CHAPTER ONE

MARRIAGE

Verona’s Bonaventura Bovi opened his memoriale with an account of his union with Isabeta Paulino. In Vicenza, Gaspare Arnaldi the elder initiated his liber with his marriage to Caterina Zugliano on 23 November 1407. Son Andrea continued the book with an account of his marriage to Caterina Botarini, and grandson Gaspare II entered as author when he “touched the hand” of Giovanna da Schio. Verità I, Bartolomeo Antonio, and Verità II Verità succeeded their fathers as writers with notices of their own marriages, as did Contino and Girolamo Stoppi.

Authors assumed a personal voice when they took wives. That is not to say that marriage constituted a moment of liberation. Authors of memoirs married while still under the paternal roof and remained there until their fathers’ deaths. Many thereafter lived in fraternal households. Nor did writers stake a claim to personal autonomy: the very genre of the memoir testifies to their desire to maintain solidarity in the patriline by inscribing their share of its collective memory. But, in Bolognese and Veneto memoirs, assertion of personal identity within the memory of the lineage began with matrimonium. In a small but telling irony, writers claimed full membership in the historical family by an act that established horizontal rather than vertical connections.

Realistically, no other rite of passage could mark the individual’s coming of age. Few Veronese or Vicentines were formally emancipated from the father’s authority (patria potestas). Tax rolls did not accord separate fiscal households to sons while their fathers still lived. The reaching of economic maturity at age twenty and legal maturity at age twenty-five did not evoke notice. In Vicenza, political maturity at age eighteen mattered little since a seat on municipal councils could be had through inheritance or purchase at any age.
Most of the Arnaldi, for example, obtained council membership in childhood. In Verona, as will be seen, young men usually failed several times in eligibility scrutinies before they gained a council seat: the drawn-out process for securing political access did not offer a single threshold.

Marriage was given centrality because the region lacked other rites to mark a transition into adulthood. In the terms of social anthropology, marriage transformed the dangerously ambiguous status of youth—sexually mature but socially indeterminate—into one that called for responsibility and settlement. The primary ritual of social integration and equilibrium, marriage also reordered the family and the community in a way that no other event in the life cycle, not even birth or death, could accomplish. Writers of domestic chronicles knew that instinctively, and began their accounts with marriage. It is fitting that we do the same.

The Formation of Marriage

Who Marries?

In March 1440 Andrea Arnaldi’s wife died in childbirth, leaving three daughters and a newborn son, who died the next day. His younger brother Battista had produced only daughters, and anyway was estranged from his siblings. Youngest brother Tommaso immediately took a wife. The sequence of events suggests that Tommaso had been destined for bachelorhood, but was called to matrimony in a last-ditch attempt to secure an heir. For the second time in as many generations the Arnaldi had limited their sons’ marriages; this time, too, the strategy pushed the patriline close to extinction.

The incident raises the issue of nuptuality: who, in any given pool of sons and daughters, was to marry? Populationist pressure, at this low point of the demographic curve, urged high rates of marriage: so humanists praised the union of man and woman as the source of civic rejuvenation, and several cities passed laws to promote nuptuality—denying public office to unmarried men, for example. Spiritual pressure worked in the same direction. St. Paul urged those who could not accept the higher calling of celibacy to marry. Augustine and others thought marriage a vehicle to spread caritas through the community and to generate future citizens for the city of God. Moralists noted that marriage promoted civic pacification by channeling lust into acceptable relations, reducing the rowdiness of young men, and expanding alliances between lineages.

Yet there were strong counterarguments for limitation. Lawyers identified
the family with its collective wealth—"familia, id est substantia"—and overproduction of heirs jeopardized that patrimony. The Veneto's custom of partible inheritance, by which all legitimate sons received equal portions of the family wealth, increased the risk. Daughters received a further share of the patrimony as their dowries, which would usually pass to their children or otherwise out of the direct male line. For the propertyless, the absence of a consistent patrimony could relax restraints on marriage, but for families who held and wanted to conserve wealth the consequences of high nuptuality were acute: dissipation of substantia would reduce the familia to economic oblivion within a few generations.

The imperatives of repopulation and caritas, then, might well conflict with strategies for preserving wealth. Most families tried for some middle ground. Evidently the Arnaldi had initially adopted a tactic once favored in northern Europe: allow one or a small number of sons to marry, leaving some or most of their brothers to fend for themselves or remain in the household as celibates and reserves. But the medieval feudal nobility had enjoyed a climate of demographic prosperity: the family was likely to survive even though a small proportion of sons married. High mortality and low fertility in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries rendered that strategy highly risky. Of the thousand or so Vicentine families prominent from 1200, more than half were extinct by 1500. Still, patrimonial imperatives induced Italians of the Quattrocento to continue the very delicate game of limiting the number of sons who married. Only some 60 percent of Venetian patrician males married.

Calculation was much the same for daughters. The old feudal nobility had tried to marry off all girls, certainly in the interest of spreading alliances and perhaps in the interest of spreading caritas. That strategy, too, could endanger a patriline's wealth, given the inevitable outflow of dowry monies. The price was evidently worth the risk in the economically expansive eleventh and twelfth centuries. In fifteenth century, however, the economy was relatively flat while dowries were shooting upward at a frightening rate. The wealthy found it virtually impossible to provide all girls with the high dowries necessary to maintain or improve social status. Keeping down dowry costs by imposing spinsterhood on daughters, a prominent feature of the famous "European marriage pattern" of the sixteenth century on, was rare in Quattrocento Italy: an unmarried woman in the household posed a danger to family honor.

Increasing numbers of parents responded to the dowry crunch by sending some of their daughters to convents, which required lower dowries and equally served to spread caritas. Among Veneto memorialists, the case of
Manfredo Repeta is the best documented: four daughters married and two became nuns, in line with the figure of 31 percent of noble girls in the Lyonnaise who entered religion. Only a few families still married off all their daughters. The Arnaldi, a family on the make, did so: they were hungry for alliances and were willing to pay the price in dowries. But they were among the minority rich enough to afford universal female nuptuality.

Age at Marriage

Figures for the age a male in Florence married vary with the data and test used, but a general figure of thirty-one to thirty-two years may serve here for comparison. Fewer than half of men were married by twenty-five, and only three-quarters by the age of thirty-three. While data for Venice are less secure, patrician men apparently married on average at twenty-nine to thirty years, with the average rising over the course of the century. Florentine women married at around seventeen or eighteen, with the figure rising by a year or two over the course of the century. Between 75 percent and 90 percent were married by their twentieth birthday. Wealthier Florentine women married younger than the norm. The actual age of women at marriage cannot be calculated for Venice, but dowry provisions in wills often set an expected age. If these orders were respected, noble girls in Venice would have married earlier than Florentines—at fifteen in the first half of the century, at sixteen in the second half.

The smaller cities of the Veneto offer a strikingly different picture. In the families that produced memoirs, men married for the first time at about age twenty-five. The age of men for all marriages, including some late second unions, is about twenty-eight (see appendix, table 1.1). If men married more than a half decade earlier than their counterparts in metropolitan centers, women married two or three years later, at about age twenty. Child brides were rare, with only 4 percent married at sixteen and none younger. Only half were married by their twentieth birthday. Thus the age gap between spouses, up to thirteen years in Florence (and about fifteen for wealthy couples), shrinks to less than six years for first marriages in the Veneto and seven years for all marriages. For Verona as a whole, the age difference between spouses stood at seven years in 1425, shrinking to 5.8 years in 1502.

The Veneto data cease to look anomalous if the focus shifts to nonmetropolitan Tuscany and to areas beyond Italy. Florence, in marriage patterns as in many aspects of demography, stands at an extreme even within its own region. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber have posited a spousal age gap of ten
years or less for Prato and five other midsized cities. Lucchese men, like those of Verona and Vicenza, married at about twenty-five; they were on average less than a decade older than their brides. Even so, figures for Tuscany as a whole might be on the high side: men in southern France married rather earlier, the women married a shade later, and the age difference between spouses was seldom over seven years.

The extra-Florentine data, while hardly definitive, suggest some broader hypotheses. Hajnal, attempting to locate the development of modern marriage patterns in northwest Europe during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, noted a relatively high percentage of (especially female) celibacy and a late age at marriage for both women and men. He guessed that the situation in southern Europe in earlier times would be rather different. The evidence noted so far supports his intuition. The percentage of women who did not marry was, indeed, quite small, and women overwhelmingly married before age twenty. Only the marital age of Florentine men—but not that of men elsewhere—lines up with the later northern model. The experience of most of fifteenth-century Italy and southern France belies any claim to modernity, as Hajnal defines it, and suggests Florentine precociousness.

