

GENDERING MEN IN EARLY MODERN VENICE

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to raise question about the cultural construction of manhood and male honour by analyzing annulment suits on grounds of impotence which were brought to the attention of the Patriarchal court in Venice during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is aimed at making a contribution to works of gender history, by making "men visible as gendered subjects". By opening a window onto the crises of manhood, impotence cases reveal the anxieties of men which were connected to cultural expectations and the multiple threats to manhood. The most telling test of manhood was the sexual performance, which stood as a marker for virility and, in consequence, for the defining of male sexual honour and masculine identity. In short, this article lays emphasis on the fact that patriarchy could be contested rather than stressing male domination and female submission exclusively.

Key words: ethics, honour, men, code of honour, sexual identity, Venice

Introduction

"What makes man a man?" asked Herbert Grönemeyer in the late 80's in a song entitled "Men" ("Männer"). Grönemeyer who became a star overnight with this song in Germany did not provide an answer to that question; but he nevertheless sensitized the German audience for the complexity of the 20th century's masculinity: he sung about male aggression ("Men make wars"), the affectionate and fragile sides of men ("Men need a lot of affection", "Men are so vulnerable") and their sexual lust ("Men can always have sex"). In short, as the refrain reminds us, men are not always what they seem to be at first glance, since their capacity to "appear hard while being soft

inside" ("außen hart und innen ganz weich") is something they had to acquire from childhood onwards ("werden als Kind schon auf Mann geeicht"). Herbert Grönemeyer, as one might argue, showed an awareness that manhood is not naturally given, but socially constructed.¹

To lay bare the precise historical meaning of manhood and womanhood in the past is an important objective of works embedded to the methodological and theoretical framework of gender history. Works on gender history have shown how immensely fruitfully the fundamental differentiation between "sex" and "gender" can be applied to early modern societies in order to underpin the historicity of cultural images of womanhood, for example. They have stressed the need to reconstruct the social and cultural construction of both, femininity and masculinity in the past, in order to understand how sex differences and gender relations were shaped by contemporary discourses and how they worked in daily life. Despite these theoretical implications, however, in practice we can still notice a considerable lack of works which make "men visible as gendered subjects" (Roper, Tosh, 1991, 1). Men have been addressed in women's works and gender history only insofar as they formed the context for the living conditions of women (i.e. the structures of male domination which sustained patriarchy) and only seldom as gendered subjects themselves (Dinges, 1998). The demand to carry out "gender history - with men!" (Dinges, 1998, 7) still needs to be realized. Not only German historiography has for a long time been resistant to problematize masculinity in a historical perspective,² an assertion which is especially virulent for the early modern period.³ The international, namely Anglo-American research landscape has, too, only seldom focused on heterosexual men in gender-conscious terms before the nineteenth century.⁴ Since gender was an "organizing principle of social structures, institutions and practices" (Roper, Tosh, 1991, 11), the complexities of the sex/gender system can only fully be unravelled if attempts at laying bare the construction of femininity *and* masculinity are made in a historical perspective. Works on masculinity, as various authors agree, should attempt to reflect the making of manhood in its relation to the "totality of

1 The idea to begin with Grönemeyer's song comes from Thomas Kühne (1996,7). In writing this article I have specifically cited German studies on masculinity and honour, in order to use the opportunity to make them known to a wider scientific audience. I wish to express my thanks to Martin Dinges and Erik O. Ründal who have commented on an earlier version of this article, and to Jens Hammer for his careful reading of the final article.

2 An import exception is Ute Frevert (1991), the pioneer of nineteenth century German history on masculinity and honour and Trepp (1996).

3 For helpful overviews cf. Dinges (1998) and Schmale (1998).

4 Important exceptions are Fletcher (1995), Lees (1994) and Roper, Tosh (1991). The homosexual movement, however, has been very productive in inspiring the so-called Men's studies. For the most recent bibliographies cf. Dinges (1998).

gender relations" (Roper, Tosh, 1991, 2).⁵ The focus should be placed on the multiplicity of meanings of the term patriarchy by avoiding laying emphasis on the various forms of male domination and female submission only (Roper, Tosh, 1991; Kühne, 1996). The way power inscribed itself into the male identity needs to be reconstructed if we want to re-create the gendered experiences of men in specific historical cultures. Such an approach should not only reflect cultural expectations regarding male social roles, social status and their access to power, but also the cultural determindness of the male body.⁶ As impotent cases elucidate, the male body of the early modern period ran in accordance with laws unfamiliar to bodily discourses and perceptions of the 20th century. When physicians examined men with sexual problems, they sometimes explained a discontinuous reaction by referring to the caloric pathology - the prevailing cultural image - and thus to the lack of heat.⁷ While this medical interpretation gives us fascinating insights into early modern medical discourses and bodily experiences, here it is the relation between male body and male honour I want to stress, in order to underpin the importance of sexual honour for the masculine identity in early modern society.

