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<https://doi.org/10.15017/18366>

出版情報 : 言語文化論究. 25, pp.141-147, 2010-03. 九州大学大学院言語文化研究院
バージョン :
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Dowry and the Marketplace of Marriage in the Italian Renaissance

Michael Guinn

1. Introduction

An old Italian proverb runs, “Tell me whom you marry and I’ll tell you who you are” (qtd. in Strocchia 43). Furthermore could be added that a woman’s dowry during the Italian Renaissance told society who the family was. Dowry and marriage were indicative of a family’s standing and its capacity to harvest new social relationships—alliances that would serve to elevate, maintain, or lower the position of the family in the judgment of society as a whole. Therefore, strategy of the utmost ingenuity was called upon. Dowry and marriage surrounded most women of the late *trecento* and early *quattrocento* as the most crucial constructs of their lives in both the social and financial domains. No insight into the practical workings of Italian Renaissance society can be formed without an understanding of the dowry and its implications on social institutions and practices of the time. This paper begins by placing the marriage marketplace into its proper social context considering the needs and ideas of fifteenth century Italy. Through a concrete reassessment of various primary sources, this study will then argue against certain scholarly assertions that marriage could not take place without a dowry at this time in Italy.

2. The *Monte delle Doti*: The Private Made Public

Marriage in the Italian Renaissance was motivated fundamentally as an exchange of property and financial resources from the bride’s family to the groom’s. The intangibles, however, such as status and respectability within the community, played a crucial role as well. While the marketplace mentality at the expense of romantic love with regard to marriage seems dispiriting to modern sensibilities, it cannot be altogether unfamiliar considering that many today get married for financial reasons and evaluate their relationships upon the basis of practical needs, including social status. In the Italian Renaissance such needs were institutionalized in dowry and marriage. In fact, the *Signoria* in Florence showed to what extent private needs became a public matter with the inauguration in 1425 of the *Monte delle Doti*, a civic dowry fund in which families could invest securely in a daughter’s future dowry by depositing a sum that would pay off with interest over time. In 1443 Francesco Tommaso deposited ninety and sixty florins into the fund for two daughters respectively that appreciated into dowries of 548 florins for the older daughter in 1445 and 500 for the other in 1448 (Chojnacki 77). This sort of arrangement facilitated a greater variety of marriage prospects. It also entitled the poor to dowries since charitable donations were secured for this purpose. The *Monte delle Doti* was meant to increase marriages and alleviate the financial burdens of the poor and families with several daughters.

“His father has no other sons,” according to a letter dated 1459, “but seven girls, one married and six still at home; five of them have dowries in the Fund” (Strozzi 115). Unfortunately, as we shall see, the result of the Florentine dowry fund was a dowry inflation that necessitated a variety of strategies from families in order to cope financially.

3. Uses and Abuses of the Dowry

After marriage the dowry could provide the couple with some financial resources to develop a livelihood. For the working class this meant that tools could be purchased by a carpenter, a new shop could be opened by an artisan or artist, or a new business enterprise could be embarked upon by a merchant. For the wives of the elite class, the dowry could be spent in an altogether different manner. A Florentine sumptuary law of 1511 began with the complaint that wives were spending their dowries so conspicuously on luxury goods that their husbands were getting naught but *poco frutto* from them (Chojnacki 82). Undoubtedly there were some members of the Florentine government prompted by their own household circumstances to promulgate such legislation.

Dowries could also be the sole subsistence for widows, allowing for the possibility of remarriage. In a record of the judicial process detailing the alleged marriage between Giovanni della Casa and a widow named Lusanna in the fifteenth century in Florence, it was clear from the proceedings that Lusanna had attracted suitors after the death of her husband based on her dowry of 250 florins in 1455 (Brucker 35-36). It was forty years earlier that a statute enacted by the Florentine government affirmed the right of the widow to reclaim her dowry. In Venice widows were even made exempt from a dowry ceiling in order to assist them in their prospects for remarriage. On the other hand, a similar statute in Florence forbade widows from returning to their natal family home with children or bequeathing their dowries to anyone but their children. In addition, if the wife died and left no children, her husband was entitled to the entire dowry (Chojnacki 81). While it is true that the husband generally committed himself to restore the dowry to his wife upon his death in the early Renaissance period (Cohen 201), there were often conditions. In the will of Fetto Ubertini dated 1348, for example, the testator writes, “I bequeath to my wife Pia ... 125 Florins in addition to her dowry.... However, if she withdraws her dowry [from my estate], then I cancel the bequest of 125 florins.” He adds that she may keep the bequest and dowry “only if she leaves her dowry in my estate, and remains a widow, or becomes a tertiary” (Ubertini 50). Clearly the desired effect on Pia is to impel her to remain in the household and never to remarry, or face the loss of the bequest. Not only this, but if she does remarry, the children would undoubtedly be left in the care of the Ubertini family, a common practice in *quattrocento* Florence. This left a widow with difficult decisions that more often than not must have discouraged remarriage.