The Italian figures also suggest broad regional differences in the cultural norms that determined when men and women would marry. Delayed marriage among Florentine men, for example, has been associated with a long apprenticeship and the need to establish economic independence and security before assuming the burdens of wife and children. The argument is based on the assumption that marriage depends on economic and perhaps residential autonomy. This is not inevitable. The Veronese and Vicentine men who left memoirs—notaries, wool merchants, a physician—all faced periods of training comparable to those of patrician Florentines, but married significantly earlier. They were willing to marry before having accumulated enough capital to set up a separate household, and accepted a period in which their own conjugal nuclei were subordinate to the authority of a father or older brother.

Early female and late male marriage in Florence has been linked, as well, with the norms of prescriptive literature. Maffeo Vegio, for example, held that men should not marry before the age of thirty-six, when their bodies would be at full strength and more capable of producing healthy children. Giovanni Morelli recalled that in the golden age of the twelfth century his male ancestors had commonly married at forty or older, and he noted without surprise or dismay that his own father had married a girl of thirteen or less. Michele Savonarola cited with approval Albertus Magnus’s preference
for men to marry at thirty, and Aristotle’s comment that men should marry at thirty-seven. Florentine moralists wished girls to marry young because they would incline to dishonorable behavior if not safely married, and because the husband would find a young wife easier to teach and control.\(^\text{30}\)

Veronese and Vicentines did not heed that opinion. They drew, instead, on a local tradition that offered another emphasis. In the Trecento, Fra Paolino da Venezia had counseled women not to marry before eighteen, lest they bear sickly children; in the next century Padua’s Michele Savonarola, citing Aristotle, agreed. Venetian humanist Francesco Barbaro looked at the constitution of Sparta and reached the same conclusion. Bernardino da Feltre even thought that couples should be the same age. Marriage, he said, was like a yoke, and the team had to be equal if the plow was to be pulled effectively. The puzzled onlooker might well ask, equal in age, or status (\textit{condizione}), or kinship ties (\textit{parentade})? Bernardino would not distinguish: “Make it that they are equal.”\(^\text{31}\)

Differing regional patterns in marital ages suggest a final comment. Sympathetic historians have noted the traumatic effects of marriage on the bride, thrust suddenly into a foreign household at a tender age and subjected to the authority of a husband who, much older and preoccupied with business and civic obligations, might well prove emotionally distant. Images of the Florentine bride of seventeen “in tears” and the “terror-stricken child brides” of Venice, thirteen to fifteen,\(^\text{32}\) indeed command our pity. Still, evidence for distress is purely speculative.\(^\text{33}\) One might argue that girls had been trained throughout childhood for that very moment. Even if such were the case in the big cities, the shock must have been much reduced in Verona and Vicenza, where brides were nearly twenty and grooms about twenty-five; in Verona as a whole, some 70 percent to 80 percent of women married after the age of twenty-two.\(^\text{34}\) Husbands were not much older, were not heads of household, usually were not launched on political careers, and did not travel on business. Because they were roughly at the same stage in the life cycle as their brides they were likely a good deal less remote.

**Choice of Spouse**

When the Arnaldi family began their memoir, in the early years of the Quattrocento, it was just emerging from the obscurity of earlier centuries but was still far from prominent. The Arnaldi lacked the patina of ancient lineage, they were not judges or lawyers, and they did not sit on elite magis-
As notaries and all-purpose merchants, they were in a position to know a good deal about the economic resources and political standing of potential in-laws throughout the city. Their marital horizons, however, were more restricted than their business and political perspective. They deferred to neighborhood solidarity: seven of the first eight spouses lived in or next to the *sindicaria* of Carpagnon, where the family had long resided. It is tempting to suggest that nonpatricians preferred residential endogamy; such was the case of the laboring classes in Florence.

The early Arnaldi preferred, as well, spouses from a similar occupational and status group, even at the cost of economically disadvantageous unions. Like the Arnaldi, the Revese were wool merchants and notaries. The Fracanzani, Zugliano, dal Gorgo, Cardino (Feramosca), Botarini, and Clivone families—all Arnaldi in-laws—also placed sons in the College of Notaries. The Botarini similarly were large-scale grain and land merchants. The Fracanzani and Zugliano joined the Arnaldi in the merchants' guild, and the Cardino, Fracanzani, and Zugliano were fellow members of the wool guild. None of the in-law families were particularly old or possessed of bygone heroes, and none were yet sitting on the city's top councils.

In the first generation, marriage was the product of long years of association and sealed rather than created relationships between families. The Arnaldi used marriage not as an instrument of upward mobility, to effect a change in status, but as a means of consolidating their position within the upper-middle range. The situation changed around 1470, with a second generation. By that date the Arnaldi sat on the highest municipal councils, and had amassed lands so extensive that they could give up the notariate and retail trade. Indeed, they had begun to call themselves noble with some frequency.

They also arranged marriages with a new pool of partners. The families that now furnished spouses were near (Repeta and Poiana) or at (Sesso and Thiene) the top of Vicentine society. If new in-laws had once engaged in commerce or the notariate they had long abandoned any connection with dishonorable manual trades. Their economic bases were large rural estates, supplemented with income from usury and passive investment. They came from older families that could claim martial ancestors and were continually represented on executive magistracies. They were also the economic equals of the Arnaldi, as measured by tax assessments: the Arnaldi now had no need to sacrifice economic parity to accomplish social ends. Four of five spouses lived outside Carpagnon: when the Arnaldi moved up socially, they shifted focus from the neighborhood to a topographically diffuse, exogamous patriciate.
Creating the Marriage

The Sequence of Rituals

The memoirs of the Veneto provide a fair overview of the “series of ceremonial stages” that created a marriage. At the completion of preliminary negotiations, the father or close kin of the prospective bride met with the prospective groom, usually in a church, to establish a betrothal with words of future consent (verba de futuro). After a pause that varied from days to months, the couple met for the first time, usually in the bride’s house, for a cluster of rites that included the exchange of words of present consent (verba de praesenti) and either the placement of a ring on the bride’s finger or a simple touching of her hand. Finalizing arrangements occasioned a further delay (about eight months on average) before the groom or members of his family led the bride to the marital house (the ductio or traditio in domus mariti).

The Veneto sequence does not deviate much from that of other cities.

Taken as a whole, the memoir notices seem clear enough. Each entry, though, recorded different components of the sequence, omitting some and emphasizing others, and placed those components in different order. The lack of uniform description suggests that observers did not perceive a single moment that effected the union or a standard sequence of rituals. They were not sure, for example, that the exchange of words of present consent was necessarily the operative rite. Gaspare II Arnaldi “touched the hand [of Giovanna da Schio] with words of present consent” on 13 March, but “married” (sposai) her three days later; seven weeks separated the hand-touch and the sposai in one Stoppi marriage. Other notices called the verba de praesenti a promise only, and indicate a time lag between exchange of present consent and the moment when the groom actually married (desponsavit) the bride. The exchange of verba de praesenti might take place before or after the ring ceremony, and several days might separate the two. Manfredo Repeta, uncertain as to what signified what, retreated into generic language: daughter Lucrezia “married” (se marida) on one day and “was wed” (fu spoxada) on another.

Veneto authors were not particularly ignorant. The many English court cases validating or disqualifying marriages show that their northern counterparts were equally unclear as to which ceremony established a binding marriage. Confusion reigned in Italy as well, and occasioned grievous loss of honor to humble women such as the Feltrines Fiorenza dalla Croce and Elena Cumano and the Tuscan Lusanna di Benedetto. They pointed to some exchange of word and gesture as proof of valid matrimony; their upper-class
seducers convinced authorities otherwise. The variety of marital rituals, and widespread disagreement concerning their precise meanings, might well bewilder the well-intentioned and give opportunity to the devious.

Doctrine, it is true, seems to show more certainty. Agreeing that mutual consent alone could legitimize a union, canon lawyers and theologians in the twelfth century worked to uncover the moment when valid consent had been made. The Bolognese jurist Gratian argued that the betrothal (desponsatio) established an "initiated" but valid marriage (matrimonium initiatum), which was then "perfected" (perfectum or ratum) by consummation. He was countered by a group centered in Paris and headed by Peter Lombard. Exhuming and transforming Roman law, northern writers divided the desponsatio into stages of verba de futuro and verba de praesenti, downgraded the former to a promise, and gave operative value to the latter. Exchange of words of present consent by the bride and groom alone created a "perfect" marriage; consummation was a consequence but not a cause of a valid union. When the canonist pope Alexander III, following a stay in France, shifted his position to support the northern model, the triumph of Peter Lombard's position was assured. Local synods, church courts, pastoral manuals, penitentials, sermons, and guidebooks for confessors spread the word to the faithful.

The triumph of present-consent theory did not, however, eradicate alternatives. Both Peter Lombard and Alexander III reluctantly admitted that future consent combined with consummation created a legitimate union, though they preferred the verba de praesenti. Gratian's stress on consummation, though dismissed in France, remained normative in Italy. Contemporaries noted a considerable admixture of usages on the local level, as strains from Roman, Lombard, and several sorts of canon law liberally combined with purely popular rituals. If there can be a covering doctrine, it might be the canonists' dictum "A marriage is legitimate if contracted according to legal form or provincial custom."