Research on honour has increasingly sharpened our awareness for the gender-specific dimensions of honour.⁸ Female honour, as has been stated, was closely tied to the purity of the body and mainly defined as sexual honour. Women had therefore to behave unambiguously and defend their honour publicly in the streets and in the courts (Cavallo, Cerutti, 1980; Muir, Ruggiero, 1990; Burghartz, 1995; Gowing, 1996; Rublack, 1999). A woman's responsibility to preserve her virginity until marriage stood in sharp contrast to male notions of honour, since men could be sexually experienced when entering marriage. In this sense did prostitutes - the inverse of female honourability - defend honourable women, since male sexual energy could be discharged in impure bodies. But the threat to female honour did not only lie outside the woman. Due to the imbalance of essential bodily fluids or "humours" (blood, phlegm, yellow bile or cholera, and black bile or melancholia) women were not only inclined to irrationality and weakness (the reason why they needed constant male guidance), but also construed as the more lecherous sex: the female body itself was perceived as problematic, since it increased the "incidence and violence of passions" (Maclean, 1980, 42). Women had therefore, on the one hand, a precious "good" - their sexual honour - to defend, but according to contemporary philosophical and medical discourses, on the other, hardly the means to do so (Dinges, 1998).

5 Cf. also Kühne (1996), Dinges (1998) who both understand 'gender' as a relational category.

6 For the connection between men studies and body history cf. Schmale (1998, 20-31).

7 Archivio Storico del Patriarcato di Venezia (henceforth ASPV), *Causarum Matrimoniorum* (henceforth C. M.), Reg. 90: 24 November 1628, *Clare Capello cum Julio Molino*, not foliated.

8 Excellent overviews are provided by Schreiner, Schwerhoff (1995) and Dinges (1989, 1995).

While sexual honour was almost entirely the foundation of female honour,⁹ broader and more public notions of honour have been identified for men which included "political and economic notions of status and power" (Tlusty, 1998, 186). Male honour could also be affected by the capacity or incapacity of ruling the household, providing the household resources, guiding its members and controlling their wives' sexuality and thus the bodies of others. Only in one respect have male bodies themselves been the object of study, namely in cases of drunkenness, since "one of the demands of honourable manhood was the ability to drink copiously, even to become drunk, but without losing control - economically, physically, or verbally" (Tlusty, 1998, 186).¹⁰

While I do not challenge the consensus that for men their sexual honour was only one part of the masculine gender identity (cf. Dinges, 1995; Fletcher, 1995), I would like to highlight herein the importance of sexual prowess and sexual behaviour for the male code of honour. Impotence cases allows us to gain insights into cases of contested virility and open a window onto the "crisis of manhood" (Kühne, 1996). Manhood, as these court cases demonstrate, was not a stable category, but had to be proven on a day to day basis. Although the male sex dominated as the strong, rational and active over the weak, irrational and passive female sex, in daily household life the wise household ruler had still to display his ruling qualities. The right to patriarchal authority embodied not only the asymmetrical power relations but referred, too, to gender-specific expectations men had to fulfil and to negotiate. As trials on household disputes elucidate, women could undermine paternal authority, before it was reinforced and implemented (Hacke, 1999). The probing of men's anxieties related to contested patriarchal authority is, however, extremely difficult, since "the essence of patriarchy is that men's problems with enforcing it are not talked about" (Fletcher, 1995, 28). An exception to that rule are impotence trials which give us many insights into the challenges to the masculine identity. They suggest that male sexuality was in practice much more problematic than it seems at first glance; it could become the source of men's turbulence with masculinity. Especially in a society "in which young girls were already said to judge a man's sexual prowess from the size of his nose" (Stolberg, 2000, forthcoming). It is the importance of male sexuality for the male codes of honour and the fragile and vulnerable side of manhood,¹¹ I would like to stress.

In doing so, I have been inspired by the distinction between the notions of "being

9 Honourable women in Augsburg, were also productive "in the sense of actively managing provisions and taking the responsibility for the nourishment of the household" (Tlusty, 1998, 186).

10 Cf. Roper (1994, 107-124) on the disruptiveness of masculinity in Early Modern German towns.

11 The emotional side of manhood in eighteenth and nineteenth Century Germany is investigated by Trepp (1996).

a man" ("Mannsein") and "manhood" ("Männlichkeit") made by Thomas Kühne in 1996. It enables us to differentiate between the contemporary notion - and thus the construction - of manhood and the different ways in which men accused of impotence dealt with the threat to their masculine identity. While taking the societies' discourse about manhood into account, I equally wish to focus on the self-image and differing social practices of men accused of being impotent. In the first part of this article, some of the moral teachings concerning sexuality are discussed in relation to the church courts' approach to impotence. In the following part, an attempt is made at placing impotence trials into the broader context of early modern notions of masculinity.

