Wives and Goods in the Venetian Palazzo

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Abstract • Venetian patrician wives of the late Middle Ages brought to their marriages material goods and family loyalty, both vitally important to the prosperity of conjugal families. The crucial resource was the dowry. During the marriage it sustained the family economy under the husband’s administration. Afterward, as the wife’s inherited property, it returned to her, supporting her widowhood and benefiting her children and kin. The economic connection established by the dowry, which included a corredo, a gift to the groom, encouraged collaboration between families, demonstrated in spouses’ appointment of both agnates and affines as testamentary executors. Moreover, accompanying the financial contents of the dowry were trousseaux consisting of clothing and furnishings for the bride, bestowed by her family and supplemented by the groom. These items further enhanced the relationships forged in marriage by giving visual testimony of a married woman’s position as the bridge between her natal and marital families.

Keywords • corredo, dowries, marriage ties, testamentary executors, trousseaux, Venetian patricians

In her many studies on Florence but fundamentally in what is probably her most famous essay, “The Cruel Mother,” Christiane Klapisch-Zuber enunciated two ideas about women and the casa that have had a profound influence on all subsequent discussions. “Houses were made by men,” is one, and the other: “[W]omen were passing guests in these case, in both the material and the symbolic sense of the word casa,” that is, as a dwelling and as a lineage. Klapisch-Zuber was referring to Florence, but on the whole her statements apply as well to Venice. Venetian lineages, among the nobles who correspond to the Florentine patricians studied by Klapisch-Zuber and others, were certainly patrilineal and, indeed, patriarchal in structure. Genealogically and patrimonially, Venice’s hereditary ruling class flaunted—and took great care to pass on—their ancient (or not so ancient) names from male generation to male generation; and the city’s statutes, legislation, and government policy provided a solid institutional framework for the agnatic organization of patrician society.

Nevertheless, every generation of those noble case confronted what Isabelle Chabot, also writing on Florence, once called the “paradox that struck
at the ideology of agnation.”³ Marriage meant that some women left the *casa* and other women came into the *casa*. In the process they took property away from their families of origin and into their marital households. It was those goods that enabled married women to complicate the Venetian patriciate’s lineage orientation. The largest element of the property that accompanied women to their marriages was the dowry. It is not the place here to synthesize the vast scholarship on dowries in Renaissance Italy, but it is important to recall that a woman’s dowry belonged to her. To be sure, it remained under her husband’s control and direction during the marriage in order to enhance the family’s material well-being, to help it “sustain the burdens of matrimony,” in the Roman law formulation.⁴ But just for that reason it altered the marital family’s economic structure in two ways. First, the dowry never stopped being the wife’s property, to be recovered upon her being widowed or—in Venice though not in Florence—to be bequeathed to whomever she chose if she predeceased her husband.⁵ The husband was thus only the temporary custodian of the dowry. His fondest hope, however, was to graft it permanently onto his lineage by securing its succession to his children. That strategic lineage interest had a forceful influence on a man’s dealings with his wife.