The profusion of alternatives gave provincial fathers considerable discretion at each stage in the marriage sequence. For example, canon law held that betrothal by verba de futuro constituted a "mutual engagement," expressing the full consent of both parties for eventual union. Veneto memoirs indicate, however, that the girl's consent to a future union, if indeed it was even sought, was not regarded as worth recording. Males alone effected betrothal: the prospective bride "was promised to me by words of future consent," or her father promised her to the intended groom. Ancient Germanic usage, after all, allowed the man who held legal authority over a woman (the mundualdus) to establish betrothal on her behalf; some canonists held that
a father could betrothe his children, though such betrothals required evendual ratification by the actual parties. If the girl did not raise an explicit protest, her silence was taken as tacit consent and she was obliged to marry, under penalty of excommunication.

She might not have much say in the next stage either, as fathers and brothers claimed the right to exchange words of present consent on her behalf. In Andrea Arnaldi’s memoir, for example, Caterina Botarini “was promised to me by verba de praesenti” in 1432; he used exactly the same words for his second marriage in 1441. His daughter Margarita “was by me promised by verba de praesenti” to her husband Simone Revese. The formula violated canon law on two counts. First, Arnaldi regarded the words of present consent as a promise only, not as actually creating the union. Matrimony was not complete until the bestowing of the ring or touching of the hand, a separate and sometimes later ceremony. Second, he insisted that someone other than the bride actually uttered the words that bound her to the union. Bartolomeo Muronovo did not use legal language, but his words, too, suggest an authoritarian approach to daughters' marriages: “I had her married,” or “I gave her as wife.”

Here, too, custom sanctioned the father’s directive role. King Saul, after all, gave (dedit in the Vulgate) his daughter Michal to David (I Samuel 18:20–27). Under Roman law, marriage was made by consent, but consent might be made by parents or whoever held patria potestas; only much later, and without complete success, did the Church reinterpret the principle to demand “consent by the partners themselves.” Germanic law held that the father holding the mundium of a girl could desponsare her without her consent, and Hincmar of Reims wrote that a lawful marriage was created when a free woman was given by her father. Furthermore, strict application of the doctrine of mutual consent would admit the validity of clandestine marriages, which were universally reviled. So Gratian and Cardinal Ostiensis argued that betrothals and marriages were not valid without the consent of fathers, and statutes in Vicenza and Verona (and elsewhere) imposed hefty fines on men who contracted marriages without the approval of the bride's kin.

The final stage in the marital sequence, the ceremonial transfer of the wife to her new home, is the common denominator in the memoirs' records of marriage. Nearly all mentioned the time and circumstances of the procession; in several cases, entries provided more detail about the transfer than about any of the preceding ceremonies. We are told, for example, that Tommaso Arnaldi's aunt and cousin accompanied Elisabetta dal Gorgo because of the illness of his brother Andrea, that six women accompanied Angela Chiara,
that women accompanied Lucia, and that Gaspare II personally led his wife to the Arnaldi house. In Germany, England, France, and other regions as well the procession to the husband's house was given ritual emphasis equal to that of the exchange of consent and the conveying of the ring.

It is not hard to see why writers gave that emphasis. The *ductio*, not the wedding, reconfigured the household and the family at large. Since the dowry had to be settled if not actually paid before the *traditio* took place, transfer also marked the reordering of the patrimony. In the Veneto, as was the case at Rome and Augsburg and (at some periods) Florence, transfer alone, and not the exchange of *verba de praesenti*, authorized sexual relations between husband and wife. In only one Veneto case out of about fifty was a child born less than nine months after the *traditio*. Amid uncertainty regarding the sequence and the meaning of marital rituals, the * ductio* was the end point, the moment when there could be no doubt that a valid marriage had been established.

Mainstream lawyers, it is true, so stressed the exchange of present consent as creating a "perfected" union that they gave little value to subsequent acts. Even they might acknowledge that the *ductio* made public and unmistakable demonstration of consent; Bartolus thought that the *traditio* had the effect of proving publicity and "rendering effective the consent," whereas his pupil Baldus regarded it as one of the proofs of a valid marriage. And, of course, there remained many who persisted in the view of Gratian and Bernard of Pavia that consummation—authorized only by the *ductio*—was the constitutive act in forming a marriage.

The public passage of the bride from paternal to marital house equally served a social imperative: as marriage reassembled the social order, it was necessary that the community at large witness the critical act of transfer. Moreover, because the words of the ceremony were susceptible to misunderstanding and abuse, they required ratification by physical gestures such as the *ductio*, which were public and blatant. This was particularly important in Italy, where the exchange of consent usually took place in a private dwelling before a handful of close relatives and friends. The Veneto families that produced memoirs respected that belief: some 60 percent of transfers took place on Sunday, which was not only a holy day but a holiday, when the greatest proportion of the populace might be on city streets to view the passage (see appendix, table 1.3).

Authorities took that reasoning a step further, demanding that not only the transfer but the ceremony itself receive witness. To remove all doubt that consent was coerced, a notary, judge, or priest should interrogate the bride...
and groom as to their true intentions. A spiritual rationale held that, as a marriage constituted a sacramental union before God and his people, the community of the faithful should serve as witness and the community's spiritual director should supervise the proceedings. Clandestine marriages escaped all controls; if sustained, they threw the serious issue of the dowry into turmoil; if overturned, they threatened dishonor to the spurned party. Both Church and lay authorities wanted positive proof of the wedding, preferably by an official and at least by neutral parties.\textsuperscript{64}

Florentines largely respected these desires, and a notary usually presided over and/or recorded the marriage; Lusanna di Benedetto's failure to obtain the services of a notary was both anomalous and ruinous to her case. Legal norms in the north pushed in the same direction: Paduan statutes required a public instrument of marriage, Trevisan law required interrogation by a judge, and Bolognese ordinances ordered registration of marriage in municipal books. Venetians commonly married before notaries, or at least an early Quattrocento traveler thought they did.\textsuperscript{65} Still, local usage was not uniform. Milanese law, for example, made no provision for a notary at any stage in the sequence. While people in Vicenza and Verona ordered notaries to record dowry confessions, which is another matter altogether, they did not order a record of marital rituals—or at least notarial registers and family archives preserve no such instruments. Memorialists married in a private world of words, not in the public world of legal agents.

To secure public attestation of free consent, and to underscore the sacramentality of marriage, Alexander III and the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 urged Church bans before marriage, a wedding presided over by the parish priest before the church door (“ante facie ecclesie”), or at the very least a nuptial blessing during the procession to the groom's house. Reformers from the twelfth century on offered model liturgies for church weddings. A proper wedding, declared San Bernardino, began with a Mass in which both man and woman took Communion.\textsuperscript{66}

Because mutual consent alone made the marriage, and because the couple mutually administered the Sacrament, neither priest nor holy setting could add anything to it. Thus the Church enjoined a religious matrimony but could not nullify a marriage contracted otherwise.\textsuperscript{67} Until the Council of Trent, the sacralization of marriage proceeded at a slow pace. In northern France and England, marriages might be concluded before church doors, with priests presiding, though recent studies conclude that a majority of English marriages were made out of church and French evidence for church weddings derives from model \textit{ordines} rather than praxis.\textsuperscript{68} In the rest of Europe, pri-
vate or civil marriages remained the norm. Constant reiteration of synodal statutes prescribing marriages before priests, for example, suggests that the dictates of the Fourth Lateran were widely ignored. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Toulouse, the “church ceremony was not an essential feature of matchmaking.”

The same was true in Italy, with a few exceptions in the marginal phases of the marriage sequence. Florentines, notably, manifested “indifference to the recommendations of the Church.” Marriages at the bride’s home, absence of priests, and omission of benediction or wedding Mass indicate a casual attitude to ecclesiastical ratification and a determined resistance to the messages of Church-sponsored myths and images glorifying a sacralized matrimony. Memorialists of the Veneto also preferred to marry at home, without benefit of clergy. Girolamo Stoppi, it is true, sposai Claudia Boldero after a priest’s benediction. But this took place seven weeks after he “took her as wife” and “gave her my hand”; it but sealed an already legitimate marriage. It also took place in 1565, when the strictures of the Council of Trent were beginning to be felt.

Prior to Trent, memoirs make only two references to religion in the marriage sequence. First, the verba de futuro for Andrea’s marriage to Marcella Fracanzani was pronounced in the church of Santa Maria dei Servi. Andrea and Nicolo Fracanzani needed a church, however, not the Church. Sacred space gave greater solemnity to the promises, but did not signify recourse to ecclesiastical authority; no priestly presence is recorded. A church also represented neutral space, appropriate for the conclusion of negotiations. Second, Simone Revese took Margarita Arnaldi to the marital house “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with his benediction.” Evidently Simone and Margarita detoured the traditio procession past a church, where a priest blessed the union. But they were not married before or in a church. None of the Arnaldi were. Anyway the blessing came a full ten months after the marriage, ratifying but hardly creating the union. This is the only notice of its kind among fifty marriages mentioned in the memoirs. If couples in Verona and Vicenza went before a priest with any frequency, they did not regard the event as worth recording.