Impotence and the church court

Impotence cases elucidate two ruling principles of church doctrine, i.e. the centrality of sexuality for the validity of the marriage and the procreational aim of sexual practices. For despite the anti-carnal Christian tradition, the "sexual union was the realisation of one flesh" (Fletcher, 1997, 54) and until sexual intercourse had taken place, a marriage was not considered valid. But only natural, incurable and perpetual impotence constituted a nullifying impediment. Temporary impotence, by contrast, caused by disease or mutilation did not necessarily constitute grounds for annulment because of the possibility that the problem could pass with time.¹² In this context it was necessary to assess whether impotence arose during or at the very beginning of the marriage, a question which ecclesiastical judges carefully investigated. When impotence arose during marital life, the marriage was likely to have been already consummated, something marital partners with perpetual impotence could never achieve. Since impotence constituted one of the few possibilities to declare a marriage null and void, it was a serious accusation. If the suit was successful, remarriage was possible for the healthy party.¹³

Even though impotence was not necessarily a male disease in early modern society,¹⁴ twelve out of thirteen charges on grounds of impotence were brought to the Patriarchal court in Venice by women.¹⁵ The inability to consummate a marriage,

12 Marital partners were supposed to live together for at least three years before a suit on grounds of impotence could be brought to court Jerouschek (1994, 295). In practice, however, this rule was not always followed.

13 Therefore, one could argue, women could use the courts to strategically achieve an annulment of the marriage. For the juridical aspects of impotence cf. Darmon (1979); Phillips (1988, 8).

14 The existence of female sperm was e.g. held by Galen. According to him women's sperm had to be drawn out of her and had "to be present for conception to occur" (Cadden, 1993, 126). This view, however, was contested.

15 This result is based on the systematic analysis of the sample called *Causarum Matrimoniorum* in the period 1570 to 1700. For France cf. Darmon (1979).

however, was not exclusively approached in terms of a purely manly problem. Women's bodies could, too, be held unsuitable for sexual intercourse and discussions in court reveal the importance of the anatomical suitability of both marital partners.¹⁶ Before midwives were called to court to carry out bodily examinations, interrogations in court focused on the intimate life of the couple, revealing in an uncommonly detailed way the sexual practices of the marital partners. In accordance with the guiding principles of church doctrine, they were commonly addressed in terms of the marital debt, which both partners had to pay. This is not surprising, since sexual activities were licit only within a priestly blessed union, with the procreative aim in mind, and at prescribed times. Sexual activities for mere sensual pleasure and in forbidden positions like anal or oral intercourse were sinful, because not aimed at procreation (Davidson, 1994). In order to prevent libidinous and sinful feelings, the Italian Brother Cherubino da Siena advised couples in his *Rules of Married Life* that the woman should face the sky and her husband the earth while fulfilling the marital debt.¹⁷ Other sexual activities involving the mouth, the eyes, the nose, the ears, or the tongue were sinful because they were not aimed at procreation. Kissing was allowed as long as the tongue was not involved, and only mouth to mouth. Needless to say, the husband should only ejaculate into the appropriate vessel, and not outside the woman (Bell, 1990, 123; Hergemöller, 1998).

Despite the identical right and duty of wife and husband to pay the marital debt under mortal sin, in some of the moral teachings of the church gender specific expectations become extremely audible. Bernardino of Siena, for example, reminded women in his preachings that the female virtues of a married women were "sexual continence and shame", (Rocke, 1998, 155) - even when it came to practising the marital debt. In conjugal life, it was the wife's duty to prevent that her husband might see her naked, or might touch her indecently (Rocke, 1998, 155). Additionally, wives should, in their request for sexual intercourse, always behave chaste and modest. Therefore, Bernardino of Siena advised husbands that they should "react to the 'smallest sign' of his wife's yearning to protect her from the indelicacy of having to express her desire" (Rocke, 1998, 155). Women's sexual desire or insatiability, however, was commonly not an issue discussed in legal court practice, because it was rather the question of the validity of marriage which was investigated. In this respect other gender differences regarding the marital debt were audible in the court room than discussed so far. Despite the identical duty to render the marital debt, in practice only women were suspected in court of being reluctant to fulfil this conjugal duty.

16 I am not discussing here the bodily examinations carried out by physicians and midwives respectively.

17 Cf. Bell (1990) and his discussion of Cherubino da Siena, especially 122. In medical theory the "missionary position" was also held to be best for conception (Cadden, 1993, 245).

This might be taken as an indication that the notion of the sexual insatiability of woman was not the only cultural image available to describe women's sexual behaviour - it could be addressed and interpreted quite differently. One might even suspect that the exclusively male staff of the church court was initially willing to allow doubts about a wife's sense of obedience. A case in point is Camilla Benzoni who declared straightforwardly in 1590 that her husband "tried to have sexual intercourse with me ..., but combined nothing".¹⁸ She was immediately suspected by the judge of being resistant towards sexual intercourse with her husband,¹⁹ an argument which was also available for and used by the accused husbands.²⁰ Female plaintiffs, by contrast, more generally stressed their obedience regarding their sexual and conjugal behaviour, while at the same time underlying their sexual modesty. Their guiding principle for pressing a suit to court was not sexual lust, but motivated by the need to live in accordance with the moral teachings of the church. Almost all of them had left their partners before starting the suit in court, since they lived, as they declared, in agony²¹ and sin.²² Father confessors sometimes used their influence and means of "social control" in confession and advised a woman in crisis that she should leave:

"for the sake of her soul (...) (her husband) and go to the house of her father and mother and I (the father confessor, D.H.) told her explicitly that this was not a valid matrimony and that the church would have annulled it without any difficulty".²³

Apart from the possibility of suing for an annulment of the marriage, impotent partners could be advised by their father confessors to live like *fratello et sorella*²⁴ - that is, not to practise sex at all. This was an important alternative in cases of impotence, if the partners wanted to stay together. According to the Spanish Canonist Thomas Sanchez, the ecclesiastical judges should allow the partners to live together, if that was their express will (Sanchez, 1607, book VII, disputatio 97, 386). But in the cases that came to the notice of the Venetian Patriarchal court, this advice was not followed and sex played a central role in the lives of the couples. In the trial of Anna Lazzarini against Battista Vidali, defendant, plaintiff and several witnesses testified - with a quite unusual "unanimity" for trials - that both partners had practised

18 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 14v.

19 Ibid, fol. 15r. Women responded to this attack stressing their obedience. Ibid., fols. 15r-v.

20 Ibid., fols. 25v-26r.

21 Ibid., fol. 22r.

22 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine (barcaruol) cum Francesco Reuisare panorum, fol. 37r. Cf. also ASCPV. C. M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 22r: [...] 'che stando noi cosi senza consumar matrimonio perfettamente stauamo in peccato'.

23 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 74: 2 September 1579, Bartholamei de Albertis cum Angela Petri Textoris, fols. 8v-9r.

24 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 23r.

sexual intercourse "day and night" for the long period of two and a half years.²⁵ They worked intensively to consummate the marriage and "they even shut themselves in a room in order to try to consummate it".²⁶ Even during menstruation - the time in which couples should abstain from sexual activities - sex was practised.²⁷ In other circumstances, modesty rather than sexual excess was the rule for Christian life. The above-cited Cherubino da Siena explicitly warned couples against frequent sexual activities, as sexual intercourse drained natural male vigour and could even lead to an early death (cit. in Bell, 1990, 122).

Not only the frequency, the repertoire of sexual activities which were admittedly practised also transgressed the rules of sexual behaviour as laid out above. This admittance might be astonishing, as - according to Christian doctrine - sex was understood in terms of the marital debt and not in terms of sexual lust or desire. But this principle was more flexible than one might have thought. Stimulating sexual activities were not considered to be sinful if they were practised as a preparation for sexual intercourse and not in terms of sexual desire (Jerouschek, 1994, 288). In this sense, hands could be used to remove potency problems by stimulating the penis outside the vagina (Jerouschek, 1994, 287-8). This for us slightly contradictory logic might also explain why in impotence trials descriptions of "unnatural" sexual activity were not concealed. In court they counted as a proof of an incurable impotence, which long-lasting and extensive sexual practices could not remove. Practices like the stimulation of the penis were therefore - on the other hand - exclusively described in the context of impotence. In this situation the woman was the active partner and stimulated the male member with the hand.²⁸ As an alternative to the "missionary position", sexual intercourse was practised from the side or - in a development of the "missionary position" - with the female legs on the male shoulder.²⁹ But when - despite of the inventiveness and frequency of sexual practices - the marital couple was still not able to fulfil the conjugal duty of procreation, these sexual practices were deemed sinful. This ambivalent assessment of sexual practices aimed to remove potency problems becomes in part audible in the testimony of a Dominican father from June 1580:

25 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 93: 6 July 1657, Anne Lazaroni cum Joanne Baptista Vidali, fols. 4r-v.

26 Ibid., fol. 7r.

27 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Canulle Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 24v. "In addition to these fixed times of abstinence, the demand of the marital debt is not legitimate during pregnancy, after childbirth until the mother enters church for purification, while breast feeding, while menstruating" (Bell, 1990, 121-2).

28 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 93: 6 July 1657, Anne Lazaroni cum Joanne Baptista Vidali, 5 September 1657, fol. 7v: 'Voleua che io manegiaste con le mani'.

29 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine cum Francisco Reuisare panorum, fol. 12r: 'me ha insegnato à consunar Matrimonio à tutti i modi come sarà in letto dalle bande, et con le gambe in spalla'.

"Every day he (Bartolomeo) stimulated her (Angela) in order to fulfil the marital debt and he tried hard and without interruption for more than one hour; every time he made her work very hard, made her sweat, [...] but they couldn't achieve what marriage is for, although she got married in order to have children".³⁰

This quotations shows the pressures which were laid on men especially to fulfil the marital act and elucidates contemporary notions of manhood which construed men as the more active sexual partner. In this regard the frequency of sexual practices can be taken as an indication of how impotent men reacted towards the public threat of a public attribution of impotence and thus how they dealt with contemporary cultural expectations, an issue to which we turn next.