Second, the dowry reshaped the husband’s economic substance with the addition of new elements. The marital family lived off the proceeds of the dowry, whether it took the form of profits from invested cash, rents from real estate, or interest from shares in the state’s funded debt. Dowries were cobbled together with any or all of these, and sometimes even included fabrics imported from the East to be marketed by the new husband.⁶ Applying the profits he gained to the upkeep of the family was of course the whole purpose of the dowry, but its importance to the family’s overall well-being highlights the considerable weight of the wife’s material presence in the household. In Florence, wives’ dowries accounted for one-fifth to one-third of a conjugal family’s wealth; to cite only one famous example, the 1,600-florin dowry that Alessandra Macinghi brought to Matteo Strozzi in 1422 represented 30 percent of her husband’s wealth as registered in the Catasto, or fiscal census, of 1427.⁷ There are no equivalent Venetian figures, but marriage contracts spell out in detail the annual rents from the real estate portion—often substantial—of many dowries. In their contract of 1512 Isabella Loredan gave Girolamo Barbarigo a dowry of 3,000 ducats, 2,100 of which was rental property within Venice, which yielded 105 ducats annually; in another contract that same year, Laura Sanudo gave Giovanni Foscari real estate yielding annual rents of 227 ducats.⁸ To put those figures in perspective, the annual maintenance that Lorenzo Priuli budgeted in 1505 for himself, his wife, and one son totaled 55 ducats; many testating husbands bequeathed 50 or 60 ducats for their widows’ annual food and clothing expenses.⁹ Clearly, income from dowries formed an essential component to the family’s annual maintenance.
Another way the dowry reshaped a husband’s wealth was his obligation to place a lien on enough of it to ensure its return to his widow or his wife’s heirs at the end of the marriage. Sometimes the pledged property took the form of immovables that were part of the dowry: the husband received the rental income during the marriage, but the title to the property remained with the wife. For example, two sisters, Cateruzza and Fiorenza Querini, assigned to their respective husbands, the brothers Stefano and Lio Viaro, a property at San Lio as part of their dowries. The brothers could sell the property but would then be obliged to replace it with property of equal value, which had to be secured for the restitution of the sisters’ dowries (obligata ale dote). Similarly, Giovanni da Lezze received lusofructo (usufruct) of lands and other investments belonging to his new wife, Marietta Badoer; in this case, however, “it must not be sold or otherwise alienated, but is always to remain obligated to the aforesaid madonna Marietta.” Often a cash-heavy dowry required the husband or his kinsmen to guarantee it with their own property, most often real estate or investments in the state’s grain office. Thus, Paolo Morosini, guaranteeing in 1434 his wife, Maria’s, dowry of 150 lire di grossi (equivalent to 1,500 ducats), “gave, assigned, and transacted” to her part of a large residential property he shared with his brother. Once the marriage ended, by the death of either spouse, if Paolo or his heirs repaid the dowry in cash, the property would revert to his estate; otherwise it remained Maria’s. The double effect of the dowry on a husband’s economic substance—that is, its importance in the conjugal household’s wealth and the commitment of the husband’s property toward its restitution—meant that the economic character of the new marriage was not patrilineal or patrimonial, but marital, a complicated mingling of the assets of husband and wife. To invoke again Isabelle Chabot’s phrase, the dowry “struck at the ideology of agnation” in two symmetrical ways. It depleted the resources of the wife’s lineage, especially her brothers, and it also put the economy of a new conjugal household on a bilateral foundation.

The mingling of patrimonies encouraged overlapping interests and loyalties between two intermarried families. The fathers and brothers of married women as well as their husbands (and if the husbands were emancipated, their fathers) had good practical reasons to cultivate their affinal relationships; these were, indeed, among the chief reasons for the marriage in the first place. Moisè Venier, married in January 1438, was already in a grain-importing partnership with his new father-in-law by March of that year, at the same time that he was keeping his own father’s accounts. In a marriage contract of 1529, the bride’s father promised to welcome his prospective son-in-law into his house, treat him as his own son, pay the living expenses of the newly married couple, and authorize the young man to administer the property of the bride’s family.

Not every husband went into business with his wife’s father, or managed his in-laws’ family accounts, but the frequency with which married men appointed affines as executors of their wills, entrusting them with pro-
tecting the family fortune and the children’s well-being, is a strong indication of the confidence that swiftly arose between intermarried families. In a sample of 77 testaments drawn up by married male patricians, 34 (44 percent) included members of the men’s wives’ families and/or their daughters’ husbands among their executors. This is a respectable level of trust even compared with that bestowed by those same married men on their own birth lineages: 46, or 60 percent, appointed lineage mates as executors. The frequent resort to in-laws displays the high level of trust that matured in marriage alliances. It also hints that some married men found it more congenial, and perhaps more liberating from lineage discipline, to strengthen ties to their marital kin in lieu of, or at least balancing, their relations with their own lineage. It ultimately reveals that men amalgamated their lineage and marital affiliations in a matter of critical economic importance to them and the destinies of their children and their property.

Married women maintained even stronger ties to their families of birth. They called upon their parents and siblings as executors of their wills half again as often as their husbands did. In the testaments of 205 wives, more than three-quarters—78 percent—included members of the woman’s natal family among her executors, as compared with 60 percent of the husbands. Many of those women were young wives in their first pregnancies; it is therefore not surprising that they kept close connections with their parents and siblings. So it was with Andriana da Mula, married in 1495 and already pregnant in early 1496: she made her husband an executor, but also her mother, father, and brother. Similarly, Sterina Lando, who married in 1456, wrote a will two years later, having already borne one daughter; her executors were her father, her mother, three brothers, and a married sister, along with her husband. Young wives were not the only ones to retain ties to their natal families. Cateruzza Vitturi, a remarried widow with three children, appointed her mother, her brother, and her sister’s husband in a will she dictated 18 years after her first wedding. Another widow, Lucia Pisani, named as executors both of her parents and her three brothers, as well as her son. This was 23 years after her wedding.

