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Marriage, Manners and Mobility in Early Modern Venice
(review)

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Butler also stresses the importance of the *Eikon Basilike*, a text purportedly authored by Charles I himself and which he also reads in terms of its imaginative potential (p. 93).

Of course Butler is not the first historian to stress the inherent theatricality of Charles I's execution or the impact of the *Eikon Basilike*, but his work is distinctive for the intersection he charts between political events and the imaginary sphere. Further chapters also pursue interpretation of the public image of the martyred Charles I, especially Milton's acknowledgement that Charles and his supporters used the power of the imagination as a key to political authority (p. 136).

Overall the text would have benefitted from a slightly sharper focus. Given that Butler argues for the intersection of imagination and politics, his treatment of the constitutional history was at times disjointed, as political events floated in and out of his analysis as occasion demanded, rather than receiving systematic treatment. But his central idea of the nexus of politics and the imagination is clear and strong and this is a fresh and valuable contribution to existing studies, not only of seventeenth-century politics, but also the History of Ideas.

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Cowan, Alexander, *Marriage, Manners and Mobility in Early Modern Venice* (Historical Urban Studies), Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007; hardback; pp. xvii, 209; 9 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. £55.00; ISBN 9780754657286.

This book provides a unique perspective on attitudes to marriage, concubinage and social mobility amongst the Venetian Patriciate in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its aim is 'to examine upward social mobility through marriage in early modern Venice' (p. 13). It does so via a systematic analysis of the surviving *prove di nobiltà*, the investigations of a governmental magistracy – known as the *Avogaria di Comun* – into whether or not proposed marriages of Venetian noblemen to brides from outside the Venetian Patriciate, and/or those of natural daughters of Venetian noblemen to members of the Venetian nobility should be approved for registration by the Venetian State. Records survive for the investigations into the social and moral backgrounds of approximately 500 women who wished to marry into

the Venetian nobility, from the time the laws pertaining to outsider brides and natural daughters were enacted in 1589 until the study's end date: 1699. If the investigators found in favour of the petitioners, then any sons from these relationships would be eligible for membership of the Grand Council, the Republic's supreme governing body made up of the men from Venice's most noble families.

Alexander Cowan uses both qualitative and quantitative methods in this study. He draws extensively on the written testimonies recorded (always in first-person) by the women concerned, who were not physically present at the hearings. For his qualitative evidence, Cowan documents the attitudes, prejudices and ideas of his protagonists. Quantitatively, he uses demographic characteristics of petitioners, marriage contracts and the recommendations of the investigations for the statistical data from which to describe broad social trends.

As the book's opening example illustrates, petitioners were concerned to demonstrate that they were the legitimate or natural daughter of their parents; that their fathers were of high social status in their home town; that their fathers and grandfathers had always lived 'civilly and honourably'; and that their mothers and themselves had lived 'modestly and honestly' (p. 1). Both 'outsider brides' and the natural daughters of patricians who wished to marry into this closed caste had to demonstrate that they and their families were of appropriate social and moral standing so as to ensure that the purity of the Venetian nobility would not be tainted.

Cowan argues that the 1589 law was evidence of the Venetian State's concern with increasing social differentiation and the need to preserve noble status. These claims for recognition of patrician status were not speculative and would only be brought if negotiations were at an advanced stage. Sometimes couples married before the, often lengthy, investigative process undertaken by the *Avogaria di Comun* was completed. The investigation would then be stopped and registration refused but petitioners could apply to have their marriages and their offspring recognized at a later date, so that marrying before the process was completed was not an insurmountable hurdle to eventual registration.

The second chapter discusses the *Avogaria di Comun* and its functions and the process undertaken during an investigation of a *prove di nobiltà*, including the interrogation of witnesses, the types and validity of evidence, including hearsay and the use of quite elderly witnesses to testify to the noble

status, or otherwise, of a claimant's father or grandfather, or of the moral standing of a mother.

The later chapters then take up various themes such as outsider brides and their families. Cowan argues that the opportunity to marry outsider brides opened up a tight Venetian marriage market in which often only one male was able to marry and many girls became nuns because of the spiralling costs of dowries. Outsider brides offered additional dowry capital. These outsider brides were from a very restricted social circle that included doctors, lawyers, merchants, high level officials, rentiers and nobles from the Venetian territories or beyond. Many of them could be subsumed within the Venetian *cittadini* (citizen) class, which was a semi-privileged group of high status but Cowan argues that a more accurate term would be *huomini civili*, a group between the nobility and majority of the *cittadini* class. A key criterion for determining a bride's social status was how her father and grandfather made a living: any suggestion that these men engaged in 'vile' trades that involved directly selling and handling goods (as opposed to supervising the process) meant automatic disqualification.

The last part of the book concerns the natural daughters of patricians. The factors taken into account here were: whether the daughter had been recognized by her father at birth and had been supported by him; whether the patrician's relationship with the mother had been long-term, stable and exclusive; and the moral conduct of mother and daughter. These relationships garnered wide acceptance in Venetian society perhaps because it was so difficult for Venetian noble men and women to marry. Concubinage was the next best option, providing a marriage-like environment for bachelor noble men, as well as for many unmarried or widowed women from across the social spectrum.

Some of the contextual material on Venetian social mores in the last chapter of the book would have provided necessary information earlier in the book, and would have prevented the need to repeat information. But this is a minor criticism of a very thoughtful, lucid and suggestive book that should inspire further research into the relationship between gender, marriage and social mobility in early modern Europe.

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