Threats to the masculine identity

The fashioning of manhood and womanhood helped to underline the contours of male and female gender roles; but it equally opened the door for the multiple threats to the masculinity identity. Refinement in looks and dress, for example, bore the danger that men might be perceived as soft and womanish (Fletcher, 1995, 96). The general threat to effimacy should be avoided by "manly activities, by physical exercise through which men proved to themselves and each other that their was the stronger sex" (Fletcher, 1996, 94). One of these "manly activities" were certainly the fist battles held at Venetian bridges under the eyes of thousands of spectators. Even though it is difficult to assess what this assertive maleness actually meant to the fighting men themselves, they were, however, able to display "strength, endurance, and aggression" (Davis, 1996, 109) and to differentiate themselves from women and children. The most threatening test of manhood, one might argue, was the ability to perform sexually. Only then was a husband's right to control and rule over his wife the expression and realization of his biologically superior sex. But patriarchal authority was not always immediate and had to be gained and implemented. If the man lost control over his body and his sexual performance, he, too, jeopardized the control over his wife. He might awake one day, as happened to Nicolò Brun in 1625, and find that a *cartello infamante* had been fixed over his entrance in the shadow of the night.³¹ In this unwelcome message, the dishonoured receiver Nicolò Brun was insulted as a *becco contento*, as a content cuckold (Blok, 1981, 427-440; Burke,

30 "Ogni giorno lui (Bartolamio) la (Angela) stimolava nell'uso del matrimonio col' strappazzarla piu d'una hora continua ogni uolta chel la faceva strachar, et sudar, niente di meno mai poteua far nessun uso di matrimonio, mettendoli nelle pensieri, ne li ueniva à più effetto nell'uso del matrimonio, per la qual cosa lei si era maridata per generar, et far fioli, ...". (ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 74: 2 September 1579, Bartholamei de Albertis cum Angela Petri Textoris, fol. 9r).

31 Archivio di Stato di Venezia. Avogaria di Comun, Miscellanea Penale. 416. 13: Brun, Angela, rapita moglie di Nicolò, 1675, not foliated.

1987, 96). His control over his wife failed when a male member other than his own *sta in alto* (i.e. erected) and challenged his masculine superiority by subjecting it to public gossip.

Early modern notions inherent to the masculine gender identity construed manhood as the sexual control over a wife, which was equated with social control and the maintaining of sexual and social order. The virile man was the active, penetrating part, while the penetrated, passive and submissive role was deemed feminine, regardless of the actual sex of the person (Rocke, 1996, 13; Hergemöller, 1998, 106). Sexual slanders, too, elucidate that the defining of gender roles was to a certain degree independent from the actual biological sex and men could be perceived as behaving or being in a feminine position. The expression "te ho in culo" ("I have you where you belong to be") written on a *cartello infamante* in Rome in 1620 plays exactly with the polarity active/passive, male/female and dominant/submissive of the gender system only to conclude that the receiver was in the passive, i.e. female position (Burke, 1987). The dangers posed by the polarity of sexual differences had to be overcome by an unambiguous male behaviour, in order to escape the threat of effimacy. Potency was undoubtedly important in this respect. Verbal sexual slanders exchanged in Italy in the early modern period elucidate the centrality of potency for the construction of manhood: men with honour had "cogliani grossi", while dishonoured men were portrayed as "manso", i.e. tame as a lamb, or even castrated.³² Gestures of castration point in the same direction (Burke, 1987).

Sexual male dominance³³ was sometimes hard to achieve and highly contested. Fathers might have been foreseeing their sons' difficulties and had arguably advised them how to sexually perform properly. Where sexual manuals were not available, sexual knowledge had to be acquired through practice.³⁴ The humiliation of impo-

32 A case in point is: ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 92: Bendetta Spinella cum Pietro Franchini, not foliated, 20 March 1638; cf. also Roodenburg (1998) from whom I have taken the example of the 'cogliani grossi'. Sexual slanders provide at least some empirical data for a particularly Mediterranean notion of honour, a concept which, as Stewart (1994, 75-78) rightly states, has still to be proven. In northern Europe, men were insulted in relation to their working abilities and their economical reputation, but not in regard to their sexual honour (Roodenburg, 1998; Schwerhoff, 1991; Dinges 1998). In Italy, however, sexual slanders against men clearly dominated (Burke, 1987; Dinges 1998), while women all over Europe were insulted in regard to their sexual honour (Dinges, 1994).

33 Fletcher reports that in the sixteenth century London more than 130 terms were used to 'portray intercourse as an act of male dominance' (Fletcher, 1996, 93).

34 An interesting constellation could arise if the woman was widowed and had had sexual experience during her first marriage, while the man was sexually inexperienced. In turning the gender roles upside down, the woman could be the active partner and govern the husband during his sexual performance. ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine cum Francisco Reuisare panorum, fols. 11v-12r: 'Io era Donzello, et non sapeuo quello che fosse donna mi manco sapeuo consumar Matrimonio, che lei mia mogier me ha insegnato à consumar Matrimonio à tutti i modi'.