The enduring relationship between married women and their families had the effect of reinforcing the involvement of those families in the husband’s affairs, even after his death. That was owing to men’s overwhelming tendency to entrust their testamentary intentions to their wives, in spite of—or perhaps because of—the women’s loyalty to their birth families. Among those 77 married male testators, 60 of them, 78 percent, appointed their wives as executors. Not only that, more than one-quarter of them gave the wives special authority: three made the wives their sole executors, and another nine gave them the deciding vote among a group of executors. For example, Alvise Zane gave his wife, together with her mother and brothers, majority status among a group of executors that also included Alvise’s own brother and the husbands of his two sisters (who, of course, were also his marital kin). When men like Alvise Zane gave fiduciary authority over
their estates to the parents and brothers of their wives and the husbands of their daughters and sisters (as 46 percent did), they were programming the marital bond between families and lineages to endure into the next generation, or even beyond. Taking in all these indications, both wives and husbands exhibited a desire to situate their marriage and the prospects of their children in the largest possible bilateral structure of relationships. If we also take account of their sisters’ and daughters’ husbands, the structure was multilateral. Men’s primary loyalty to their own families thus blended seamlessly with a strong attachment to wives and marital kin. One last example illustrates this multilaterality. Leonardo Priuli wrote a will in 1477 in which he named as executors his wife, his widowed mother, his mother’s brother, two of his late father’s brothers, his two married sisters and their husbands, and his mother- and father-in-law. By my calculation, that assemblage represented six agnate lineages and five marriage connections. At the very least, Leonardo Priuli consciously planted his *casa* in a flourishing garden of relationships that revolved around his union with his wife and his connections with and through other married women.

Examples and figures like these reveal little about the psychological or emotional contributions to that bilateral orientation, though it is hard to imagine that such elements did not play a part in the decision to entrust family and estate to some persons but not to others. What is evident is the economic tethering that bound husbands, wives, and their families. The remainder of this article will be taken up with the types of goods that fastened those tethers. The major element was, of course, the dowry in the form of cash, immovables, and investments. It is vital to consider, as well, the material articles that surrounded the dowry, which impressed the wife’s presence most visibly on the marital *casa*. Like the dowry and the exchange of trust between husbands, wives, and their families, a married woman’s goods reflected the breadth of her loyalties and the influence she derived from the bilateral associations they nourished. According to Carole Frick, Renaissance Italians spent up to 40 percent of their wealth on their clothing, so our initial focus is on the clothes that adorned a married woman and the marital household she inhabited, with a special focus on how she acquired them.

Like their Florentine and Milanese counterparts, elite Venetian brides brought to their marriages articles that clothed and “decorated” them—in Jane Fair Bestor’s term—reflecting honor on both the father who provided them and the husband whose dignity they now enhanced. This advertising aspect of trousseaux, or *corredi*, prompted an endless and largely ineffective flood of sumptuary legislation virtually everywhere in Italy. In 1463 the Venetian Senate had no doubt who was responsible for the “extreme and insupportable expenditures” that went into the jewelry and pearls that women wore; the Senate imposed a 200 lire fine on “the husbands or fathers or others with authority over women who violated” new limits imposed on certain types of jewelry. Raffaella Sarti observes that “objects help to model and
structure social relations, and equally social relations are expressed through objects.” The objects that Venetian fathers and husbands gave to clothe and decorate married women’s bodies were meant to express the women’s relationship to both families. Nevertheless, the structuring of those relations into a hierarchy of loyalties was always uncertain and subject to change as women’s social networks shifted over the course of a marriage, and as men tried to capture for their own family the primary loyalty of their wives. It is therefore important to look at the goods provided in turn by each of those men—fathers and husbands or their surrogates—and the role of those goods in capturing the loyalty of married women.

The dowries that Venetian nobles carefully detailed in their marriage contracts invariably included a trousseau (corredo) for the bride. What follows adds to a brief pioneering discussion of trousseaux by Élisabeth Crouzet-Pavan. The information comes from 100 marriage contracts, 39 from the fifteenth century and 61 from the first half of the sixteenth century. Forty of them simply mentioned unspecified articles, described by such phrases as “things for the woman’s use,” “things necessary for the woman,” “things for the use and adornment of the woman,” or my favorite, “things such as women love.” These phrases, though vague, emphasize the personal benefit the bride would derive from them, probably the first time she possessed such rich objects on her own account. Other contracts give a more precise idea of what those objects were. Forty-nine contracts contain such specifics as “objects and clothing for the woman’s use,” “items to clothe, that is, to be worn by the woman,” “things and jewels for her to wear,” or “things for the young woman to wear, including clothing, jewelry, and pearls.”

