his niece, his right to continue living in his own house together with the young couple ‘in order not to go wandering at my age’.32 A mother could add that if a son-in-law ‘was not a good companion’ to his wife, sister-in-law and nephews, a dowry contract could not mean that daughters could not request any of the permanent dowry contract.

In this case, a striking number of widows in the 1420s Florentine statutes stated that the spartan nature of the family household furnishings or even the lack of a home and future descendants of Messer Iacopo dello Stroza degli Strozzi were to have the right to return if they were widowed.33 The wills of many other Florentines who invited their widows to remain in their household, without, however, reclaiming their dowries, Matteo Strozzi and Agnolo da Uzzano, among others, founded on the permanent nature of the dowry.34 Agnolo da Uzzano also encouraged their daughters to ‘return’ to the paternal home if they were widowed. Strozzi transformed this ‘return’ into a collective right available to the female descendants of a branch of the family.

The male identity of a patrician house was also considered the spartan nature of their domestic furnishings – the same spaces that, if needed, had to be tenure to be demolished or obliterate the female coat of arms from the façade of the house.35

WIDOWS AND HOME OWNERS

The fate of widows was often uncertain. Because of their allegiance to two families and houses, women could not take for granted their continuing residency in the marital home after the death of their husband. Furthermore, the designation of their dowry goods was closely linked to the house where they lived. If they continued to inhabit the house of their deceased husband, their children’s maternal inheritance was assured, but if they returned to their original home and then remarried, their dowry was given back to them and could be used for their new husband’s enjoyment.

Generally, the communal statutes only guaranteed the widow the right to preserve her dowry; Venetian law laid out in detail the timescale and means of restitution and, as we have seen, attempted to protect the family home and goods located in Venice itself from a possible migration into female hands. As well as guaranteeing the return of the dowry, Florentine statutes also required fathers to rehouse their widowed daughters without, however, their children, who therefore often remained in the home of their deceased father.36 In Venice, by contrast, this right to return was not included in the statutes, although this does not mean that daughters could not request any of the dowry in the paternal home if necessary. Therefore, the absence of other formal guarantees, widows could only count on their dowry to purchase and furnish lodgings. In fact, a striking number of widows in the 1420s Florentine statutes stated that the spartan nature of the family household furnishings or even the lack of a home and future descendants of Messer Iacopo dello Stroza degli Strozzi were to have the right to return if they were widowed.33 The wills of many other Florentines who invited their widows to remain in their household, without, however, reclaiming their dowries, Matteo Strozzi and Agnolo da Uzzano, among others, founded on the permanent nature of the dowry.34 Agnolo da Uzzano also encouraged their daughters to ‘return’ to the paternal home if they were widowed. Strozzi transformed this ‘return’ into a collective right available to the female descendants of a branch of the family.

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In the Florentine house and fortress, ‘all the existing furnishings’, Bamba would be able to demand the ownership of the said camera and antecamera and ground-floor room and the aforesaid goods and keep and use them as long as she lived and remains a widow, without harassment or contradiction from the author’s heirs and without the license, authority or prohibition of any judge or court of law.35
DEFINING THE CASA

Creating an inventory of them. In February 1507, Marietta, the mother of Dietifeco di Daniele del Buonaccorsi, was bequeathed the use of all her son's possessions, which were eventually to be inherited by her paternal uncle and her cousin. The will specified, however, that she was to inherit outright the bedroom with all its furniture. And so, two months after the death of her son, Marietta went to the property court and undertook to give the heir the goods kept in Florence and in the villa, which she could only use temporarily, while an inventory with object evaluation, a copy of which was drawn up, was drawn up 'in order to show what was freely hers and what she had to preserve for the heirs'.

The Renaissance house and its furnishings therefore had a distinct identity. Their destiny ideally followed a series of norms as well as a system of values, whereby it was the duty of men to preserve them over time and prevent women from disposing them. Young widows who left with their dowry to remarriage were often accused of 'ruining the house', forcing the heirs to dispose of family goods in order to cancel out the total debt. And yet, in other examples, it was precisely this obligation to restore dowries to widows that enabled them to 'save' the house and its contents from ruin. Alessandra Macignhi, the widow of Matteo Strozzi whose will we have discussed, is a famous example of fidelity and female dedication to the male house. Thanks to her, the house on corso Strozzi – which meant so much to her husband – was saved from the confiscation of goods imposed by the Florentine commune on political exile.