tence, a discontinuous erection or premature ejaculation increased in front of female expectations. Men were not only expected "to perform, but to perform well" (Stolberg, 2000, forthcoming). This was not an easy task, since "women's sexual desire tended to be stronger and more lasting than men's" (Stolberg, 2000, forthcoming). Orgasm seems to have been something women clearly expected to enjoy,³⁵ as suggested by certain Letitia in court. She had been the satisfied sexual partner of certain Giacomo de Badilis who was later, in 1575, accused by his wife Marietta of being impotent. Letitia, however, testified in court towards Giacomo's priceless sexuality:

"lui negocia le donne, et fa come fa i altri homeni ma el no ge tira, el no ge sta duro, el prattica ben con esse (le donne), *el me lo feci sete uolte In una notte*, ma chel possa tuor uerzinita penso chel no sia bon".³⁶

Letitia, who was seemingly content with Giacomo's sexual performance despite his inability to maintain erection, refers not only to the multiple possibilities and sexual fantasies lay people in early modern Venice played out in daily life despite the strict regulations concurring their moral and sexual behaviour. This quotation points, too, to the crucial corporal "defect", which men who had lost the control over their sexual ownership had to experience. The result of their inability to maintain erection, a premature ejaculation or the lack of "strength" was commonly described as the incapacity to penetrate a woman. Not surprisingly, the deflowering act was the most difficult moment in the consummation of marriage. This was a delicate situation for men, because their sexual performance stood as a marker for their virility. The success or failure had widereaching consequences, since the connections between biological and cultural manhood were fluid in the early modern period. Only a man who had given proof of his potency could be the ruler of a family and the head of the economic unit, the household. His potency would ensure that his wife became pregnant and that the Christian duty of procreation would be fulfilled. Sexuality and economy were intrinsically interconnected. Therefore, one could argue, only the man who was able to destroy a hymen as a proof of his masculinity had a claim to the dowry. In contrast, an impotent man was forced to pay the dowry back, if the woman he had married was still a virgin.³⁷

35 Fletcher (1996, 11) and Bullough (1994, 41, 43) both state that it was the man's duty to keep his wife 'happy and satisfied'. Additionally, medical theories stressed the need of female pleasure, since only then was female seed produced (Cadden, 1993, 93-7).

36 ASCP, C.M., Reg. 73: 2 May 1575, Mariette Riccio de Castro Anoaali cum Jacobo de Badillis, not foliated (italics by D.H.).

37 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine cum Francisco Reuisare panorum, fol. 10r: 'quando contrassi matrimonio con detto francesco li ho dato dote, il quale me l'ha restituita di sua volontà cognoscendossi non esser homo per donna' and ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 74: 2 September 1579, Bartholomei de Albertis cum Angela Petri Textoris, fol. 16v.

In court, women and men connected failure to destroy the hymen with the lack of male *forza* ("strength"),³⁸ as the case of Giulio Molino reveals. He was a sexually experienced man when he entered marriage with the *gentildonna* Clara Capello. According to his own deposition he had had sexual intercourse with various women before his marriage. But, and this is pertinent, while the other women had all been deflowered by other men, Clara Capello had not. In his interrogation he focused on the fact that Clara Capello was a virgin and "when I tried to destroy the hymen of the Signora Clara Capelli, I had no strength".³⁹ Women used the same language ("forza") to describe the failed act.⁴⁰ This is of course the crucial point, since the marriage was only consummated when a *donzella* had become a *donna*. Women claimed in court that despite persistent sexual activity they had not been carnally known⁴¹ and even attempts at violently consummating the marriage had failed,⁴² since they were still virgins.⁴³ Men more generally argued that they had penetrated the woman so deeply that she should have been deflowered. But not always could they be sure whether she was now a woman ("donna").⁴⁴ While the female partner could argue that she had not been deflowered because she did not feel pain at all,⁴⁵ the male partner would claim that woman did not feel anything at all during sexual intercourse.⁴⁶ In such contradictory statements, judges would ask whether signs like blood had been noticed on the sheets. But even blood could not be interpreted with clarity as the visible and material sign of male potency, since they might have been the indicator for an injury of the female vessel only.⁴⁷

38 For an excellent investigation of the gendered language used to describe the sexual act cf. Roper (1991).

39 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 90: 24 November 1628, Clara Capello cum Julio Molino, 20 December 1628, not foliated.

40 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fols. 17r-v: 'non faceua quella forza che bisognaua per metterlo dentro'.

41 Ibid., fol. 15v.

42 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 74: 2 September 1579, Bartholamei de Albertis cum Angela Petri Textoris, fol. 20v.

43 Between others: ASCPV. C.M. Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine cum Francisco Reuisare panorum, fol. 8r.

44 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani., fols. 25v-26r.

45 Ibid., fol. 16r: 'ho inteso à dir dalle altre donne non si può fare che il Membro uirile dell' homo entra nella natura che non dolga et che non senta'.

46 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 74: 2 September 1579, Bartholamei de Albertis cum Angela Petri Textoris, fol. 21v.

47 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 27v. Blood on the sheets, as the interrogator explained in court, could also be misleading, and penetration might not have been successful: 'se bene il segno del sangue et altre sporccio (?) in simili casi sono segni della consumation del matrimonio et che il membro uirile sia entrato dentro nel uaso natural della donna però non è segno certo et indubitato, potendo essere che nel entrar d'aprir il uaso naturale sia sparso qualche poco di sangue senza però che il membro sia entrato ueramente dentro il uaso ò natura della donna'. Ibid., fols. 27v-28r.