Sometimes the contracts cited specific articles in the trousseau, especially sumptuous items seemingly mentioned to impress the groom and anyone else who might see the contract—such as, after 1505, Venice’s state attorneys (avogadori di comun), who were charged by the Senate to register all contracts. Nicolò Corner took the initiative in his marriage contract in 1401: he wanted his bride’s dowry to include enough of a striped Flemish fabric called devisado de Fiandra to fashion for her a pelanda, an elaborately decorated fur- or silk-lined cloak. Maddaluzza Paruta’s trousseau in 1426 also featured a pelanda embroidered with pearls. Laura Dolfin’s trousseau one hundred years later, in 1526, included a string of pearls, a diamond, and a ruby. In the contract between the Venetian patrician Francesco Venier and the daughter of a noble from Zara (Zadar) in Dalmatia, the 5,000-ducat dowry included a silk crimson (cremexina) dress with sleeves lined in ermine; a pelanda of black silk damask, with bello rico embroidery, and sleeves lined with squirrel fur (varo); another pelanda, this one of fine scarlet wool embroidered with pearls; and a shoulder brooch and a barette. This was a fairly lavish trousseau, but far short of that assembled for the Florentine Ghostanza Minerbetti in 1511, which included six rich dresses and two pairs of sleeves (one silk, one velvet), in addition to 35 items of lingerie, 15 per-
sonal accessories, and 11 other objects—and this was only the appraised part of a larger trousseau.33

Appraisals were necessary, in Venice as in Florence, because of the uncertain value of many of the goods in the trousseau. This step was one more way of involving both parties to the contract and their respective social networks in a collaborative enterprise. The value of the three *pelande* in the trousseau of the bride from Zara just mentioned was to be estimated by two persons, one selected by each of the two parties, who would be bound by the agreed-upon figure. Normally, however, in contracts between two Venetians the appraisal was delegated to “two friends or relatives of both sides.”34 Sometimes professional expertise was called in also, as in Florence. Morosina Morosini’s trousseau in 1512 included 300 ducats’ worth of *ornimenti et vestimenti*, to be appraised by “two mutual friends,” but also 200 ducats in jewelry, the value of which should be determined by “two experienced jeweler friends of the two families.”35

Agreement on the value of the goods in the trousseau was essential because they represented a considerable portion of the total marriage settlement. For all its sumptuousness, Ghostanza Minerbetti’s Florentine trousseau, estimated at 275 florins, was considerably less than Venetian trousseaux of the same period, although she also had a substantial unestimated portion, which apparently did not figure in the calculation of the dowry.36 The average trousseau in sixteenth-century Venetian contracts was more than twice as large, at 570 ducats.37 That figure represented 13.5 percent of the total patrician marriage portion, which in those years averaged 3,861 ducats.38 Fifteenth-century Venetian contracts also included trousseaux averaging 13.4 percent of the dowry, essentially the same percentage as in the sixteenth century, and about two percentage points larger than the average Florentine trousseau portion.39 The inflation in dowries over the years meant that trousseaux were two-thirds larger after 1500 than in the previous century, when they had averaged 348 ducats, compared to 570 ducats in the first half of the sixteenth century. So the tendency over time was for families—at least those who could afford it—to provide ever more elaborate adornment for the bodies of their marrying daughters.

The parents of brides had a double motivation for keeping up with this inflation. In addition to giving visual form to the honor of their own family and that of the groom, the parents who bestowed well-furnished trousseaux on their daughters sought, in Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli’s words, to have her “maintain the shadow of her original identity … by bearing the sign of her family of origin” into her new home.40 That imperative led parents to ensure that their daughter had her trousseau when she was conducted (*mennata*) to her husband’s home. Antonio Vitturi noted in his will of 1513 that of the 1,600 ducats he had been promised as the dowry of his wife, Francesca, he had received only 1,000, but that included her clothing (*computa i pani del doso me deti*).41 From the very beginning of her marriage, a bride’s trousseau impressed her natal affiliation and her family’s generous affection.
on her memory as well as on her body. Marta Ajmar has underscored the role of the wife as responsible for “the moral and material identity and memory of the household”; it was her parents’ intention that she also preserve the memory of her natal family.42 The clothing and jewelry she carried to her marital home, which in the case of expensive dresses were expected to last as long as 40 or 50 years, were therefore enduring reminders.43

