

HONOR AND THE MARRIAGE WARS OF LATE RENAISSANCE VENICE

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ABSTRACT

How women and men applied and enforced codes of honor still warrants comparative analysis. The essay explores the behavior and values of wives in troubled marriages in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Venice. The documentation is drawn from the series of ecclesiastical investigations housed in the Patriarchal Archives of Venice and from the criminal tribunal of Venice's State Attorneys. It illustrates through brief example how wives protected their honor against accusatory husbands and how they challenged male honor and male notions of masculinity. The case studies illustrate the fluidity of notions of honor. While wives were expected to be monogamous, husbands were impelled to be good providers, to have heterosexual sex, and to spawn children. Married women, aware that male honor could be as vulnerable as their own, used descriptive rhetoric both in the courts and in neighborhood gossip to discipline husbands as well as to protect their own standing in the community.

Key words: ethical values, code of honour, women, Venice, 16-17th centuries

Honor was an important concept in the ordering of Mediterranean society, as it regulated conduct; maintained hierarchy; and bound groups, lineages, clans, and classes to a common culture (Ferraro, 1999, 193-94). Honor fostered personal as well as collective virtue, respect, and public esteem. It defined reputation in relation to sexual difference. Thus the honor of a woman was tied to her chastity, as sexual purity was a valuable object of exchange in a patriarchal society that privileged lineage. A woman's sexuality and powers of reproduction were closely guarded by those who stood to benefit from them. In contrast, men's honor hinged on family status and collective family behavior, while individual husbands were expected to provide for wives in accordance with social station and to spawn children to carry on their lineages. These are familiar social and cultural norms outlined in the historical literature, yet how they were applied and enforced from place to place and time to

time merits closer study within specific contexts. Moreover, how women's use of these codes of honor differed from that of men still warrants analysis.

This essay focuses on the behavior and values of wives in troubled marriages in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Venice. It explores the following questions: did married women share their husbands' notions of honor? Were there class differences? How did wives protect their reputations against accusatory husbands? How did wives challenge male honor and notions of masculinity? The documentation for this study derives from the series of ecclesiastical investigations (*The Causarum Matrimonialium*) of failed marriages housed in the Patriarchal Archives of Venice; and from the *Avogaria di Comun. Miscellanea penale* housed in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia. The essay, part of a forthcoming book entitled *The Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice*, will demonstrate through case examples how some Venetian wives used the codes of male honor both to advance their own interests as well as to shame men.

Did wives share the same notions of honor as husbands? Perhaps they did in principle, yet it is difficult to argue for a distinctly feminine construction of honor. The concept principally served patriarchal interests. A woman's chastity was a function of male lineage, as was her fulfillment of motherhood. The scholarly literature has amply documented the dire social consequences for women who failed to meet these cultural expectations (Cavallo, Cerutti, 1990, 73-109; Ruggiero, 1987, 753-775). Thus it is not surprising to find Venetian wives actively engaged in protecting themselves against accusations of infidelity. There was a practical consideration as well: they could lose their dowries.¹ However, the Venetian marriage wars reveal an exciting new dimension to wives' efforts to keep their honor intact: they took an offensive stance, placing their husbands in vulnerable positions by targeting male honor. There was broad community consensus in late sixteenth-century Venice, irrespective of social class, that husbands must provide for their families and spawn offspring to carry on the family line. Venetian wives used these expectations of husbandly behavior as weapons for their own empowerment, and they were sustained by friends and kin who offered testimony to the courts on their behalf.

A variety of judicial records from late Renaissance Venice illuminate how wives in failing relationships protected their own honor by jeopardizing that of their male partners or husbands. In the secular arena, they came before civic authorities and demanded redress for injuries they had endured. For example, Venetian women who consented to premarital sex on the promise of marriage turned the spotlight on partners who reneged. Secular authorities were sympathetic. In Venice, the tribunal of the *Essecutori contro la Bestemmia* began to investigate and prosecute men for breach of promise beginning in the 1570s (Cozzi, 1967-68; Derosas, 1980, 431-528).

1 On the legal status of the dowry in Italy, see Ercole (1909, 191-302; 1910, 167-257), both of which are bound in the volume dated 1908. On husbands' rights and limitations see Ercole (1910, 167-182; 222-223; 246). See also Chojnacki (1975, 41-70, esp., 47; 1974, 176-203) and Davis (1975, 107).