4. Dowry and the Brides of Christ

Some women in Pia's position would take their dowries to the convent. As evidenced by Ubertini's stipulation in his will, this was one option that was open to widows. Convents required dowries as well, the new nun or tertiary bringing her dowry as a Bride of Christ, albeit at a less expensive rate. Ubertini continued his will and testament with the following stipulation: “To each of my daughters ...

I bequeath the sum of 400 florins for their dowries if they intend to marry, or the sum of 225 florins if they become nuns” (50). The reduction of the dowry for those daughters directed towards a cloistered existence during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries reflects the expediency of saving money on parceling out dowries rather than the recognition of a spiritual calling among daughters. In fact, inflationary developments in the fifteenth century Florentine republic led to a population growth in convents, from 906 in 1427 to 2000 at the turn of the following century. The number of convents grew in proportion to service this need, nearly doubling between 1368 and 1470 (Chojnacki 71). Certainly not all of this growth can be attributed to familial strategy in avoiding the depletion of dowry resources on behalf of one or two daughters by sending excess daughters into convents. Nonetheless, a particular trend set in the patrician class would come to such a pitch that by 1581 in Venice “no less than three-fifths of all patrician women were in convents” and in 1553 a magistracy supervising nuns that required strict impartiality was left vacant because no one in government could be found without a female relative in a convent (71).

5. The Dowry and the Marriage Market

This strategy of cloistering daughters, in particular in the patrician class, developed as a consequence of the competitive nature of Italian families in the heat of which patrician fathers took advantage of civic assistance like the *Monte delle Doti* in order to raise the stakes. As dowry amounts climbed, so too did the practice of cloistering daughters. The consequences on social status from this dowry inflation can be gleaned from comments taken from documentary sources. In August 1447 Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, a widow, wrote to her eldest son then living in exile from Florence that she had arranged a marriage for her daughter Caterina to a silk merchant, to whom “I am giving one thousand florins of dowry, that is five hundred florins that she is due in May 1448 from the Fund, and the other five hundred I have to give him, made up of cash and trousseau, when she goes to her husband’s house, which I believe will be in November, God willing” (110). With a daughter marrying before the maturation of her dowry, Alessandra is clearly not entirely satisfied, and there is even a hint of desperation when she writes, “He who marries is looking for cash and I couldn’t find anyone who was willing to wait for the dowry until 1448, and part in 1450.” She states that to get Caterina into a nobler family would have meant “fourteen hundred or even fifteen hundred florins, which would have ruined both of us.” Part of the problem for the Strozzi family was that with its male members in exile while the Medici ruled Florence few families found such an alliance to be politically or socially prepossessing. What is especially intriguing about Alessandra’s statement, however, is that she could not find anyone else willing to wait for payment of the dowry. If a wife died in childbirth at this time, not an uncommon occurrence, only the principal of the dowry rather than the accrued interest was returned to the family. Therefore, this must have been a factor in the impatience of the market. In fact, in another letter to her son in 1449 Alessandra would contemplate taking insurance out on the dowry for twelve florins when Caterina did become pregnant (114).

By 1465 when it became desirable for Alessandra’s son to marry, she sent reports on various candidates to him. One of these whom she approved was offering one thousand florins as a dowry. Considering that her son was still in exile, this seemed all that could be mustered or indeed hoped for; after

all, Alessandra writes with evident bitterness, it is “an artisan’s dowry” (120). The artisan class would have included those who made and sold goods in the community. Nonetheless, it is striking to recall that this is the exact same figure that Alessandra had offered with her own daughter eighteen years earlier. Such was the pace of the dowry inflation that Alessandra mentions with some degree of envy that now “the Manfredi gave their girl two thousand florins to marry into the Pitti family So you see how it is.” It was this sort of social vigilance that led to competitive maneuvering for position and an exorbitant marriage market as the fifteenth century wore on in Italy.

6. Fixing the Dowry

Venice tried to halt dowry inflation by introducing a dowry limitation law in 1420. What is most striking about this law is that the state recognized certain social nuances in its exemptions. Widows, as we have seen, and women over the age of twenty-four could offer amounts above the established ceiling. The latter benefited by this because most patrician women were married as teenagers. In addition, women from the wealthy bourgeois had an extended ceiling to enable them to marry into the patrician class. Five years later Venice eliminated the dowry ceiling altogether for the blind. In 1444 lame and misshapen women were added to this list of total exemptions so that those who were ‘injured by nature but adorned by fortune also could marry’ (qtd. in Chojnacki 84). In Florence, where no such legislation existed, Alessandra Strozzi wrote of an illegitimate relative recently wedded who was lucky: “considering her status and that she’s longsighted ..., we weren’t looking to put her in a wealthy household so much as one where she’ll be loved and well looked after” (115). The amount of the dowry is not mentioned, but the fact that the bride’s physical characteristics and status are can incline the historian towards the assumption of a proportionate dowry.