Sometimes the mnemonic effect was enhanced by the inclusion in the trousseau of articles other than clothing that the bride would recognize from her premarital youth. When Dea, the widow of Francesco Rosso, contracted the marriage of her daughter Orsa, she stated that part of the girl’s trousseau would be “clothing and other items that she [the mother] has in her house.” And Andrea Morosini declared that his daughter Lucia’s trousseau would “be from ca’ Morosini, consisting of goods of ca’ Morosini.”44 What kind of household goods is not usually specified in the contracts. Valaressa Valeresso had in her trousseau 200 ducats’ worth of arnixe, which probably meant domestic tools like the scissors, inkstand, breadbasket, and pail in Ghostanza Minerbetti’s trousseau.45 Part of the trousseau of another Valaressa bride, Oria, consisted of “household furnishings” (mobeli de caxa), as did those of Marietta Badoer and Laura Lombardo, whose mobili were to be appraised along with her jewelry by the usual “two mutual friends.”46 These were probably small furnishings; Venetian brides resembled Florentines in seldom bringing beds to their marriages, unlike their counterparts elsewhere.47

Christiane Klapisch-Zuber reckons that Florentine patricians preferred not to make so obvious an allusion to the sexual act, though Julius Kirshner has suggested that the groom’s gifts of clothing to his bride, symbolically dressing her, were meant to signify his right to undress her for sex.48 That sexual impulse can be read between the lines of the Florentine widow Alessandra Strozzi’s account of the clothing and jewels, worth over 560 florins, that her future son-in-law, Marco Parenti, lavished on her daughter Caterina when the two were betrothed; she reported in a letter to her son Filippo that Marco was so taken with Caterina’s beauty that “he can’t sate himself [saziarsi] of doing things for her.”49

The nuptial gifts that Florentine husbands like Marco Parenti gave to their new wives, the counter-trousseau, have been well studied by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Isabelle Chabot, Jane Bestor, and Carol Frick. For Venice, Anna Bellavitis’s discussion of counter-dowries among the citizen class (cittadini) throws light on the groom’s economic contribution to the marital transaction.50 But to my knowledge there is as yet no systematic study of the Venetian counterpart of the Florentine counter-trousseau, nor is documentation on the practice in Venice easily found. Yet ample evidence makes it clear that bridegrooms dressed their wives just as the Florentines did. In a sumptuary law of 1425, the Senate explicitly imposed a limit of 400 ducats on husbands “having apparel made” (faciendi … vestes) for their wives—a good indication that many bridegrooms were spending more than that (and would continue to do so despite the law).51 It is only to be expected that a
husband would seek to match the investment of his bride’s father, in order to put his own semiotic stamp on his wife. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and Jane Bestor refer to the “customary obligation” on Florentine husbands to present their wives with these nuptial gifts. Surely the requirements of honor were indeed in the nature of an obligation. Yet, just as parents provided a trousseau partly to demonstrate their honor, wealth, and respect for their new son-in-law, but also as an affectionate inducement to a grateful daughter to keep alive her identification with them, in the same way, a husband adorning his wife with fashionable and expensive apparel simultaneously demonstrated his capacity to provide materially for his wife and, like Marco Parenti, strove to “[kindle] marital love, intimacy, and fidelity,” to quote Julius Kirshner.52 By and large, parents and husbands were successful, judging from the choices of testamentary executors that we saw earlier: married daughters appointing their parents and siblings, and wives and husbands entrusting each other with at least a share in the administration of their estates.

As in Florence, the gifts that Venetian husbands gave their wives were in effect loans, remaining the husband’s property. But those gifts also seem to have been regulated by what Isabelle Chabot calls “the rule of the game” governing all the exchanges that attended a marriage: that is, they were symmetrically temporary.53 The dowry stayed in the husband’s hands only as long as the marriage lasted; the items in the counter-trousseau also belonged to the wife for only that long. It is not clear what percentage of Venetian husbands gave their wives only short-term use of the garments, repossessing them soon after the marriage festivities as some Florentine husbands did. The Venetian market in secondhand wedding finery described by Patricia Allerston does alert us to the practice, used by nobles as well as others, of borrowing luxury attire and other furnishings to be returned after the festive period during and following a wedding.54 Despite these instances, however, the evidence from men’s wills leaves no doubt that many had clothing fashioned for their brides, and this figured in a characteristic transaction that followed the rule of the game described by Chabot. The deal was to bequeath to the future widow ownership, or at least usufructuary rights, to clothing and other items in return for her renouncing remarriage, instead remaining in the marital household and caring for the children with expenses borne by the husband’s estate. In some cases, the understanding was that she would defer or waive altogether the restitution of her dowry, leaving it in the husband’s estate for the benefit of the children. In many other cases, however, the husband conceded the dowry, added his wife’s clothing, other items, and an annual income, all on condition that his widow remain *donna e madonna*—in effect, legal guardian of their children and custodian of her husband’s estate.