Another example from the secular sphere may be found in dowry legislation. In 1553 the Venetian state legislated that wives whose dowries were endangered by their husbands' insolvency could petition the *Giudici del procurator* to intervene (Ferraro, 1995, 495). Likewise officers of the state, through the tribunal of the *Avogaria di Comun*, went after husbands who expropriated their wives' property. They attempted to recover rings, pearls, and other household goods, signs of wifely status, from husbands whose honor they challenged with accusations of robbery. The vivacious response from husbands – who later testified in the Patriarchal Court where wives had petitioned for formal separation – indexes how accusations of expropriating spousal property challenged their sense of masculinity. Husbands from the nobility down to the ordinary classes meticulously detailed their sources of income, their material possessions, and the ways in which they provided for their wives. Here all parties-husbands, wives, neighbors, kin, lawyers, and judges-paid close attention to social class, expressing the expectation that a husband support his wife in the manner appropriate for her social station (Ferraro, 1995, 499).

Women also sought redress for their injuries in the ecclesiastical arena, through the Patriarchal Court in Venice. The patriarch, normally a Venetian patrician with important links to the city's ruling oligarchy, presided over this tribunal together with an assisting vicar (Niero, 1961; Prodi, 1994, 320-323). Together they heard appeals for annulment and separation. More petitions to break marriage ties came to this court from women than from men. It is the stories drawn from wives' depositions that are of great interest to us here, for they attempted to repair or restore their own honor by reciting scripts before the patriarch and his vicar that cast the full blame for their own transgressions on their husbands' behavior. The examples that follow will illustrate these important rhetorical strategies.

According to cultural norms regulating marriage, a wife was expected to be sexually monogamous, to perform the marital duty with her husband, and ultimately to bear children. Deviations from the expected norm put her honor at risk, with serious repercussions for her husband and male relations. Venetian wives who came before the Patriarchal Court to answer challenges to their honor from disgruntled husbands turned the tables around, making their husbands the subjects of investigation for legal and social transgressions. One young wife, who admitted bearing another man's child, attempted to gain the sympathy of the Patriarchal Court and the neighbors who testified on her behalf by explaining her husband was impotent and thus could not fulfill her understandable desire for children. Lucretia Balatini, the twenty-two year-old daughter of a Venetian boatman, presented her case against the weaver Francesco Revedin to the Patriarch Giovanni Trevisan in March 1584.² She argued that

2 ASCPV. *Causarum Matrimonialium*, Busta 78, Testimony of *Dona Lucretia filia q. Baptista q. Antonij Balatini*, March 5 and 20, 1584, ff. 7r-10r, 35v-38r. The case will be fully analyzed in my forthcoming book, *The Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice*.

Francesco did not fulfill the conjugal duty of performing sex for procreation, and this failure to perform was justification for her adulterous affair. The accusation went straight to the heart of male honor, Francesco's manhood, and it did not remain within the confines of a private court interview. Lucretia had told the neighbors, setting off a wave of chatter throughout the community's gossip network. Well-manipulated gossip, we learn in this case and others, was a powerful weapon (Cavallo, Ceruti, 1990, 88-89; 90-94; Ruggiero, 1987, 756; Norton, 1987, 3-39). The distraught husband, now on the defense, struck back with an argument that touched a woman's honor in a male-centered world at its very core: her chastity. He complained that once his wife had had an affair with Antonio she began to say that he was not a man and that she wanted to leave him. Moreover, he continued, she had had sex with several other men. His was a serious accusation, one that could be corroborated. Again the resourceful wife had a clever retort. Lucretia admitted having had sex with various men, but she claimed it was not by her own volition but rather because her husband had prostituted her for his own support. She went as far as to say Francesco had consented to her sexual relationship with Antonio, the father of her son. This was another powerful attack on male honor. Husbands were expected to provide food, lodging, and clothing for their wives, and not vice versa, and certainly not through pandering.

As the ecclesiastical vicar attempted to investigate Francesco's potency, the litany of attacks on his male honor continued. And they were of the gravest nature. Lucretia suggested Francesco was 'not a man for a woman.' What did this signify? If it suggested he preferred sodomy, the penalty could be death (Ruggiero, 1993, 109-145). This was another formidable weapon that wives could use against their husband's honor.

While Lucretia's statement remained only at the level of suggestion, other wives blatantly told the patriarch and his vicar that their husbands wanted sex *contra natura*. In 1584 Pasquetta Peregrini lamented that her husband had demanded sex that way.³ She undermined her husband's honor in a number of other ways as well. She claimed he had gagged and beat her; had denied her sufficient food; had been unfaithful; had squandered her modest dowry of 300 ducats; and had pledged her pearls, rings, and dresses. The list of accusations is so familiar in these court cases that it can almost be labeled a trope. Almost, because on the one hand they may have reflected social reality to some degree, but on the other they were effective arguments used in the patriarchal court to obtain marital separations of bed and table.