Seasonality

The timing of marriages was not random. Canon law counseled against matrimony during penitential seasons: Advent through Epiphany, Lent, and Pentecost through the feast of St. John the Baptist. At least a third and as
much as 40 percent of the year was off-limits. Failure to observe these guidelines would not invalidate a union, but might require penance and temporary separation before the Church would bestow its blessing.74

Families of Veneto memorialists sometimes respected and sometimes ignored ecclesiastical prescriptions. In twenty-seven cases in which a core moment—exchange of verba de praesenti, conveying of rings, or indefinite “married” (nubesit, despensavit, sposai)—can be dated, they indeed obeyed the Advent prohibition: a single marriage was made during that season, but eleven (41 percent) clustered immediately before and after it (see appendix, table 1.2). They also avoided Pentecost, with only a single possible instance (the exact day in June was not specified, and might have fallen after the 24th). Lent, on the other hand, was actually a favored time for marriage: six (22 percent) were made then, compared with the 13 percent of marriages that would have fallen during Lent if matrimony had been spaced randomly throughout the calendar. Of fourteen Freschi marriages, one took place during Lent and none during Advent; five clustered around Advent.

The moment of marriage was not the target of Church restrictions. Ecclesiastical intent was to banish distractions from penitential observance: raucous feasting and sexual union. Marriage could well take place during reserved seasons, because the bride remained quietly and chastely in the paternal home for some time. Traditio to the marital household alone brought celebration and consummation. To gauge respect for canonical prohibitions, then, we need to look at the day of ductio rather than the day of matrimony. The number of dated cases is not great, only seventeen, but the pattern is clear: not a single bride went to her husband’s house during Advent, Lent, or Pentecost. The greatest number of traditiones (47 percent) took place in January and February, between Advent and Lent. A further, purely secular cluster of transfers is found in September and October (29 percent), when harvest markets filled cities with foodstuffs for feasts.

Marriage was specific to day as well as to season. Wednesday and Friday were discouraged because they were days of abstinence. Sunday was encouraged, perhaps to share in the sacrality of the day and certainly to maximize publicity. Venetians called the husband’s postconsummation present to the bride a “Monday gift,” in expectation of a Sunday traditio; indeed, they considered any day except Sunday cursed. Gaetans and Florentines typically conveyed the ring on Thursday or Sunday, and, like Romans, most commonly transferred the bride on Sunday.75

Here, too, the Veneto memorialists followed norms more closely with regard to transfer than to marriage itself (see appendix, table 1.3). Matrimo-
nial prohibitions were relatively weak: while Sunday was indeed preferred (44 percent of cases) and Friday avoided (4 percent), there was no particular dislike of a Wednesday wedding (22 percent). Again, the wedding would not violate rules of abstinence since the bride remained in her house. What did violate those norms was feast or consummation at the time of the duc tio; here Veneto families scrupulously respected the rules. Because the bedding of bride and groom would occur in the evening, after the sundown that marked the beginning of the next day, it was licit to transfer the bride on Wednesday (20 percent of cases) and even better to transfer her on Sunday (60 percent). Tuesday transfers (with consummation on penitential Wednesday) were rare (13 percent), and Thursday transfers (with consummation on forbidden Friday) unknown.

Folklore, too, set rules for the seasonality of marriage. On twenty-four "Egyptian days," declared "all Greek authors," terrible things would befall a person who married: "if he takes a wife, he will have little good thereby, and he will stay only a short time with her, in poverty." A second list of twenty-nine "unhappy or unfortunate" days does not specify the curse. Authors recorded these texts in the belief that they possessed merit. Families also, it seems, gave them credence in scheduling marriage. The two lists deemed some fifty-one days inauspicious, or 14 percent of all days, but only 7 percent of marriages and transfers took place on unfavorable days. The figure would decline to 5 percent if we exclude the Stoppi, who were newcomers to the region and perhaps unfamiliar with local beliefs, and would drop farther to 3 percent if we exclude one marriage on Epiphany Sunday, when the holiness of the day might be expected to counteract bad fortune. Gaspare II Arnaldi, at least, apparently relied on the lists in arranging his marriage, splitting its stages between March 13 and 16 to avoid unhappy days on the 14th, 15th, and 17th.

Dowries

Dowries were universal in Verona and Vicenza, at least among those who documented their marriages. Intended to "sustain the burdens of matrimony" and support the widow thereafter, they also ratified the social and moral legitimacy of the bride and her family: thus Tommaso Arnaldi provided dowries for the daughters of brother Battista because he was avid and eager (cupidus et amator) for the honor of both brother and nieces. The dowry represented the daughter's share of the patrimony. When Veneto women confessed receipt of their dowries they renounced further claims to the in-
heritance. Their share was to be a “fitting” (congrua) proportion of the patrimony, though it need not be equal to brothers’ shares; in a few cases, daughters received portions equal to those of sons, though this was not the norm.\(^8\) The dowry constituted the lion’s share of goods exchanged at marriage; extradotal goods brought by the wife were seldom mentioned, and then were not substantial,\(^9\) and if husbands brought gifts to the marriage these were not recorded.\(^8\) Dowries could not be squandered during marriage and were to be restored to a wife upon her husband’s death: he pledged goods as “counterdowry” as security for eventual restitution of the dowry.\(^8\) If the wife predeceased her spouse, without children, he received a half share of the dowry.\(^8\)

The striking feature of Veneto dowries is their inflation. The first marriage of the Arnaldi memoir, that of Gaspare I to Caterina Zugliano in 1407, brought in 200 ducats.\(^8\) His sons’ marriages in the 1430–40 period brought in an average of 317 ducats.\(^8\) Three dowries averaged 433 ducats in the 1450s,\(^8\) and the figure rose to over 500 ducats for the five dowries of the 1460s.\(^8\) When documentation resumes in 1496–1502, three dowries averaged 3,167 ducats.\(^9\) That hypertrophy is the more remarkable because the tax assessments of the Arnaldi and their in-laws did not rise in absolute value or relative to those of fellow citizens: families committed progressively larger shares of the patrimony to dowries. In similar fashion, Bartolomeo dal Bovo raised the dowries of his four daughters by 50 percent in a short time span, from 300 ducats for the eldest to 450 ducats for the youngest, while Freschi dowries rose by 138 percent between 1452–77 and 1520–32.\(^9\)

Dowry inflation has been noted throughout Italian cities. The phenomenon was not new, if literary commonplaces are any guide: Dante perceived fathers of daughters in distress well before his time.\(^9\) The hardships posed by inflation were so severe by the fifteenth century as to preoccupy civic leaders, who worried that increasing demands would ruin families and/or reduce nuptuality. In 1425 Florentines created a municipal dowry fund which, because of its social importance and vast cash flow, remained central to marital strategy and public finance for over a century. The Venetian scuola of St. John the Evangelist did the same three years earlier, though the nature and scale of the fund’s operations are unknown.\(^9\)

Why dowries rose so dramatically has been the source of considerable speculation. Susan Mosher Stuard, for example, has taken growing dowries as an indicator of greater aggregate wealth and liquidity among the well-to-do in Ragusa.\(^9\) Indicators in the Veneto suggest an economy that was indeed growing, but not sufficient growth in personal incomes to sustain skyrocketing
expenditures on marriage. David Herlihy has offered a demographic reading: high age differentials at marriage, coupled with normal midlife male mortality, produced a surplus of marriageable women whose families had to compete for husbands with progressively higher dowries. In the Veneto, however, the much lower age gap between husbands and wives would reduce the applicability of the model. Stanley Chojnacki has attributed Venetian inflation to a snowball effect and changes in women’s attitudes: widows possessed of ever-larger dowries increasingly dowered their female kin, fueling self-perpetuating upward pressure on dowries. Women in Verona and Vicenza, however, left only small amounts to dower other women, assigning the bulk of their dowries to sons.

The single factor supported by the Veneto evidence is status competition. Ambitious and well-off families bid up dowries to attract husbands from higher social strata, and the rest of the population followed suit simply to maintain their positions. Those aspiring to the patriciate absorbed short-term losses; if they were successful, the balance sheet corrected itself when inferiors bid for their offspring and equals matched their dowries. Alternately, patricians accepted high dowries as obvious markers of their distance from the masses. In any case, the economic burden on any one family balanced itself out because dowry exchange is a zero-sum game, and in the long run as much would flow in as would flow out.