The wills of a father and son, Lodovico and Nicolò Mudazzo, provide a good example. When Lodovico drafted his will in 1397 he was a remarried widower. He acknowledged his second wife, Orsa’s, right to restitution of her 1,000-ducat dowry, and he bequeathed her an additional 200 as a gift.
He also expressed his hope that she would live with his son Nicolò, her stepson, with Nicolò paying her food and clothing expenses. But Lodovico left open the possibility that Orsa might elect to live elsewhere. In that case, he instructed, his son was to provide her with enough money that “she be able to live and dress in such a way that she can go about honorably and contentedly.” Fortunately, Lodovico was zerto—certain—that Nicolò would treat his stepmother “like a mother” (come mare). Lodovico’s will makes no mention of the trousseau or counter-trousseau, but it does reveal his insistent sense of obligation to ensure that Orsa would be honorably appared, which suggests that she was to retain her clothing, perhaps as part of the dowry he was explicitly relinquishing. When, 14 years later, the son, Nicolò, wrote his own will, he was even more explicitly generous to his wife, Elena (as he might well be to the mother of his 13 children). In addition to acknowledging her dowry of 1,100 gold ducats, he bequeathed her 1,000 ducats’ worth of shares in the state-funded debt (which probably yielded 30 ducats per annum), lifetime residence in the marital casa, and food and clothing expenses. If Elena did agree to stay with their children in the house, “in the interest of greater love and peace,” Nicolò wrote, she would receive an additional 50 ducats a year, two beds furnished onestamente (respectably) in keeping with her status, and all the other “household equipment” (arnixe de casa) that she might need, up to the value of 25 ducats. In addition to this largesse, Elena was to have all her woolen and linen clothing (de lana et de lin, in the formulary phrase) and all her other possessions; and he added “for her use” (per so uxo), indicating that these items remained his property, not hers to dispose of. Like many husbands, he conditioned his generosity on Elena’s remaining a widow and taking care of their flock of children, though he was certain that “she won’t prefer otherwise” (altro non dexirà).

Nicolò Mudazzo went into greater detail than most husbands, but the message in his will is the same as theirs. Like the two-thirds of Florentine fathers identified by Isabelle Chabot as designating their future widows guardians (donna e madonna) of their children, Venetian fathers also wanted their wives to end their days in the marital casa. Nicolò Mudazzo resembled most husbands who bequeathed to their widows their apparel, in that he did not specify their sources, whether trousseau or counter-trousseau. But some husbands did go into detail, for example, Leonardo Priuli, whom we earlier saw designating relatives from multiple lineages and marital connections as his executors. Leonardo’s provision for his wife warrants an extended quotation:

To my most beloved wife, Maria, I leave her entire dowry of 3,000 ducats; however, I beseech [oro] her to kindly leave the dowry in my estate for five years, or for as long as she requires cash for the benefit of our children. In addition, I bequeath to her all the clothing and personal effects she received from her father, which she should freely possess; and she is also to have all the items that I have had made for her, except for my jewels, which should be calculated as part of my residuary bequest. [Note that thus far the be-
quests are not conditioned on Maria’s remaining unmarried.] Item, I also leave her expenses for food and clothing for as long as she remains a widow, as my executors deem suitable for her status; but she should have more if she requires it and my estate can supply it. I commend to my most beloved wife our dear son, Zaccaria, and all other sons or daughters who might be born to us, that she be both departed father and mother to them, and take the place of a father in seeing to their care.58

Priuli’s testament encapsulates the multiple valences that a wife’s presence brought into the marital household. Not only did he entrust his last will to the families of his wife, his mother, and his married sisters, his will also recognized Maria, only two years after their wedding, as his collaborator in the upbringing of their children—indeed, as his alter ego—by authorizing a gender-complicating bilaterality of parenting, with this young wife explicitly encouraged to take on the father’s role.59 Maria’s affiliation to both natal and marital families was to be given visual form in her possession and use of her trousseau and counter-trousseau, again serenely contemplated by Leonardo, who appointed her as custodian of the flesh-and-blood memory of their marriage, and at the same time acknowledged her continued role as representative of her parents, to whom he assigned a share of the fiduciary responsibility for his estate by naming them as executors. His testament captures the wife’s role as the fulcrum of blended family relationships in substance, symbol, and memory.