Other, similar cases of patrimonies saved by widowed mothers. In his family chronicle Donato Villani relates that his cousins refined the inheritance of their father Bindo di Piccio Ferrucci and, in order to avoid honouring his debts, they transferred the paternal goods to their mother. When, in December 1499, Biagio Buonaccorsi's father died bankrupt, leaving a debt of 1,500 ducats, Biagio was forced to renounce his inheritance and abandon the paternal house, but during the following months the property court assigned Buonaccorsi's house and furniture to his widow and stepmother, allowing Biagio to return to the home of his father.

Widows whose dowry included the residence of the married couple were also home owners. In such unusual situations women were the ones concerned about their husband's residence after his death. Lucrezia Corelli, a Venetian citizen, married a patrician, Sebastiano Prului, who was presumably rather impoverished, and in her will of 1515, which she wrote herself, she bequeathed him her house in San Gervolamo for the rest of his lifetime, as well as two rooms, one large and the other small, in her house in the country with two 'furnished' beds, because the said Messer Sebastian came to stay in my house when we married and remained there and brought his own furniture. However, I wish him to keep all his furniture: everything that he says it belongs to him and no difficulties should arise from people contradicting him on this matter.

Women whose dowries included a house were usually widows, as a house was often given as restitution for their first dowry. However, the record book of a Florentine sussuratore (specialized wood-worker) is a lively testimony to the effects that living in the wife's house might have on the power balance and hierarchy within the couple's relationship, particularly when the wife resolutely asserted her identity as owner. That woman came to flaunt her textiles and furniture! was the very revealing accusation made by Marco di Zanobi, who was compelled to separate from his wife in January 1524 after barely six months of marriage; The fifty-six-year-old craftsman had decided to remarry in reaction to the traumatic experience of losing his wife, three children and a grandchild to the plague in spring 1523 and his choice of a new bride was perhaps a little hasty. Ginevra da Castagni was a widow and received Marco in the house she owned as part of her dowry. In these circumstances he felt that he was treated as a guest by a woman who not only was the proprietor of the house in which he lived, but also paraded her property with arrogance. This challenge to the traditional hierarchy was sufficient to destroy the marriage, forcing Marco to leave the house and, initially, to ask to be taken in by his daughter's husband. However, the separation appears to have been temporary: in 1528 he returned to his second wife.

CONCLUSIONS: IDEALS AND REALITY

When norms and practice, ideals and reality are examined simultaneously, Venetian and Florentine families appear to have much in common. The 'desire for immortality' was frustrated by the reality of women's limited wealth and economic conditions. The idealized continuity of the house, understood as a physical space as well as a group of blood relatives linked by the same surname, was rarely fulfilled and underwent the necessary adjustments to adapt to concrete situations. The legitimation of illegitimate children, the adoption of distant and less fortunate relatives, and as a last resort remarriage along the female line were common occurrences. It is also true, however, that the differing demographic and politi- cal situations of the two cities between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also affected perceptions of the family and lineages. During the prolonged popu- lation crisis that struck Florence during the fifteenth century the need to safeguard properties in order to avoid their dispersion was felt particularly strongly. On the other hand, the search for political legiti- macy in a context typified by internal conflict within the elites could create a foundation for family strategies specifically focused on preserving goods and identities, and it should be remembered that the great proliferation of family chronicles has been linked with the political instability of Florence during the Renaissance. In contrast, Venetian families expressed these strategies specifically focused on preserving goods and identities, and it should be remembered that the great proliferation of family chronicles has been linked with the political instability of Florence during the Renaissance. The legitimization of illegitimate children, the adoption of distant and less fortunate relatives, and as a last resort remarriage along the female line were common occurrences. It is also true, however, that the differing demographic and political situations of the two cities between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also affected perceptions of the family and lineages. During the prolonged population crisis that struck Florence during the fifteenth century the need to safeguard properties in order to avoid their dispersion was felt particularly strongly. On the other hand, the search for political legitimacy in a context typified by internal conflict within the elites could create a foundation for family strategies specifically focused on preserving goods and identities, and it should be remembered that the great proliferation of family chronicles has been linked with the political instability of Florence during the Renaissance.

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