To elude the threat of being described as somebody who is not a man suited for a woman,⁴⁸ husbands under pressure sometimes sought for drastic solutions. When they had lost the control over their sexual ownership, other men were asked to deflower their wife, or to make her pregnant - the visible sign of potency.⁴⁹ We can hardly estimate the psychological pressure which forced these invirile men to take such drastic steps; some expressed the fear that the woman might leave them as a certain Francesco Revedin has done. He begged his wife Lucrezia earnestly, "sweet child, please remain with me"⁵⁰ - a sign for his emotional vulnerability and the turning upside down of gender roles.

Men accused in the Patriarchal court of being impotent had of course been brought up and lived in a cultural environment where masculinity had to be proven. In a society where the notions of privacy and sense of shame were different from nowadays, impotence was sooner or later discussed in public, in the neighbourhood and by family members. Parents, as a first reaction, seem to have insisted on the continuance of the marriage stressing patience and time, which would resolve the marital problems,⁵¹ an argument, which in one exceptional case was supported by a father confessor.⁵² Men, if they spoke directly about their problems in consummating the marriage, turned first to clerics, like Giulio Molino, who asked the father of the monastery of S. Steffano for advice.⁵³ or to physicians.⁵⁴ But sooner or later, the sexual problems of the marital couple were discussed between members of the family, friends and relatives,⁵⁵ often to the displeasure of the men involved. Francesco complained in court that his wife Lucrezia had immediately made a

48 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine cum Francisco Reuisare panorum, fol. 10r.

49 *Ibid.*, fol. 9v.

50 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine cum Francisco Reuisare panorum, fol. 37v.

51 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 74: 2 September 1579, Bartholomei de Albertis cum Angela Petri Textoris, fol. 45r. Cf. also ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine cum Francisco Reuisare panorum, fol. 9v. She wanted to get an annulment three and a half years before, but because of her fathers' expressed will, she did not sue her husband at the Patriarchal court.

52 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 19v: 'che hauesse patientia et che disfare un matrimonio era cosa d'importanzia'.

53 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 90: 24 November 1628, Clare Capello cum Julio Molino, not foliated, 20 December 1628.

54 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 30r. An exception is Giovanni Battista Vidali who talked with Anna's mother, friends and relatives about his impotence, but who in turn never claimed that he was not impotent. ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 93: 6 July 1657, Anne Lazaroni cum Ioanne Baptista Vidal, fol. 21r.

55 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine cum Francisco Reuisare panorum, fols. 9r-9v: 'Io mi son lamentata in tempo che son stata con detto francesco, diuerso uolte con diuerso persone'. See also ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 74: 2 September 1579, Bartholomei de Albertis cum Angela Petri Textoris, fol. 45r.

complaint to her father, mother and others about him by "saying that I was not a man and (then she had) left me".⁵⁶ These public discussion increased the shame of the accused husbands. The reactions towards this public humiliation, however, differed sharply. Giulio Molino, for example, simply turned his back on worldly society and became a *religioso* without even considering spending his days as a bachelor.⁵⁷ And Giovanni Battista Vidali spent his days as a soldier,⁵⁸ trying to prove his masculinity in a different context.

In a more intimate dimension, impotence was an experience the partners shared, regardless of the question of who was the partner unsuitable for sexual intercourse. Women were thus expected to help the husband in these difficult moments. In this sense, women and men had to work together and women were urged to avoid movements, which would make the act of deflowering harder for the man.⁵⁹ The threat to manhood, and to matrimony, affected the entire relationship, although we can only speculate to what extent these couples experienced despair and hardship. Certain Angela Tessaria had become - as a witness testified in court in 1580 - even extremely thin⁶⁰ because of her marital problems. The situation could be perceived as almost tragic, if both partners wanted to stay together and were now advised to sue for an annulment of the marriage. Despite the reciprocity of their affections, Anna Lazzaroni and Giovanni Battista Vidali were - as they stated unanimously - not able to consummate the marriage. The connection drawn between the emotional relationship and the success or failure of sexual practices is the most striking one in trials by impotence. In court marital feelings and emotions gained relevance in the dispute between the marriage partners. Commonly the male partner complained in court that his feelings of affection were not reciprocated by his wife.⁶¹ This confession is striking because it reveals an emotional, fragile and vulnerable "inner side" of manhood. More or less explicitly, a link was drawn between the stigma of being impotent and of unreciprocated affection, a connection that was typical for the discourse of impotence in court.⁶² The discourse about emotions, introduced by male

56 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 78: 5 March 1584, Lucretie Ballatine cum Francisco Reuisare panorum, fol. 13v.

57 ASCPV. Reg. 90: 24 November 1628, Clara Capello cum Julio Molino, 20 December 1628, non foliated: 'Non mi uoglio più accompagnare più ne con essa Signora, ne con altra gentildonna'. According to Chojnacki (1994), 2/5 of adult patrician males remained bachelors in Medieval Venice and were not excluded from holding office, although they held minor offices.