One final example displays the complementary ways in which the bilateral allegiance of married women found tangible expression in the goods that surrounded and clothed them. Shortly after marrying Cateruzza Vitturi in January 1438, Moisè Venier began keeping an account of the new family’s expenses.60 Over the course of the first year he recorded expenditures of 260 ducats for Cateruzza’s vestir, which included fabrics and tailoring for four dresses, as well as accessories such as veils, jewelry cases (cofani e cofanetti), a rosary, and a small knife. He also gave her the use of jewelry worth 4.75 ducats (4 ducats, 18 grossi), although that, as with Leonardo Priuli, was to remain his property (de mie raxon). One of the dresses deserves special attention. It was made of pano morello de grana, a reddish-brown wool, with sleeves lined in squirrel fur.61 Eleven years later, in 1449, when the recently widowed Cateruzza remarried, among the goods she brought to her new husband’s house were “two dresses of morello wool, one old and one new.”62 Seven years after that, in 1456, she drew up the will mentioned earlier, in which she named as executors her mother, her brother, and her sister’s husband. In it she bequeathed to her mother “my morello dress, as a token of my love.”63 It was also a token of Cateruzza’s enduring bonds to both her birth family and her first husband, now joined in the circulation of the dress Moisè had had made for her 18 years earlier, back to his wife’s natal family.

As it happened, Cateruzza outlived her mother, living for another 41 years, in fact. The fate of the morello dress is uncertain, but the memory of
the marriage that produced it was very much alive in her last will, in 1497.64
It reveals that after the death of her second husband in 1469 she had moved
back into the same parish, and perhaps the same house, in which she had
begun married life with Moisè Venier 59 years earlier. She identified her-
sel as Moisè’s widow and requested burial alongside him “in our tomb” in
Santo Stefano. She bequeathed the bulk of her estate in usufruct to her as
yet unmarried son—one of her three sons with Moisè—inquiring that at
his death it was to be divided between the two married sons. Most notably
in the present context, she made special mention of “all the movable goods
I have in my house,” which also should progress from brother to brothers.
Those goods had taken the place of the morello dress as a symbol of Cateruz-
za’s place in the multiplicity of physical and familial case in which her iden-
tity had been sited. That substitution corresponds to the difference Marta
Ajmar, glossing the sixteenth-century commentator Giacomo Lanteri, has
noted as the contrast between “the transience of women’s personal adorn-
ment … [and] the durability of domestic decoration.”65 The morello dress had
linked Cateruzza to the beginning of her first marriage and the grafting of
her husband’s lineage onto her natal identity in 1438. It had preserved the
memory of that marriage by accompanying her (and her sons) into her sec-
ond marriage in 1449. Bequeathing it to her mother in 1456 had expressed
Cateruzza’s continued identity as a daughter. Now, as she approached her
death, after outliving her parents, siblings, and two husbands, she took as
her responsibility the projection of those multiple memories to her only sur-
vivors, her sons and eventually their children, in the durable form of the
material goods of the palazzo.

Notes

1. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “The ‘Cruel Mother’: Maternity, Widowhood, and
Dowry in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” in Women, Family,
and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago, IL: University
of Chicago Press, 1985), 117–118. First published as “La ‘mère cruelle’: Materni-
ité, veuvage et dot dans la Florence des XIV-XV siècles,” Annales: Économies,
sociétés, civilisations 38, no. 5 (1983): 1097–1109. On women’s place in the pa-
trician household, see Patricia Fortini Brown, Private Lives in Renaissance Venice:
Art, Architecture, and the Family (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004);
and Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, eds., At Home in Renaissance Italy.
2. See the references in Stanley Chojnacki, Women and Men in Renaissance Venice
3. Isabelle Chabot, “La sposa in nero’: La ritualizzazione del lutto delle vedove
nella pratica e nella legislazione statutaria dell’Italia superiore,” Rivista italiana


6. For a dowry with all three components, see Archivio di Stato, Venice (hereafter, ASVe), Giudici del Proprio (hereafter, Proprio), Vadimoni, reg. 8/1, ff. 42r–43v (Dolfi n-Barbaro), 30 July 1477.


8. ASVe, Avogadori di Comun (hereafter, AC), Contratti di nozze, reg. 141/2, ff. 10rv, 11v–13r.


10. AC, Contratti di nozze, reg. 141/2, f. 9rv.

11. “non se possi vender, ne alienar, ma sempre resti obligado a la dicta madonna Marieta.” AC, Contratti di nozze, reg. 141/2, ff. 7r–8r. The contract between the Querini sisters and the Viaro brothers is in ibid., f. 9v. Both contracts are from 1512.


13. Even when married, a son remained under his father’s authority (*patria potestas*) until he was legally emancipated or the father died. Prior to emancipation sons could not make contracts without the father’s consent. On emancipation in Italy, see Thomas Kuehn, *Emancipation in Late Medieval Florence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982).