Honor was at the center of these arguments. A husband was expected to have income that derived from respectable activities; to be pious; to have heterosexual

3 ASCPV, CM, Busta 78, Pasquetta Peregrinus and Romano Cavatia, April 26 to October 12, 1584, ff. 1-46v; FC, Filza 16, Peregrinus and Cavatia; AM, Reg. 74 (1581-1587), April 26, 1584, f. 134; May 5, 1584, f. 136v; May 14, 1584, f. 139.

sex; and to spawn children. The scripts wives presented in court, with the aid of legal representatives grounded in canon law, turned these expectations upside down. The accusations were powerful. They characterized husbands in these failing marriages as spendthrifts, as adulterers, as blasphemers, and as sexual aberrants with behavior ranging from impotence to the graver suggestion of sodomy.

Men and women summoned to depose for the litigating spouses did not always share the same notions of honor. Adultery cases, for example, reveal a range of attitudes. Perhaps the most surprising discovery that emerges from cases of this type is that the honor of husbands who accused their wives of adultery was not necessarily safe from reproach, reproach from the court but also from the community of witnesses that testified on the wife's behalf. While men viewed adultery as an almost certain condemnation against a misbehaving wife, one that would cost them their dowries, women went as far as to say husbands deserved infidelity because of their own deficiencies as spouses. Moreover, women did not excuse adulterous husbands by conceding to the double standard that "boys will be boys." Daughters and wives seeking to defame their fathers and husbands, respectively, used accusations of adultery against them.⁴ When in 1591 the hat maker Lorenzo Trevisan accused Margarita, his wife of 21 years, of amorous relations with a fellow *bareter* named Baldi, the wife called in some women neighbors to defend her.⁵ Lorenzo wailed that his honor had been injured. The neighbors, however, expressed a different viewpoint. Martha Veronese claimed the husband had misgoverned his house, while Margarita truly loved the other man. The second witness, Maria Cavarzan from Monte Belluno, shared Martha's sentiment. She added to the negative picture of Trevisan by stating he hit his wife. Nicolosa Feraler clarified further that Trevisan hit his wife because she would not confess to having committed adultery. Female sentiment that Trevisan was a bad husband who deserved an unfaithful wife, of course, did not arouse the sympathy of the forty men who tried the case: both Margarita and her lover were punished. Perhaps a better defense against a husband's accusation of adultery was to charge it was motivated by greed, to land the dowry as prize.⁶ This was the case with Camilla Porcellin, accused by her husband Pietro in 1618 of having an affair with Giacomo Lion. The case had begun in the *maleficio* in Padua; Camilla brought her appeal to the *Avogaria di Comun* in Venice, and it was judged important enough to

4 This will be fully discussed in a chapter entitled "I Said Yes with My Voice but not with My Heart" in my forthcoming book *The Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice*. It concerns women petitioning for annulments on the grounds that their fathers forced them into arranged marriages. Their aim is to defame their fathers' characters.

5 ASV, Avogaria di comun. Miscellanea penale, *Busta* 127, fascicolo 17. Lorenzo Trevisan, baroter versus Margarita di Battista Passarin, Veronese. 1591.

6 ASV, Avogaria di comun. Miscellanea penale, *Busta* 195, fascicolo 15. Porcellin, Camilla, moglie di Pietro and Lion, Giacomo (bandito per omicidio). Adulterio. 1618.

consider.⁷ The rectors of Padua, Battista Nanni and Massimo Valier, repounded to this supplication as did the Avogaria di Comun. It was signed by Zuanne Marco and Gicaomo da Pesaro; Francesco Correr and Zaccaria Sagredo; Francesco Molin, and the Venetian Council of Forty. The final verdict (June 2, 1619, f. 23r) was that the case was worthy of being heard by the Avogaria di Comun.

Thus the investigations housed in the Patriarchal Archive's collection of *Causarum Matrimonialium* and the Archivio di Stato's *Avogaria di Comun. Miscelanea penale* offer us varying notions of honor, notions that do not so much separate out in terms of class but in terms of sex. They teach us that women knew male honor could be just as vulnerable as their own. The honor of husbands was subject to the power of descriptive rhetoric that carried heavy social and at times legal consequences. That rhetoric was not confined to the legal sparring of ecclesiastical lawyers, nor to the private venues where notaries recorded the depositions of litigants and their witnesses. It spilled over into the Venetian neighborhoods as quickly as the high tides flooded the city's labyrinth of footpaths. The stories were repeated over and over, so that they appeared as tropes in the genre of court stories. As such they informed the popular culture of Late Renaissance Venice and reinforced standards that both disciplined and protected misbehaving husbands and wives who broke the community's codes of honor.