Moralists, it is true, decried the use of marriage and dowries for social advancement. Giovanni Dominici regarded the inflation of dowries as a form of selling oneself, and warned darkly of the disasters that awaited those who married above their station. Alberti, too, wanted equality of husband and wife: marrying too high incurred obligation and cast one’s own family into the shadows. Giovanni Conversino wanted economic equality of spouses: a wealthier wife would boss her husband around, and squandering the patrimony to secure a prestigious husband was “insane.” Bernardino da Feltre extended his metaphor of marriage as a yoked team to urge that husband and wife be of the same rank (conditione). Fathers such as Giovanni Morelli, though, felt that marriage strategies should be directed to “raise yourself up,” and the fact that the Morelli gave more in dowries than they received indicates that they were willing to pay for socially advantageous unions.

Strategies pursued by the Arnaldi in the two phases of their social development suggest that if dowries paid and received were comparable, a family was marrying within a generalized social grouping; if a family gave daughters greater dowries than it received from daughters-in-law, it was investing capital to attract a better sort of alliance. The first generation of Arnaldi, up
to about 1470, intermarried with families that came from their occupational
group; the dowries they paid out roughly equaled those they received from
in-laws. The Arnaldi seem not to have aspired to upward mobility, and set
commensurate dowries to consolidate their position among the notarial-com-
mercial ranks. The second generation, however, openly aspired to nobility.
In 1502, when Silvestro Arnaldi simultaneously married a daughter and son
to offspring of the very great Thiene family, he used differential dowries as
an inducement. Silvestro paid 4,000 ducats for daughter Laura’s dowry, but
took in only 1,500 ducats from son Andrea’s bride. That 4,000 ducats was
about double or triple the prevailing rate among the city’s nobility. The Thiene
needed money; the Arnaldi needed ratification of newly acquired standing
and were willing to pay the price.

So, too, the Veronese Pietro Verità acknowledged that dowries had to be
calibrated with the quality of the groom, giving his testamentary commis-
ioners power to augment his daughters’ dowries “according to the status
and rank of their husbands.” In turn, social climbers sought unions with the
well-established Verità, and paid handsomely for the privilege: the 1,500-
ducat dowry paid by Filippo Pindemonte to Michele Verità was nearly twice
that given in any other Pindemonte marriage.

The lamentations of fathers and city councillors might, however, be
taken with a grain of salt. Those who decried inflated dowries were the same
men who arranged inflated dowries for their own daughters. Neither the
weak authority model (patriarch-politicians were helpless before upward
pressures) nor the hypocrisy model (they preached one position in public and
practiced another in private) is convincing. Perhaps, instead, high dowries
were not so disruptive as they appear at face value. Three types of evidence
from the Veneto suggest that we might question the degree to which sharply
higher nominal dowries truly jeopardized patrimonies, the marriage mar-
ket, and brides’ families.

First, dowry confessions can be fictive documents. When it is possible to
compare dowry confessed to dowry actually received, the gap is often con-
siderable. In one extreme case, the Vicentine patrician Gaspare Monza ac-
knowledged receipt of six hundred ducats for the dowry of his wife Jacopa
Rabi; he later admitted that “in rei veritate” he had received nothing. Verona’s
Pietro Verità formally declared that daughter Ginevra had been given a dowry
of six hundred ducats, and her husband confessed to receiving two hundred
ducats as a first installment; “in veritate,” Pietro admitted on his deathbed
that the dowry totaled only five hundred ducats and the husband received
but a hundred. In such cases, the husband’s family was obliged to restore the sum stipulated in the false confession, though it had received less: the husband’s family agreed to contribute a share (or, in the Monza case, the entirety) of the dowry.

Second, dowries were seldom conveyed at a single moment. In 1496, for example, Silvestro Arnaldi promised four thousand ducats as the dowry of his daughter Cassandra, but stretched payments over fifteen years. The obligation would have been unbearable if demanded in a lump sum, but installments averaging 267 ducats annually would not wreck the family’s wealth. The cash portion of the dowry often consisted of credits owed by third parties, which still had to be collected by the husband’s family, often over several years. In yet another form, Domenico Uberti designated the dowry of daughter Caterina as part of the capitalization of a commercial company formed with her husband and brother-in-law: he assumed a long-term obligation, but did not have to come up with any cash at the time of marriage.

Third, a chronic shortage of liquidity in the Veneto led to widespread assignment of land and land rights rather than cash. Property in the region was capitalized at 6 percent, so that a dowry of fields valued at fifty ducats would produce rents of three ducats annually. The immediate monetary loss to the bride’s family did not remotely approach the sum stipulated in dowry confessions, and the husband’s family accumulated the dowry only over a decade or more. Moreover, in land dowries the bride’s family generally conveyed not full title to the property but only the right to collect rents. Her family invariably retained the capacity to reclaim (“francate”) that right of collection for the nominal value of the dowry, over an extended period. For example, the Arnaldi in 1456 assigned forty campi of land in the village of La Longa and half of their house in Vicenza to Marco Clivone, to cover most of the dowry of Angela Chiara Arnaldi. Over the next fourteen years, the Arnaldi produced small sums of money and assigned miscellaneous lands until they recovered both properties. Francating portions as funds became available, they could promise inflated dowries without jeopardizing short-term fiscal stability or long-term patrimony. And they cemented a close alliance with the Clivone family, binding debtor to creditor in mutual interdependence and risk.

In practice, then, newly married men did not enjoy a sudden infusion of ready money. The income from dotal lands was paltry, and long terms of payment meant that the dowry was an annuity, not a lump sum. The dowry could not fund a new household or launch a business career, and so
belied the classic definition that it was intended to sustain the burdens of matrimony. Nor were brides’ families suddenly drained of wealth even when, as with Silvestro Arnaldi, the stipulated sum was very great indeed. Nonliquid dowries, protracted payment, and the possibility of fraction also suggest modification of the thesis that the dowry represents a one-way, one-time cash flow from bride’s family to groom’s family, complementing the brusque separation of the girl from her natal family and her definitive integration into the marital family. The amount stipulated in the dowry confess thus had symbolic rather than purely economic consequences. It measured not wealth actually transferred but such intangible factors as the social valuation of the union and the contracting parties, good faith, and reputation, or, in other words, status itself.

Constante matrimonio

Spousal affectio

Marriages among the Veneto memorialists lasted, on average, somewhat over two decades before the death of a spouse sundered the union. While perfect strangers at the moment of marriage, husbands and wives had plenty of time to get to know each other. The memoirs even hint at what men, at least, eventually thought of their partners, provided we resist overconfidence in our abilities to penetrate the emotional world of the past.

The meaning of their words is uncertain. When Bonaventura Bovi noted the death of his “sweetest” (dulcissima) wife Isabeta, and when Andrea Arnaldi mentioned his “fondness” (dilectio) for his recently deceased wife Caterina Botarini and called her the sharer of his fortunes (consors) rather than simply wife (uxor), neither may have intended sentimentality. Andrea left other clues, however, which suggest at least a deep respect for Caterina. He twice spoke of her in the superlative: she had been a dilectissima consors. Usually a spare writer, he carefully recorded the date, day, and hour of her death, noted the date of the onset of her “infirmity” (a fatal childbirth), and commended her body and soul to Christ. As if deflecting and thus alleviating sorrow with a flurry of details, he recalled the date and duration of their marriage, and the birthdates and present ages of their surviving children. He never devoted such saturated attention to any male in the family.

The writers of Verona and Vicenza were far less eloquent than many Florentines who wrote movingly of their wives’ deaths. They offered no equivalent to the Bolognese Gaspare Nadi’s lament that “I loved her more than seemed
possible, because I don’t believe there is or has ever been a woman better than she.” Yet Veneto writers did not waste words: when they recorded a fact we can be certain it mattered to them, and they scrupulously noted salient information about their wives. Three times in a single page, for example, Andrea Arnaldi recorded the date, saint’s day, and hour of his second wife’s birth, repeatedly giving Marcella a concrete identity by locating her in worldly chronology and celestial patronage. He felt that posterity needed reassurance that sister-in-law Cassandra Revese had “died to our Lord Jesus Christ, with all the comforts of the most holy mother Church, with a sound mind to the end.” Each time a child was born, the Verità and Arnaldi repeated the name of both mother and father: wives were partners in procreation, not mere agents of parturition.

There is nothing surprising in such expressions. Venerable tradition, after all, had expected a warm and trusting conjugal union. Jesus himself told men and women to leave their families and cleave unto their spouses, to become one flesh. St. Paul required that husbands show love (caritas) to their wives; when he set the union of husband and wife as analog to the union of Christ and his Church, he defined the bond of both unions as unswerving love. Hugh of St. Victor interpreted the Epistle to the Ephesians to require mutual caritas, solicitude, affection, compassion, consolation, and devotion, while the canonist Alexander III took the maritalis affectio (intent to treat each other reciprocally as husband and wife) of Roman law, which had lacked emotional connotations, pushed it toward our “affection,” and made it requisite to a binding marriage.

