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***People and Property in Florence and Venice***

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## PEOPLE AND PROPERTY IN FLORENCE AND VENICE

ANNA BELLAVITIS AND ISABELLE CHABOT

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 *catasto*, a survey of families and their goods for tax purposes, and



5.1 Cesare Vecellio, *Family Portrait*, Venice, 1550s (cat.138)  
The painting portrays seventeen members of a family from the Veneto, ranging from a small child on her mother's lap to the figure 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 ricordi*), 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 *paterfamilias*.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

### 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, of 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 *casata* (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.<sup>3</sup> While a degree of residential mobility characterized the experience of the less well off, the directly owned house, the 'permanent address', anchored the families of rich artisans, merchants and patricians in urban space and time, giving them a sense of perpetuity that was immediately obvious to the eyes of the entire community. For many the house was a symbolic as well as a material possession that was passed down and inherited. The strong identification between house and family raises several questions. Who in the family was most associated with the Renaissance house? Within the inheritance structure of Renaissance Italy, was the 'family house' fundamentally a male asset? Whatever the answers to

these questions, the house was a space where the lives of men and women intertwined and generations succeeded one another.

Was the Renaissance house a male possession? 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 built 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 Florence 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 Strozzi'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

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 Lionardo, and if they fail, to the descendants of Messer Iachopo degli Strozzi.<sup>4</sup>

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 dispersed forever along the female line. A pious bequest to the church had the added advantage of supporting his desire for eternal life. There are many similar examples but here we will limit ourselves to examining the 1542 will of the Venetian patrician, Giacomo Corner, who left the 'Ca' Granda' Corner, which he had built and owned, *in perpetuum* (forever) from one eldest son to the next born from a legitimate marriage. Alternatively, 'in the absence of male descendants', it would be left to the first-born son of his brothers or of the daughters of his sons and, finally, to the eldest son of his daughters.<sup>5</sup> In this case, Giacomo Corner's daughters entered the inheritance game, but only in fourth position, after his brothers and even after his granddaughters. The choice of binding the transmission of immobile goods according to a strict hierarchy was known as 'entail'. It not only excluded women, but also privileged the line of descent of only one of the sons, generally the first born, and was a widespread practice among the European nobility. There was, however, a Venetian variant that linked mercantile society with the transmission of family palaces by organizing the succession according to the *fraterna* (brotherhood). This partnership among brothers formed the basis of Venetian entrepreneurial activities well into the sixteenth century. Entail could also, during this period, oblige all the brothers to live and trade together, at least for the first generation or for a fixed time. Brothers were also expected to nominate themselves in turn as heirs and to leave their wives the choice of living as widows with their brothers-in-law.

In the middle and at the lower end of the social scale modes of living diversified and the multiple

forms of use and possession of houses – outright ownership, but also more frequently renting, sub-renting, free use, life ownership, hospitality – weakened the strong identification of people with their houses. Even though male wills excluded female offspring, in the absence of men, daughters – 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 Tiepolo, 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 when she was widowed or because she bequeathed it directly to her daughter.<sup>7</sup>

The house a woman received from her family when she married did not always become the couple's residence. In 1424 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'.<sup>8</sup> 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.

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 'walnut chest' or some other pieces of furniture (plate 5.2). Francesca Michiel, the wife of Domenego de Zuanne, a 'ship owner', even took her own portrait with her.<sup>9</sup> 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 mar-

ried Francesco Becicheni,<sup>10</sup> or 'two cushions and two bolsters' as in the case of Ludovica Scotto, a widow who was remarried to Cornelio Zambelli.<sup>11</sup> The same bed sometimes reappeared in women's wills, bequeathed to a grandchild or servant 'for her marriage' or to a charitable institution. In Florentine patrician households, however, women contributed very little to the furnishings of the nuptial chamber, which were normally provided by the husband. In this intimate space belonging to the couple, brides only supplied the chests containing their trousseaus: 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.<sup>12</sup> 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. Only 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 trousseaux 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.<sup>13</sup>

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 not provided with the key to the study, the supreme male space, while husbands did not even set foot in the kitchen, where the 'queen of the house' reigned undisturbed.<sup>14</sup> 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 residency, use of spaces and domestic furnishings were matters for negotiation.