ČAST IN ZAKONSKE VOJNE V POZNORENESANČNIH BENETKAH

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POVZETEK

Raznolikost pravnih zapisov iz poznorenesančnih Benetk ponazarja, kako so ženske v propadajočih zakonskih zvezah štitele svojo čast tako, da so očrnjevale čast svojih moških partnerjev ali soprogov. V tej profani areni so prihajale k civilnim oblastem in zahtevale zadoščenje za krivice, ki so jih morale pretrpeti. In sekularne

7 ASV, Avogaria di comun. February 19, 1618, ff. 12r-13v. The bad fortune of me, Camilla, daughter of *quondam* Zuanne, weaver of gold cloth, willed that I would be joined in matrimony with Mr. Giovanni Pietro Porcelini from Piove de Sacho. Born in this city, raised by my relatives, with a dowry of more than 4,000 Ducats, and then the heir of a rich patrimony, I was then constrained to leave my native nest, and my family to live with acid people who grow fat with my possessions. They then forced me out, with the help of the office of the Illustrissimo Avogaria. My husband went before the Podestà of Padua and accused me of adultery, with the sole purpose of having my dowry. It is an invention. My husband has made me live in Padua, in misery, so that he could have my patrimony. I don't know anyone here, and I don't have anything.

oblasti so bile sočutne do njih. V Benetkah je sodišče *Essecutori contro la Bestemmia* v sedemdesetih letih 16. stoletja začelo preganjati moške zaradi lažnih obljub njihovim partnericam. Drug primer iz sekularne sfere lahko najdemo v zakonodaji o doti. Leta 1553 je beneška država izdala zakon, da lahko ženske, katerih dota je bila ogrožena zaradi prezadolženosti njihovih soprogov, lahko prosijo za intervencijo *Giudici del procurator*. Moške, ki so si prilastili lastnino svojih žena, so lahko preganjali tudi državni uradniki prek sodišča *Avogaria di Comun*. Ženske so iskale zadoščenje za prizadejane jim krivice tudi v cerkveni areni, in sicer prek beneškega škofovskega sodišča. Nekatere zgodbe iz pričevanj teh žena so prav zanimive in tudi pomembne. Govorijo namreč o tem, kako so ženske poskušale oprati svojo čast z branjem takšnih spisov pred škofom in njegovim namestnikom, ki naj bi dokazovali, da je za njihove pregreške v celoti krivo vedenje njihovih soprogov. To pomembno retorično strategijo ilustrira več primerov iz tistih časov. *Lucretia Balatini*, na primer, je leta 1584 trdila, da njen mož ni izpolnjeval svoje zakonske dolžnosti spolnega občevanja z njo "za razplod", kar naj bi bilo opravičilo za njeno prešuštvo. Ko pa je njen mož njo obdolžil prešuštva, je poskušala dokazati, da je bil on tisti, ki se je želel osamostvojiti. In da bi uničila njegov položaj v družbi, je pred sodiščem namignila, da mu je bila ljubša sodomija. V nekem drugem primeru istega leta je *Pasquetta Peregrini* opravičevala svoj pobeg od moža s tem, da je ne podpiral, za navrh pa še zlorabljal. Drugi sodni primeri razkrivajo, da čast moških, ki so svoje žene obdolžili prešuštva, ni bila nujna varna pred grajo. Spisi, ki so jih žene predložile sodišču ob pomoči pravnih zastopnikov in poznavalcev cerkvenega prava, so vsebovali nekaj zelo močnih obtožb. Može v teh razpadajočih zakonih so namreč prikazovale kot zapravljljive, prešuštnike, bogokletnike in spolne pregrešnike, ki jim je bilo mogoče pripisati vse od impotence do hude sodomije. Ženske so možko čast obrnile na glavo. Njihova retorika ni bila omejena le na pravno pomoč cerkvenih pravnikov in tudi ne na zasebne pisarne, kjer so si notarji zapisovali pričevanja pravdarjev in njihovih prič. V beneško sosesko se je prelila prav tako hitro, kot je plina preplavila mestne labirinte in steze. Te zgodbe so se tako ponavljale, da so se pojavljale že kot trope v žanru sodnih zgodb. In kot takšne so informirale popularno kulturo poznorenesančnih Benetk ter utrdile standarde, ki so disciplinirali kot tudi ščitili pregrešne žene in može, ki so prelomili kodeks časti v skupnosti.

Ključne besede: etične vrednote, kodeks časti, ženske, Benetke, 16.-17. stoletje

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