Renaissance Italians, too, expressed high ideals. Alberti valued the good wife as a “constant companion,” and devoted long passages to the mutual pleasure, benevolence, intimacy, good will, and shared emotions of the conjugal union. Poggio defined marriage as a “bond of concord” by which “two wills, two souls are joined in one.” Francesco Barbaro extolled the joys of having a good wife; his and others’ high valuation of procreation, nursing, and domestic management equally honored the virtuous spouse. Civic humanists saw the family as microcosm of society and marriage as foundation of the social order; moralists stressed reciprocal service, concord, respect, and dilectio, while enjoining men to remain sexually faithful and not beat their wives. Even the misogynist Bernardino da Feltre thought the good wife the most honored of humans, “half the life of her husband”; she wears the Virgin’s crown of twelve stars, and is a radiant sun. A good union was the “most beautiful” of the human relationships pleasing to God. Paolo da Certaldo, who otherwise found women “empty of head and frivolous of heart” and au-
horized an occasional beating, ranked the love of a good wife among “the greatest loves that exist,” and thought a “good wife the crown and honor and fortune of a husband.”

Whether people in the Renaissance expected or experienced romantic love must remain an open question. Historians have concluded that their medieval forebears had known both doctrines of sentimentality and episodes of sincere, even passionate love within marriage. It is tempting to infer the same from the Veronese Leonardo Montagna’s Zampolina, a sprawling collection of prose and poetry mourning the loss of his wife. At the very least, respect, trust, and companionship flourished in some later marriages. Contino Stoppi, for example, mused on the death of his diletissima consorte: “she passed from this mortal to a happier life, leaving behind many who were disconsolate and in great tribulation over her death.” Contino himself died within two months, his final sickness “fed by a melancholic humor contracted from sorrow for madonna Valeria his wife.” What wives thought of their husbands was seldom recorded, but trace indicators such as wives’ preference to be buried in the tombs of marital rather than natal families, and scattered episodes such as one Veronese woman’s bequest of two hundred ducats “to her beloved husband” indicate occasional high regard.

Affection cannot be proven, but trust certainly can. A wife who successfully supervised the domestic regime and raised children to physical, moral, and spiritual maturity commanded appreciation that frequently carried over into testamentary hopes that she continue as manager in widowhood. Gaspare I Arnaldi named his wife Caterina Zugliano as executor of his will, and demanded that his heirs honor and reverence her and obey her warnings and advice. Son Tommaso’s will ordered that his sons and daughters marry only with the approval (scientia) of his widow Elisabetta dal Gorgo, and that she be treated well, loved, and honored by stepson Gaspare II if she chose to remain in the house. Aventino Fracastoro wished his widow not only to live in the house but to be domina over the household, and threatened to withdraw his blessing upon his sons if they did not show reverence and obedience to her. He once called her frugal, and once frugalissima: she could well be given responsibility over goods and children.

It is true that such testamentary provisions are colored by family self-interest. Keeping the widow happy at home ensured that she would not take her dowry and go elsewhere. In the more fulsome Venetian and English wills, however, historians have seen signs of husbands’ high regard for and trust in the wives they were leaving behind. Venetian husbands increasingly made wives the sole or decisive executors of their estates, used personalized lan-
guage to express affection, and made significant bequests to wives over and above their dowries. Warm feelings and self-interest are not, after all, mutually exclusive. Even if expressions of love and trust were merely formulaic, that does not alter the argument: formula itself demonstrates that "affection between spouses had become normative."\(^{122}\)

**Women's Dotal and Property Rights**

Battista Arnaldi, the prodigal who never returned, was already in debt when he demanded his inheritance and left the fraternal household at the age of twenty-two. For two decades he sold pieces of land, and brothers Andrea and Tommaso provided relief from creditors. Perhaps he was a compulsive gambler: in 1443 the brothers offered an allowance if he would give up chess. His life continued to unravel. Relations bought his land, rented him a house, took in one daughter, and eventually dowered both daughters. By midcentury his behavior was unsupportable: Andrea and Tommaso cut him off, and a prospective son-in-law refused to negotiate with him. The family memoir does not record the date of his death.\(^ {123}\)

Semiramide Thiene at first acted the model wife. Shortly after her marriage in 1437, with Battista's consent, she named her brother and her husband procurators to collect lands and monies owed her. Less than a year later, she bought a small piece of land for herself and her husband, but she then acted without Battista's consent and specified that the purchase price come "out of the money from her dowry." In 1445 she bought land independently, without reference to her husband. A year later the break was complete. Semiramis began her will with the request that Battista could not undo (contrafacere) its provisions, then commanded that he not impede alienation of her goods after her death.\(^ {124}\)

This exceptional case hints at several norms. Semiramis's first transactions are entirely conventional, reflecting the economic and judicial limitations on married women. She required a procurator in court proceedings, as did Florentine wives. She could not act or defend in court without a surety; at least she was better off than Florentine women, who needed consent by a male guardian to effect legal transactions. The husband, here and throughout Italy, administered the dowry and reaped all profits from it. Under normal circumstances a wife in the Veneto and elsewhere could not alienate her dowry or extradotal goods during marriage. Local statute declared that goods purchased by a wife were presumed to belong to the husband. Custom also worked against her. Jurists such as Baldus had advised women to secure no-
tarized inventories of nondotal goods they brought to marriage, but this seldom happened in the Veneto and a widow would find it hard to prove that household goods did not, in fact, belong to her late husband. Finally, the wife could bequeath goods to her husband or anyone else only if she left an equal share to her children.125

Semiramide’s recovery of control over her dowry is no more remarkable. If women were deemed “weak and feeble,” likely to jeopardize their own or their families’ interests by light-headed decision, and therefore required male protection from their own poor judgment,126 they equally needed protection from errant husbands. Vicentine law sanctioned a woman’s right to sue her insolvent husband for an equivalent of the dowry, and further gave her the capacity to assign a tutor to children if her husband dissipated their goods as well; he could not then touch their patrimony.127 Julius Kirshner has concluded that later medieval legal opinion not only revived but reinforced the Roman law remedy of lawsuit against a husband verging on poverty (vergens ad inopiam).128 Nor did women find it a merely theoretical resource, as the case of the peasant Flora attests. Appearing before a judge in 1451, Flora charged that her husband “through mismanagement of his goods was verging on poverty,” thus endangering restitution of her dowry. The judge granted her the right to sequester agricultural goods from her husband’s lands up to the value of 213 lire.129 Many Toulousaines and some 460 Florentine women secured similar rulings.130

Lawyers and legislators, in fact, widened the entire range of protections afforded dowries. Statute in Vicenza and elsewhere was clear: during marriage the wife held a hypothec on the husband’s goods for her dowry, and he could not alienate it even with her permission. She, in turn, could alienate her dowry if threatened with starvation, but only if a judge ascertained that the husband had not pressured her to claim poverty. When another Flora in 1483 petitioned to sell land to feed herself and her nine children, the podesta himself questioned her privately and took testimony from her kin to determine that the request was freely made.131

Dowries, declared the law, held preference over claims by creditors.132 In 1422, fearful that women might be forced to obligate or even alienate their dowries to pay husbands’ debts, Vicentine councils ruled that women could only cede dowries and parafrenalia in case of hunger, capture of husbands by foreign enemies, or husbands’ physical disabilities.133 Owners disliked the principle that dotal claims constituted a hypothec on husbands’ lands, because tenants possessing dominium utile might refuse to pay rents or repay loans on account of dowry commitments—one piece of Verità land had been ob-
ligated for three dowries, and the family had to forgive considerable arrears to regain full control—*but they could not alter it.* Creditors and lawyers worried that devious couples might shelter assets behind the wall of the wife’s hypothec, but here, too, the law stood firm. Further, a husband’s testamentary bequests supplementing the dowry fully belonged to his widow and could not be impounded by his heirs. Attempts to safeguard patrimonies in the male line by imposing a blanket entail suffered defeat with the ruling that Chiara Squarzi’s dowry, at least, was excluded from her brother’s inheritance.

Even the ever-hungry Venetian fisc made no headway against dotal claims. Early in the fifteenth century the Senate specified that a portion of goods seized from mainland rebels be designated for return to wives after the deaths of their exiled husbands. Later magistrates not only upheld that law but allowed wives of rebels to petition for the return of dotal goods during their husbands’ lifetimes. In midcentury tax officials complained that subjects who owed the fisc for gabelles (dazi) had accepted large dowry hypothecs so that their lands could not be confiscated for arrears. The Senate apparently misunderstood the issue, and passed an irrelevant law that land purchases from the fisc be made with ready cash, but at least it did not downgrade dotal rights. Such protection of dowry rights may, in fact, have provided a stimulus to dowry inflation.