5.2 Box with the arms of the Buondelmonte family, Florence, c.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 wealthy, of an extended family living side by side in domestic harmony.<sup>15</sup>

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 Ziliol family, however, demonstrate the gap between the ideal of residential continuity and reality.<sup>16</sup> The lawyer Alessandro Ziliol paid an annual rent of 140 ducats during the first decades of the sixteenth century for the ‘great house in Campo Sant’ Angelo’, where he lived with his wife and many children. According to a custom established by previous generations, he should have housed 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 with women who had not been chosen by the family and had left the family house. Another, on his return from a long journey to Syria, had asked to live in the family house. Two sons, Camillo and Giulio, had made good marriages with the daughters of the patrician Tommaso Bragadin and had gone to live on their own.

Within working-class groups, at the age of about fourteen but sometimes much earlier, the destiny of male sons was decided by an apprenticeship. In contrast, the sons of patricians and citizens left home much later, and could also be forced at their father’s wish to live together in the family house against their own will until the age of thirty or even later. Some sons never left the family home and eventually took over their father’s business.

Sisters did not have access to a system analogous to the Venetian *fraterna*. Those who did not marry young or enter a convent sometimes continued to live in their father’s house as *chietine* (religious

women who took some vows) or *pizochere* (women committed to a religious life who remained at home and did not take vows), taking care of single brothers. More rarely, sisters went to live on their own, an eventuality that was sometimes provided for in their brothers’ wills. Elena Ziliol, a cultivated woman and writer of sonnets, who preferred to remain unmarried at home rather than go to a convent, eventually married an older man late in life who tormented her with his jealousy to the point that – according to her nephew – he caused her premature death. Lower down the social scale, however, daughters often left their family in childhood to go into domestic service in patrician households, where they exchanged long years of toil for a miserable dowry paid by the employer.

Domestic employees, servants and also slaves – Turks, Tartars or Africans – were another constant presence in wealthy households.<sup>17</sup> Some of them were only transitory – during this period servants frequently moved from house to house – but others remained in one home over a long period of time, following the children from infancy to adulthood. Sometimes an elderly wet nurse was taken into the home of her ‘milk child’, by now an adult, and could count on finishing her days there. So Magdalena from Cremona, widow of ‘Bartolomio the comb-maker from Padua’, lived in the house of the Venetian patrician Zuan Agustin Moro and left all her belongings to ‘madonna Andriana Barbaro’, the widowed owner of the house described as ‘my child, whom I breastfed’, and her sister Maria.<sup>18</sup> In addition, some wills reveal rather unorthodox cohabitations with domestic servants, as in the case of Nicolò dalla Bolza, who left funds to say mass for his soul and for ‘the soul of Franceschina Morato, who was my companion and housekeeper’.<sup>19</sup>

The Renaissance 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 whose father or mother remarried were expressed primarily in women’s wills. Towards the end of her pregnancy Beneta di Maistri-Gigante asked her husband to behave well towards her children and not to distinguish between them and

any others he might have after her death, ‘for the love we had for each other’.<sup>20</sup> Paola Orio, the wife of a coal and wood merchant, leaving her inheritance to her children, forbade them to leave wills in favour of their father, because she did not want her possessions to finish in the hands of any children, legitimate or otherwise, that her husband might produce after her death.<sup>21</sup> ‘With words full of love’ Camilla, wife of Andrea Frizier, the grand chancellor entrusted her husband with her son Carletto who was but a ‘small child, according to my wishes I recommend Carlo to you, adding that if you ever remarry no one should hit him’.<sup>22</sup>

Hierarchies between or within generations evolved as fathers, 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.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, another Venetian, the doctor Nicolò Massa, 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.<sup>24</sup> 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 Brocardo, a notary at the Curia Forinsecorum, 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 they should be burnt immediately’.<sup>25</sup>

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, from the nuptial room of the young couple living with their parents to the entire household of which they eventually became owners. Various temporary ‘desertions’ from the conjugal home provide an eloquent indication of the tenuous position of the

young bride in her husband’s house during the early years of marriage. In Florence in 1374 when Agnola, who had married Amerigo Zati 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 there she died on 15 September surrounded by the love of her own family.<sup>26</sup> After a miscarriage and nine months of agony Bandecca Berardi, the first wife of the merchant Goro Dati, also returned to die in the house in Florence where she had been born, a domestic space that clearly felt more familiar than her marital home. She had been married for five years and had not yet provided her husband with a child.<sup>27</sup>