58 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 93: 6 July 1657, Anne Lazaroni cum Joanne Baptista Vidali, fol. 3v.

59 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 26v.

60 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 74: 2 September 1579, Bartholamej de Albertis cum Angela Petri Textoris, fol. 13r.

61 Ibid., fols. 25r-v and ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 90: 24 November 1628, Clare Capello cum Julio Molino, not foliated.

62 Rainer Beck has noticed the same link between affection and impotence (Beck, 1992).

defendants, was taken up by the ecclesiastical judges. They started to encourage both parties to inform the court about their emotions and affections towards each other by questioning "se in questo progresso di tempo che hauete cohabitato ui sete fatto carezze l'un all'altro *come si suole tra Marito et moglie* con bacci toccasse, et altre carezze solite".⁶³ A certain degree of caressing and tenderness between the spouses was part of the marital debt and linked to emotions and affections.⁶⁴ Feelings were understood in terms of support and comfort for the male partner and gained importance particularly when the marriage was not easy to consummate, as the above quoted Anna Lazzarini revealed in court:

"[...], feci l'amore circa un'anno parlandoli ... delle notte intiere, et ... ho continuato uolerli bene,... stando perciò le hore continue bacciandosi, et accarezzandosi uicendeuolmente".⁶⁵

This description is captivating and seems to suggest a modern notion of sexuality, in which communication and caressing between the partners is an integral element in the sexual relationship. Sex, in the early modern period, was not necessarily practised quickly and without feelings, as these cases suggest, but understood in a wider sense as an affectionate communication between the male and female body. Men experienced their sexual life not only in terms of sexual male dominance or even aggression, but as a more complex set of varying feelings. Emotions, if they were reciprocated, were supporting, but dangerous if not. Then, they bore the danger of undermining the asymmetrical gender system of early modern society. They embodied the possibility of losing control over the wife, by making the man emotionally depended upon a woman.⁶⁶ And they formed part of men's anxieties in early modern societies, since women were said to have power about men's emotional life and could force them against their will to love a woman. Additionally, women could "steal" manhood, as Lyndal Roper put it, but they also had the power to restore it, though impotence was the disease for which men most often sought magical help from female practitioners.⁶⁷ Manhood in its biological and cultural dimensions was thus a fragile achievement and under constant threat (Roper, 1994; Gilmore, 1990). One of

63 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 18r (italics by D. H.).

64 The word limited hindered me to discuss more cases. There is, however, impressive archival evidence.

65 ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 93: 6 July 1657, Anne Lazaroni cum Joanne Baptista Vidali, fol. 4v.

66 The emotional dependence becomes especially audible in ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani.

67 Roper (1994, 187-189) and Ruggiero (1993) on Love-magic in Venice. Deeply rooted in the belief of common people, supernatural magic could also be adopted as an explanation pattern to justify unmanly behaviour. See e.g. ASCPV. C.M., Reg. 82: 28 November 1590, Camille Benzoni cum Gaspare Centani, fol. 31r: 'dubitai di essere stato fatturato'.

the challenges to patriarchy and authority was the probing of male potency, which stood as a marker for virility and sexual male honour.

To conclude: the masculine identity was construed as a complex set of expectations in early modern Venice. Male sexual performance and male sexual honour were extremely important in this respect, though only one of many factors.

SPOLNA IDENTITETA MOŠKIH V NOVOVEŠKIH BENETKAH

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POVZETEK

O tem, kako so Gasparo, Giovanni in drugi moški, obtoženi impotence, živeli s sramotnim madežem, ker se je o njihovi spolni časti razpravljalo javno (v soseski, na sodišču) ni nič znanega. Toda njihove zgodbe nazorno govore o tem, kako so se strateško zagovarjali na sodišču, da njihovega zakona zaradi njihove telesne pomanjkljivosti ne bi razglasili za ničnega. Pokazale so na pomen moške spolne zmožnosti za moški kodeks časti in moško identiteto. Spodbijana moška spolna čast je sporno spremenila družbeno interakcijo med moškimi kot tudi med moškimi in ženskami, saj je bila čast medij, ki je ustvarjal in usmerjal komunikacijo in vedenje posameznikov v novoveških družbah. Spremenilo se je tudi njeno povečevanje in zmanjševanje, samozaznavanje posameznikov in zaznavanje posameznikov s strani skupnosti. Medtem ko novejši pristopi k časti poudarjajo, da čast ni nespremenljiva dobrina, ampak da jo je mogoče spodbijati in da se lahko tudi povečuje in zmanjšuje, so impotentni moški lahko izjema v tem pravilu. Čeprav so lahko, kot smo videli, še vedno zadovoljili žensko, jim je bila za vedno odvzeta možnost, da se poročijo, si ustvarijo dom in postanejo hišni vladarji - najvišji izraz moške oblasti in patriarhije.

Ključne besede: etika, čast, moški, kodeks časti, spolna identiteta, Benetke

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