When women appeared not to require assistance, male controls could be relaxed. That appears to be the lesson of Semiramide Thiene’s later transactions. No law prevented her from buying and selling without the consent of a male; statutes assigning the wife’s purchases to the husband seem, at least in her case, to have been ignored. Notarial registers contain thousands of records of women, acting alone, engaged in commerce. Nothing prevented them from suing or defending themselves in court, provided they could obtain surety, and statutes did not demand that they have a procurator. Court records show many women going to law on their own. Nothing prevented them from freely bequeathing their estate once they paid due respect to children. The Vicentine rubric “That the masculine category shall encompass the feminine,” applying the male voice of statutory language to both sexes, set the principle that men and women should enjoy substantially the same rights and obligations.

Semiramide Thiene did not declare independence. She asserted freedom from an irresponsible husband, but only with the support of her husband’s kin. When she bought land in 1438 and 1445, brother-in-law Andrea Ar-
naldi witnessed the transaction. When she shut her husband out of her will, she entrusted her estate to the priest who had baptized Andrea's children and the notary who had redacted Andrea's will; an executor who appears in later documents was an Arnaldi cousin. Apparently lacking natal kin, she was not prepared to go it alone, and instead relied on a loose network of affines to protect her interests.

The Arnaldi, in turn, were ready to help. Respectable men had little to gain in the long run from the victimization of a wife or the mishandling of her dowry. They were fathers and brothers as well as husbands and in-laws: if the assets of any vulnerable woman could be plundered with impunity, so could those of their own daughters and sisters. With so much money tied up in dowries, corruption of the delicate mechanisms for the orderly devolution of dotal wealth between families and between generations would throw the domestic economy into chaos. So public authorities provided remedies such as *vergens ad inpiam* for dysfunction, and guarded against competing claims which—civic councillors were also landowners, creditors, and tax collectors—might otherwise have worked to their benefit. And so, when Semiramide discovered that her husband's irresponsibility threatened her property, she found no difficulty in securing protectors from among his kinsmen.

**Affines and Cognates**

Giovanni Rucellai of Florence twice mapped the boundaries of his family. In 1457, near the start of his *zibaldone*, he stressed its vertical dimension with a genealogy of the male line of descent. After two decades of practical experience, he redefined the family in horizontal terms, to include those *parenti* whose families had provided brides for Rucellai men.  

140 This second dimension is characteristic of the Veneto memoirs. Writers' vision rested not on the patriline—genealogy is nearly absent—but on a wider, contemporary kin group and particularly on *parenti* related by marriage. When Bonaventura Bovi listed deaths in the family, for example, he included those of his father- and mother-in-law, his father's father-in-law, and a maternal aunt who lived with him for thirty-five years.  

141 So, too, the Arnaldi noted the divorce of cousin Bartolomea, the broken engagement of cousin Cardino, the deaths of aunt Guglielma and uncle Nicolo, the birth of a child to what might have been a second cousin once removed, an aunt's pilgrimage, and her *ductio* of an Arnaldi bride.  

142 All these kin were related through marriage or the female line. Writers largely ignored agnatic uncles and cousins.
A striking feature of the Arnaldi family archive and notarial documents is the frequency, intensity, and variety of relations with marital kin. The Arnaldi bought and sold land with their affines, used their shops to transact business, chose them as arbiters, executors, and tutors, lent them money or borrowed from them, hired them as notaries, and employed them as agents and procurators. Members of the Revese family, which provided two brides for Arnaldi men, redacted a score of documents, witnessed a dozen transactions, seven times served as escrow agents, sold them land, and acted as partners in the farming of episcopal incomes. The relationship lasted over three generations, from 1434 to at least 1508. Over a longer span the Zugliano served as arbiters three times, executors three times, and partners in the wool business two times, and made two important testamentary bequests to the Arnaldi.

That concentration runs up against stock historiographic images. On the personal level, historians note tearful brides brusquely removed from natal families and thrust into husbands’ households, objects passed from one proprietor to another, or, more poetically, “cuttings to be carefully grafted onto new stock.”¹⁴³ On the general level, historians note the European transition from bilateral or cognatic kin groups to patrilineal or agnatic kin groups. In both models, marriage constitutes a merely momentary touching of lineages, with ongoing affinal relations unnecessary or even harmful to each family. Yet stock images look less secure in the light of recent revisionism, notably Herlihy’s assertion that the agnatic lineage system may have been superimposed on the bilateral or cognatic lineage but by no means replaced it.¹⁴⁴

A cluster of spiritual and civic-ethical imperatives pushed patricians of the Veneto into sustained and intimate relations with their in-laws. These have been little studied: family history has been markedly materialistic and structural, identifying self-interested strategies for maximizing wealth and maintaining social networks. But fifteenth-century Italians were also dutiful Christians and good citizens for the most part, and they were heirs to less cold-blooded belief systems. Augustine had powerfully defined marriage as instituted to spread caritas within the community. The supreme law of love demanded that “bonds of social relationships” be “distributed as widely as possible, so that a common social life of the greatest number may best be fostered.” Marriage, wrote Jonas of Orleans, creates an amicitia that constitutes the very basis of the polity; Peter Damian thought marriage a “seedbed of charity” that reunited the dispersed descendants of Adam and Eve in love and social harmony. Fifteenth-century writers as diverse as Francesco Barbaro, San Bernardino, and Matteo Palmieri viewed marriage as promoting
charity, pacification, and mutual assistance, and expected close bonds between affines.  

Memorialists in the Veneto were certainly aware of more utilitarian imperatives. Family self-sufficiency in public life was out of the question. It will be seen, for example, that young Veronese men faced a rigorous *cursus* of eligibility scrutinies before they entered councils; the well-connected might secure a seat in only a few attempts, but the isolated waited a decade or more—if indeed they ever gained favor. The Arnaldi lacked any political presence until maternal uncle Antonio Zugliano left Andrea his seat on the municipal council. Gaspare II and Alvise Arnaldi each received from maternal great-uncles positions in the closed lists of notaries eligible for government employ, thus placing the family among the elite of the College of Notaries.  

In Venice, maternal uncles frequently advanced the political careers of young patricians, sponsoring them for early election to the Maggior Consiglio. When voting on issues involving individual patricians, Venetian councils excluded in-laws from participation: they expected affinal collusion as a matter of course.

Statute required that disputes between family members be settled in a compromise worked out by two or more “common friends.” Although any citizen could serve, affinal relations were especially prized—they had a general interest in the family, knew the facts of cases, and also stood neutral with regard to individual family members. Thus when Battista Arnaldi left the household in 1437, the arbiters of the patrimonial division—Alessandro Zugliano, Nicolo Cardino, and Gaspare Tomasini—were all maternal cousins. The first two helped rework the division in 1439, and the latter two adjudicated Battista’s protest of the settlement in 1443. In 1451 Tommaso protested that dowries to Andrea’s many daughters drained his share of the common wealth, and *communes affines* Cardino, Tomasini, and Zugliano again served as arbiters.

Statutes ordered that no one under the age of twenty could alienate or obligate goods without the consent of two close male relatives (*proximi*), one from the paternal side and one from the maternal side. Maternal or affinal kin, then, were given equality to patrilineal kin in protecting the patrimony. The principle respected customary lines of property descent: because most or all of a woman’s dowry usually passed to her children, at any given point a family’s wealth derived in large part from the mother’s natal family. Furthermore, marriage did not end the father’s paternal authority (*patria potestas*) over his daughter, and he retained a residual interest in the administration and devolution of her property. The fact that the payment of dowries
might stretch over a decade or more, with exchanges of cash and land rights throughout, further entangled the economic interests of the two families.

Mutual cooperation and shared experiences in political, economic, legal, and patrimonial affairs may also have engendered mutual respect, even warmth, between natal and marital families. The memoirs of the Veneto, paying vigilant attention to events in the lives of maternal kin, bespeak at least a close concern. Recurrent selection of affines as arbiters and executors—after a marriage in 1407, the Zugliano handled Arnaldi estates in 1433, 1463, and 1499\textsuperscript{153}—certainly indicates long-term trust. Evidence from other cities goes a step further. The Florentine agnate system excluded married daughters from the patrimony but not from the collective memory of their natal families, and women in turn kept close “sentimental ties” with fathers, brothers, grandparents, and maternal uncles.\textsuperscript{154} Female Venetian testators made widespread bequests, indicating strong affectionate ties, to members of both families. Some men, too, were close to their affines: Gasparino Morosini left fifty ducats to each of the brothers of his deceased wife “because of the great love and respect which I have always had for that house.”\textsuperscript{155}

\textit{Suluto matrimonio}

\textit{Divortium}

Two unions mentioned in the Veneto memoirs were dissolved not by death but by an entry into religion. In 1448 Lucia Colzè broke her betrothal—a \textit{matrimonium initiatium}—to the Arnaldi cousin Cardino Feramosca, and entered the convent of Santa Chiara. Five years earlier cousin Bartolomea and her husband Nicolo had gone before the bishop in the episcopal palace and separated (“fecerunt divortium”). Both immediately entered the order of the Observant Franciscans, Nicolo at San Biagio and Bartolomea at Santa Chiara.\textsuperscript{156}