Without their own study married 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 Pegoloto, 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’.<sup>28</sup> Like her, other young Venetian brides, sometimes pregnant at the time, preferred to escape marital control by dictating their last wishes at the house of a close relative. In 1410 the will of the Florentine Francesca Filipetri 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 husband – as well as two or three other male members of the Florentine elite. A piece of writing signed by her husband testified to a debt of no fewer than 200 florins *pro masseritiis* (domestic furniture); two rings with a diamond and emerald were the pledges for another of her husband’s debts of 11 florins; other credits for over 50 florins were guaranteed by private writings.<sup>29</sup> The main Florentine hospital therefore also acted as a bank vault and occasionally as a wardrobe or repository, where women knew they could safely deposit

their papers, documents, wealth or items they wished to bequeath to their daughters. In her will Binda, the widow of a Florentine notary, announced her intention to deposit the trousseau 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.<sup>30</sup>

The cohabitation 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 in 1453, 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 interfering father-in-law.<sup>31</sup> This type of cohabitation became less temporary when the dowry of an only daughter, the heir to the family fortune, included a house. 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'.<sup>32</sup> A mother could add that if a son-in-law 'was not a good companion' to his wife, sister-in-law and mother-in-law, he would forfeit various special legacies.<sup>33</sup> However, especially in patrician families, it was a situation that was clearly perceived to be anomalous and a father who received a son-in-law under his roof might feel the need to make a concerned appeal to 'not deface or obliterate the family coat of arms from the façade of the house'.<sup>34</sup>

#### 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 destination 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 marriage.

Generally, the communal statutes only guaranteed the widow the right to repossess 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.<sup>35</sup> In Venice, by contrast, this right to return was not included in the statutes, although this does not mean that daughters could not request asylum in the paternal home if necessary.

Theoretically, therefore, in the absence of other family guarantees, widows could only count on their dowry to purchase and furnish lodgings. In fact, a striking number of widows in the 1427 Florentine *catasto* associated the spartan nature of their domestic furnishings or even the lack of a home and furniture with their marital status. 'I have neither house nor household goods', 'I have no household goods because I was widowed and was left without them' and 'a house with very minimal furnishings, which is expected of us widows' are common declarations that betray a more specifically female discomfort.<sup>36</sup>

Male wills were therefore often crucial in reiterating and expanding the legal guarantees and defining the rights, residency and the material conditions of women during their widowhood. In Venice, as in Florence or elsewhere, the obligation to restore the dowry was always underlined, sometimes with additions. Clauses such 'as a sign of love and in recognition of the good companionship' were included according to the specific family situation. If the wife was no longer young, a husband could afford to be generous and repay fidelity and conjugal devotion with the assignment of complete power over the household. In 1508 the Venetian Zuanne Salvador left all his belongings to his wife Marina, including his house with private moorings, on the condition that she remained a widow, 'because I hold her to be wise and a servant only to God, given that she is of an age to commence preparing her soul and mine and to expect no further vanities from this world, nor to subjugate herself to any other being except God the omnipotent'.<sup>37</sup>

In his will of 1429 the merchant Matteo di Simone Strozzi, like many other Florentines with young sons, invited his wife Alessandra to remain in the family home with them without requesting her dowry. In return, he assured maintenance for herself

and a servant and guaranteed that 'she would not be sent away from the house'. Matteo also allowed for the possibility that her situation might alter over the years, as their sons became adults, and that the cohabitation might become difficult once they got married.<sup>39</sup> A Venetian will-maker also spelt out the reasons why a widow might no longer wish to live with her sons 'because of the wives'.<sup>38</sup> In that case, as long as Alessandra still did not reclaim her entire dowry credit, Matteo assigned her a landed income so that she could live elsewhere. Such concerns reveal the fragile nature of residency in a house that belonged to others, even for a widow who had remained faithful to the household and its heirs.