15. AC Contratti di nozze, reg. 142/3, ff. 169r–170r.

16. Thirty-six percent named children. The 77 wills are part of a sample of 112 men’s wills and 264 women’s wills, including single, married, and widowed testators, from 1390 to 1520.

17. Andriana: NT 41, Bonamico, no. 1 (19 February 1495/6); her wedding date of 1495 is in Marco Barbaro, “Libro di nozze patrizie,” Biblioteca Marciana, Venice, MSS italiani, classe 7, no. 156 (8492) (hereafter, Barbaro, Nozze), f. 40r. Sterina: NT 727, Moisis, no. 142 (13 July 1458); her wedding in 1456 is in Barbaro, Nozze, f. 231v.
18. Cateruzza: NT 985, Rogeri no. 236 (20 September 1456); wedding date of 1437/8 in Barbaro, Nozze, f. 440v. Lucia: NT 41, Bonamico, no. 1149 (October 1491); wedding date of 1468 in Barbaro, Nozze, f. 361v.
19. NT 68, Bonicardi, no. 3167 (April 1485).
20. NT 1186, Groppi, prot., no. 38 (15 March 1477).
23. ASVe, Senato, Terra, reg 5, f. 46r, 1 July 1463.
26. Respectively, AC, Contratti di nozze, reg. 141/2, ff. 5v–6r (27 September 1511); Proprio, Testimoni, reg. 4, f. 18r, (29 January 1424/5); AC, Contratti di nozze, reg. 141/2, f. 22v (contract of 3 June 1512); Proprio, Vadimoni, reg 5, ff.2v–3r (16 February 1450/51).
27. Respectively, AC, Contratti di nozze, reg. 141/2, ff. 14v–15r (20 May 1512); Proprio, Vadimoni, reg. 8/1, ff. 42r–43v (30 July 1477); AC, Contratti di nozze, reg. 141/2, f. 3v–4r (1511: month and date omitted); AC, Contratti di nozze, reg. 140/1, f. 8r (26 January 1505/06).
28. ASVe, Senato, Terra, reg. 15, ff. 93v–94v, 4 November 1505.
30. Proprio, Testimoni, reg. 4, f. 30rv (January 1425/6).
31. AC Contratti di nozze, reg. 142/3, f. 234rv (17 January 1531/2).
32. Proprio, Testimoni, reg. 4. ff. 23v–24r (22 January 1434/5).
34. AC Contratti di nozze, reg. 140/1, f. 8r (28 January 1505/06); see also AC Contratti di nozze, reg. 141/2, ff. 21v–22r (28 June 1512), AC Contratti di nozze, reg. 142/3, f. 46rv (23 May 1526). On appraisals by *rigattieri* in Florence, see Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 21, 135–136.
36. In addition to her trousseau and dowry, Ghostanza’s father gave her 520 florins when she married. It is not clear whether that was the amount of the unestimated trousseau or simply cash for her personal use. Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 139–140.
37. The Florentine totals are uncertain, because the trousseau portion was reported in florins *di suggello*, whereas it is uncertain which type of florin comprised the remaining 1,200. For the different florins, see Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 226.
38. This figure also includes brides’ *dimissorie*, or personal portions not calculated in the dowry strictly so-called.


41. NT 1227, Cristoforo Rizzo, no. 28 (1513: month and date unclear).


43. For the durability of dresses, see Muzzarelli, *Guararoba medievale*, 28.

44. Rosso: Proprio, Vadimoni, reg. 4, ff. 38v–39r (1 September 1424); Morosini: Biblioteca del Museo Correr, Venice, Codici Cicogna, 3427/11 (8 January 1343/4).

45. Proprio, Testimoni, reg. 4, f. 10v (20 July 1449); Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 236–237.

46. Valaresso: AC Contratti di nozze, reg. 141/2, ff. 2v–3v (3 April 1512); Lombardo: AC Contratti di nozze, reg. 142/3, f. 46rv (23 May 1526).


51. ASVe, Senato, Misti, reg. 55, f. 103v.


55. “che la possa viver e vestirse si che la se posa pasar per honor so et che la sia contenta.” NT 1255, Pietro Zane prot., f. 143v (7 August 1397).

56. Ibid., f. 184v (24 July 1411).


58. NT 1239, Tomei, no. 413 (1 March 1477).

59. They had married in 1475: Barbaro, *Nozze*, f. 346r.


61. For *grana* and *morello*, see Muzzarelli, *Guararoba medievale*, 357, 358.


63. NT 985, Francesco Rogeri, no. 236 (20 September 1456).

64. NT 1227, Cristoforo Rizzo, no. 100 (15 November 1497).