At least they bothered to go through the formalities. The persistent view that marriage was a purely secular arrangement, regulated by the couple itself and without need of Church sanction, led—in England, at least—to frequent “self-divorce” in which husbands and wives simply divided and felt free to contract new unions. Few there sought formal dissolution of marriage, even though the Church offered several grounds (consanguinity, crime, coercion, impotence, insufficient age) for claiming that the marriage had not been valid in the first place.\textsuperscript{157}
Lucia Colzè was on fairly firm ground. Strengthening of the *verba de futuro* had led some canonists, notably Alexander III, to deny that even entry into religion could override a betrothal, but after Huguccio most theorists accepted this exceptional case. Gratian thought that an unconsummated betrothal could be dissolved by entry into a "better life"; Albertus Magnus regarded monachation as a death to the world which, as much as corporal death, effectively sundered the relationship. Peter Lombard even argued that a person joined by *verba de futuro* could enter the religious life without the consent of the other party.\textsuperscript{158}

The *divortium* of Bartolomea and Nicolo, however, was less certain. Early authors such as Gratian and Peter Lombard had taken the hard line that any complete or "perfect" matrimony (*matrimonium perfectum*) could not be broken. Alexander III softened the position to permit dissolution of unconsummated marriages in the case of monachation. Writers such as Huguccio and Innocent III ratified his position, and Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas endorsed it by repeating the metaphor of entry into religion as death to the world. But these authorities allowed the dissolution only of an unconsummated matrimony, which they regarded as a spiritual union that one or both parties could exchange for a higher spiritual marriage to Christ. After consummation, most agreed, man and wife were joined in physical union, which could be dissolved only by physical death.\textsuperscript{159}

Bartolomea and Nicolo were well into middle age, and the marriage had almost certainly been consummated: their *divortium* required counterlogic. Scripture offered two possibilities. First Corinthians 7 reluctantly admitted separation as long as both parties remained unmarried in a worldly sense, and the injunction "whom God has joined let no man separate" (Matthew 19:6) could be interpreted to mean that God—or vicars such as the bishop of Vicenza—could separate couples. The very purposes of marriage, Augustine’s triptych of procreation (*proles*), mutual fidelity (*fides*), and binding obligation (*sacramentum*),\textsuperscript{160} allowed some flexibility. Bartolomea and Nicolo had already had their chance to produce and raise children to populate the Christian community and spread *caritas*; they preserved *fides* if they remained true to their vows in a carnal sense. Scholarly consensus removed the obstacle of the *sacramentum*, affirming that the desire to enter the monastic life released the obligation if there was mutual consent to separation. The latter provision was adequately respected if both parties entered convents, as happened in Vicenza in 1443 and in several hagiographic models.\textsuperscript{161}

Still, divorce was unsettling. It could not be accomplished casually if the parties involved wished to keep faith to the Church and to the community.
To heal those breaches of ecclesiastical tradition and the social order, divorce required spiritual blessing and public confirmation. So Bartolomea and Nicolò made their divorce before the bishop, and Andrea noted carefully that he had witnessed both their entries into convents.

Widowhood

In the Veneto memoirs, twenty-three men and eighteen women lost spouses to death; widowed males also appear with frequency in Veronese tax declarations (anagrafi). With a spousal age gap of only six years (compared with twelve to fifteen years in Florence) upwards of a quarter of Veronese men would outlive their first wives. Like their Tuscan and Genoese counterparts, widowed women in the Veneto rarely remarried: only 11 percent are known to have done so. The assumption that men nearly automatically remarried, however, is not supported, as only 44 percent of widowers in memorialist families entered a second union. The anagrafi, too, indicate that most widowed men in Verona raised their children alone (see appendix, table 1.4).\(^{162}\)

The first of the Arnaldi marriages presents a model case of female widowhood. By the will of her husband Gaspare, Caterina Zugliano was left, in addition to her dowry, food, and clothing, the income from a hundred ducats and the use of a room with a bed in the family house “as long as she lives a widow’s life in a chaste and respectable manner.” Gaspare’s heirs were to honor and reverence her as their domina and mother, and acquiesce to her advice and warnings, if they wished to receive her blessing. If she chose not to live with her sons, they were to provide her with a sufficient dwelling, clothes and food, and a servant. During the nine years of her widowhood, Caterina indeed remained in the Arnaldi house, and she did not reclaim her dowry.\(^{163}\)

Men took considerable pains to ensure that widows remained safely and honorably in the marital house. Powerful reasons, moral and material, dictated that they do so. Honor thy mother, said the commandment; St. Paul ordered respect and provision for those widows “who are real widows” (I Timothy 5:3–16). His fear that unsupervised widows would stray into wanton behavior, bringing condemnation upon themselves and their families from God and the community, was widely echoed by fifteenth-century Italians. Widows were classified among the miserabiles personae whom Christians were obliged to protect and succor. Continued widowhood showed respect for the deceased spouse and prevented the neglect or abandonment of children from the first union. The son who honored his mother, said Giovanni
Dominici, piled up great treasure for himself, but if he treated her badly, her curse would tear down the foundations of the house. Financial interest, too, induced men to keep the widow close and happy. Her property would stray from the male line if she was discontent or produced a second set of children: thus the Bolognese Cesare Nappi's harsh words for his stepfather, thief of his own goods. 164

The tacit bribes for widows to remain were sometimes considerable: Pietro Verità granted his widow a lifelong usufruct of all of his goods, providing she lived *vidualiter et honesta* with her children and did not demand her dowry. Bonaventura Bovi ordered his heirs to show all “obedience, caritas, reverence, and love” to their mother, and granted her “all power and freedom of ruling and administering the entire family, because he has great trust in this madonna Isabella.” 165 Appointing widows testamentary executors and tutors of children likewise served to bind them to the marital household. Husbands in Venice, Florence, Genoa, and elsewhere offered much the same inducements. 166 Their strategies evidently worked: most widows did not leave, 167 most widows did not remarry, 168 and most dowries eventually passed to children.

This is not to suggest that there might not be friction. Because fraternal households were common in the Veneto, widows might find themselves under the authority of an in-law: Marcella Fracanzani, widow in a household headed by her brother-in-law Tommaso Arnaldi, moved out and eventually placed her son Silvestro under the tutelage of her own brothers. Second wives might be subject to the authority of offspring from the husband's first marriage: Elisabetta dal Gorgo, widow in a household headed by her stepson Gaspare II Arnaldi, also left to live on her own. 169 When a widow sought to leave the household, heirs might refuse to restore the dowry or nondotal goods; Florentine archives abound in lawsuits against recalcitrant offspring. 170 Still, dysfunction was the exception; none of the other Veneto widows are known to have departed. There were perfectly good reasons why, in the absence of friction, a widow might choose to remain in the house of her late husband. After a decade or more of marriage her ties to her children were probably stronger than those to her family of origin. If she returned to live with father or brothers she would occupy a peripheral place in their household. If she went out on her own, she exposed herself to depredation and social opprobrium. If, on the other hand, she stayed put, she was guaranteed shelter, food, clothes, and servants, 171 and had little vested interest in claiming her dowry. She also, as tutor to her children and executor of her husband's estate, might still administer that dowry without formally reclaim-
ing it. In moral and material terms, then, the stay-at-home widow gained an authority she was denied in any other situation. She still retained freedom of movement and association if, like Caterina Zugliano, she joined an order of tertiaries and traveled across town to spend time in their house.172

Historians who argued for the victimization of wives once romanticized widowhood as the time when a woman was at last free and economically independent. More systematic study of the Italian situation presents a darker picture. Tuscan widows in 1427 were poor and isolated, so economically marginal that they may have been seriously undercounted. Herlihy speaks of “social immiseration” of widows, and concludes that “the Florentine marriage pattern did not treat them well.”173 Vicentine tax rolls seem to support that contention: most widows were given the lowest assessment, five solidi, just above the poverty line.

Some qualification is in order, however, at least for patrician widows. Vicentine tax records provide imperfect indexes of true economic standing and actual residence. If, as usually happened, a widow remained in a son’s house, keeping her personal nondotal goods but not separating out her dowry, she would be listed in a separate tax household but would go on record as having little of her own. A tiny estimo, then, indicates neither isolation nor poverty. Many widows from wealthy families, widows of very rich men, did not appear in the tax rolls at all, because they did not take the minimal step of holding personal property in their own names. Marcella Fracanzani in 1460, Elisabetta dal Gorgo in 1477, and the unnamed widow of Girolamo Repeta in 1505 were all eligible to reclaim their considerable dowries and appear in the estimi as heads of distinct households, but they did not do so. They preferred to merge their financial interests with those of their sons, keeping honorable chastity and material comfort within the family house.