With regard to the delicate matter of fixing the amount of the dowry, many factors had to be taken into consideration. It “should be precisely set, promptly paid, and not too high. The larger the payments are to be and the longer they are to be carried,” writes Leon Battista Alberti around 1430, “the more reluctantly you will be paid” (118). Doubtless this was another reason that Alessandra had found it difficult to find prospective husbands for her daughter who would be willing to wait for payment. Would the money ever come without enmity or litigation between the families? There was also to be considered the matter of envy among still unwed female family members if a dowry was too great or a trousseau too lavish. One head of a household wrote in a letter of the late fourteenth century, “I also think that Antonia may be upset when she sees Caterina’s beautiful gown. I urge you to write a comforting letter to Dora [Antonia’s mother], and tell her that we will find a husband for Antonia, if God wills it” (Del Bene 34-35). Therefore, the person or persons negotiating such matters had to balance jockeying for position within the society by advertising daughters at an alluring price with maintaining harmony at home.

7. Marriage without Dowry

Sharon T. Strocchia writes in her essay entitled “Gender and the Rites of Honor in Italian Renaissance Cities” that “in Renaissance Italy, where arranged marriages were the rule, there could be no marriage without a dowry, regardless of class” (44). One wonders how such an assertion would hold

up if more documents reached posterity from the impoverished classes of the time both in urban and rural areas. Indeed if dowerless marriages took place among the poor, in all likelihood there would be no documentation. An examination of certain primary documents available to scholars now is enough to call into question the absolute nature of the claim. Lusanna's alleged marriage to Giovanni della Casa, mentioned above, was supposedly carried out in secret and without a dowry in 1453. Lusanna's procurator attested before the ecclesiastical officials hearing the case that in Florence "a woman's beauty has often been the cause of marriages between socially disparate partners, in which no dowry has been given" (Brucker 109). The procurator's motivation naturally is to persuade the court officials that his client's situation has precedents, so one must ask if it is likely that his statement would have been made in desperation alone, that is without any basis in quotidian reality, or if his contention was an affirmation rooted in an observation that the court would readily recognize. Undoubtedly, Lusanna's situation was unusual, but not so unusual that the procurator could not make this claim with some sense of sound reasoning. Clandestine marriages were still taking place as late as 1500, according to documents collected by Gene Brucker, and dowries would not have been essential to them.

In addition to the procurator's statement, we also have Leon Battista Alberti's declaration in the fourth decade of the quattrocento: "I have noted that if a girl is well born she often comes without a dowry" (118). Allowing for the dialectical schemata of his book and that certain ideas might have been introduced into the narrative for the facilitation of discussion and argument, there is still the persistent presentation of a notion as not altogether foreign to some of our sources from the period. Not to belabor the point unduly, but there is also the fact that in the late fourteenth century Francesco di Marco Datini, the famed merchant of Prato, "chose a bride who, though dowerless, was young and handsome" (Origo 165). This occurrence may fall out of the time period of "Renaissance Italy" stipulated by Strocchia in her assertion, but it certainly points to the possibility that outside Florence, Rome and Venice such events may not have been uncommon even into the period under discussion, especially when it involved a wealthy man and a beautiful young lady, as in the Datini case. Lusanna's procurator may have given us a truthful observation about such matters after all. It is hoped that more sources will come to light and further study generated before scholars draw any absolute conclusions about the possibility or lack thereof concerning dowerless marriages in the Italian Renaissance.

8. Conclusion

Nonetheless, prevalent was the number of women who went into marriage dowered, as most primary documents maintain. Even seducers and rapists were charged with dowering their young victims as a form of compensation in Florence and Venice (Rocke 163). On this side of the law, fathers were not alone in ensuring through dowries that their daughters made conspicuously suitable matches and means of establishing cohesive blood ties. Cohen calls contributing to the dowry fund "a favorite good deed" of Renaissance society (204). It would be fruitless to argue with such an assessment. Parents, relatives, friends and allies all chipped in through donations and even deathbed bequests all for the betterment of social ties. The paterfamilias above who was nervous about inciting envy in his family by the lavish gown that his daughter Caterina was to wear wrote, "The women have decided that Caterina's dress will be made of blue silk and that the gown will form a part of the dowry; this was a wise

decision” (Del Bene 35), one in fact that shows clearly that contributions not only financially to the head of the household were welcome but also some facets of the decision-making process.

Marriage in the Italian Renaissance was clearly very much like “a modern stock exchange; indeed marriageable girls were sometimes characterized as ‘merchandise’ (*mercatanzia*)” (Brucker 107). Nonetheless, it behooves the student of the period not to take the analogy too far. With all of her financial anxiety with regard to marrying off her daughter and an illegitimate relative, Alessandra rarely fails to mention happiness and even on occasion love. It is sometimes difficult to gauge parental feeling in the business-like letters and *ricordi* that detail matrimonial arrangements for sons and daughters, but we must not assume its absence either.

The dowry was central to the social dynamics of the Italian Renaissance. As we have seen, strategies were advanced by city-states and families to make the most of these dynamics. In Florence the will to keep up in the current of competitive honor was inadvertently intensified rather than relieved by one of the first modern social assistance programs in history, the *Monte delle Doti*. As convent populations swelled with patrician daughters as a result, so too did the number of convents. This, as we have seen, was an enduring legacy of dowry inflation. While it is hoped that further archival study may render a verdict on dowerless marriages, there is no doubt that the dowry was an integral part of Italian Renaissance life.

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