The lack of children, or male children, could make the residence of widows even more uncertain. The use of a house, or merely a part of it, throughout their natural life was a right that the husband's heirs might not respect because it imposed a cohabitation that was not always welcome. In the will of another Florentine patrician, Agnolo da Uzzano, drawn up on 16 January 1424, the use of the term 'hospitality' to describe the conditions reserved for his wife Bamba is significant. As well as returning her dowry of 700 florins, Agnolo left her all her clothing and jewellery and stipulated that 'she can legally stay without expenses all the time she will live in the said new house ... and in the Uzzano fortress', where she was to be 'seen and received *with goodwill whenever she pleases*'.<sup>40</sup> Precisely because Bamba was to continue living with her son-in-law Niccolò and his family in the Florentine house, Agnolo allotted her specific areas – the *camera*, the *anticamera* and two other rooms on the ground floor with all their beds and furnishings – the same spaces that, if necessary, she would share with her daughters if they were widowed and wished to return home. If, however, the owner of the house and, in the future, their children did not fulfil their duty of hospitality and courtesy, Bamba would be able

*to demand the ownership* of the said *camera* and *anticamera* and ground-floor room and the aforesaid goods and keep and use them as long as she lives 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.<sup>41</sup>

But, over and beyond the commendable concern to guarantee his wife's rights expressed in the will's change of tone here, we might question both the need for the coercive power of these words and the quality of life of a woman who was no longer considered a welcome guest but rather an undesirable intruder.

Like many other Florentines who invited their widows to remain in their household, without, however, reclaiming their dowries, Matteo Strozzi and 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: by saying that 'all the existing and future descendants of Messer Iacopo dello Stroza degli Strozzi have the right to return if they are widowed', he recognized that his female relatives belonged to the house.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, it was an ambiguous form of recognition, as it only gave them rights of use and was therefore temporary, lacking the extended period of the full ownership accorded to male heirs. Agnolo also wanted his three daughters – Costanza, Giovanna and Alessandra – to be 'received' in the Florentine house and the fortress in Chianti 'if any of them are widowed or for any other necessity', and, like their sisters-in-law, they were reserved some rooms under the same conditions. But it was, above all, in the use of domestic furnishings and objects that the temporary nature of the daughters' connection with the house became apparent:

And furthermore, he desires that his daughters in such cases of widowhood and need, in the said Uzzano house and fortress, are to be assigned the use of household furnishings and goods as they wish, by the heir of the author of this will, as long as the said daughters *only request reasonable items and ones that can be repossessed*, taking their word that they received them or not.<sup>43</sup>

The male identity of a patrician house was also founded on the permanent nature of the mobile goods that furnished it. Women only had a limited control of objects over time, which did not normally extend beyond their death. Lisa de' Mozzi, the widow of a Florentine apothecary, knew that she only had the use of her marital bed during her

lifetime because it had already been bequeathed to the city hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in her husband's will.<sup>44</sup> Understandably, widows who inherited the outright ownership of furniture and goods through a will felt the need to affirm their rights by creating an inventory of them. In February 1507 Marietta, the mother of Dietifece di Daniele del maestro Ficino, 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 heirs the goods kept in Florence and in the villa, which she could only use temporarily, while an inventory with object evaluations, a copy of which was kept by Marietta, was drawn up 'in order to show what was freely hers and what she had to preserve for the heirs'.<sup>45</sup>

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 dispersing them. Young widows who left with their dowry to remarry 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 Macinghi, 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 exiles.<sup>46</sup> There are other, similar cases of patrimonies saved by widowed mothers. In his family chronicle Donato Velluti relates that his cousins refused 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.<sup>47</sup> When, in December 1495, Biagio Buonaccorsi's father died bankrupt, leaving a debt of 1,500 ducats, Biagio was forced to renounce his inheritance and abandon the paternal home, 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.<sup>48</sup>

Women 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 their death. Lucrezia Corbeli, a Venetian citizen, married a patrician, Sebastiano Priuli, who was presumably rather impoverished, and in her will of 1503, which she wrote herself, she bequeathed him her house in San Gerolamo 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 is his belongs to him and no difficulties should arise from people contradicting him on this matter.<sup>49</sup>

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 *rammendatore* (specialized wool-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!'<sup>50</sup> 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 de' Castroni 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 demographic accidents 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 legitimization of illegitimate children, the adoption of distant and less fortunate relatives, and as a last resort transmission 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.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, Venetian family memoirs expressed the search for identity by the middle classes, who were denied political power.<sup>52</sup> At the end of the thirteenth century the transformation of the Venetian patriciate into a closed and hereditary group definitively excluded families who had previously contributed to the Great Council, the city's most important political body. As a result of this, in the words of Alessandro Ziliol, 'many houses and nobles were reduced to the state of families'.<sup>53</sup> By the time Ziliol was writing only those who were still part of the political elite and sat on the Great Council could call their lineage a 'house' (*casa*), while the others had to content themselves with being merely a 'family'.