Provincial Families of the Renaissance
Grubb, James S.

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EPILOGUE

This book has sought, in part, to restore agency to its subjects. All too often in their quest for generalization historians and social scientists create monolithic cultures, as if authorities on the one hand and impersonal forces on the other imposed behavior on common people. The ordinary sort are perceived as more acted upon than actors, functioning primarily to give concrete realization to models dictated from above and without. Ideology set some bounds; demography, ecology, economic structures, law, and the state set others. The task, therefore, is to look beyond nominal subjects to discern the overarching systems that conditioned their experiences. That is not an approach authorized by the evidence underlying this book.

Even in the most sympathetic treatments of spiritual life, for example, subaltern groups emerge as essentially passive receivers of messages and audiences of ritual. On the contrary, as the Veneto memoirs abundantly demonstrate, devotional writers, preachers, and organizers of ritual provided raw materials from which lay people constructed personalized religious views. Compilers had available a large and growing corpus of patristic and medieval writings, sermons, popular texts, and learned treatises. Since they could scarcely assimilate the whole, they selected among their sources and so were active agents in shaping their devotions. Paraliturgies and spiritual-magical lore often allowed them to bypass clerical mediation altogether. Furthermore, since theologians, canonists, and moralists scarcely constituted a monolithic body, indeed frequently reached polar opposite opinions, the laity enjoyed considerable latitude. Consumers in a largely open ecclesiastical market, they chose freely from a broad range of priest-providers; they played down some widely sanctioned elements (penitential and Marian) and brought some less favored themes (prophetic and magical-medical) to the forefront. What they emphasized was not always what producers of religious guidelines might have wished.
The same was true of other aspects of experience. For example, there ex­isted no single doctrine of marriage, but rather a congeries of more or less approved positions. Divergence of opinion presented alternatives, hence al­lowing variation in everyday decision making. So families in the Veneto picked and chose among calendrical prohibitions, and emphasized parental controls and consummation far more than did mainstream canonists. Dowry systems, too, offered not overarching norms but a profusion of legitimated strategies that left ample space for maneuver. The very mechanisms by which patricians sought to safeguard the orderly devolution of marital wealth were amply and skillfully deployed, by peasants and debtors, to deflect the claims of superiors. In the marketplace, debt might have been endemic, but tech­niques for managing and expanding debt provided immensely valuable and varied resources for economic flexibility and patronage. Doctrines of nobil­ity offered not a single source of legitimation but many possible means to social validation; the Arnaldi had to pick their way through a crowded field of opportunities and disabilities.

Higher culture, then, set ranges of options but seldom possessed coercive mechanisms to impose orthodoxy. Some facets of experience, it is true, were beyond personal control. There was little to be done about endemic disease and high mortality. Still, responses to demographic fragility varied widely from place to place, suggesting localized strategies for ensuring biological and social reproduction—very different ages at marriage in Florence, Venice, and the Veneto, for example, or differing rates of nuptuality among different social groups. Drastic changes in fertility rates over the course of the Quat­trocento were surely not simply the result of shifting biological parameters, but reflect conscious decisions (a decline in the age of women at marriage, for example) as well. People were aware of their options and the risks inher­ent in each option, and made their choices accordingly. Perhaps local custom rather than individual preference determined specific choices, but the fact that custom was localized indicates responsiveness to small-scale preference.

This book has also aspired to trust its subjects. Certainly in the public record they were capable of dissembling and deception: a good number of dotal documents cannot be taken at face value, and many if not most docu­ments of land sales conceal loans and do not indicate actual alienation. Still, when they themselves set pen to paper, Veneto memorialists made entries and copied texts that mattered to them. An underlying assumption of this book is that they would not have bothered to write if the exercise was purely fictive. We can, I think, discern their intentions, but we must also accept that they were sincere.
For example, to read through the memoirs is to be reminded of the intensity of spiritual sentiment. In addition to regular traces of devotion that fill their pages—invocation of God and saints, naming of children, reckoning calendrical time by saints’ days and daily time by liturgical schedules, calls for divine favor on marriages and the deceased, provision for postmortem rites—memorialists collected pious texts of a heterogenous sort: prayers, prophecies, guides to holy places, hagiography, bits of Scripture, apocrypha, accounts of pilgrimages, sacramentals, poetry, and hymns. They also recorded salient events in local and Roman ecclesiastical life. In the work of Bartolomeo dal Bovo, Manfredo Repeta, and Bartolomeo Verità, spiritual and religious material forms a significant, even preponderant proportion of the whole.

Memorialists must have found these texts meaningful, to devote so much time and ink to their copying. The point may be banal, but merits emphasis. Skepticism and scorn long pushed study of faith and devotion from the historical mainstream, relegating it to canon lawyers, antiquaries, and partisan clerics. The past generation has rediscovered church history, indeed has returned it to the forefront, but for the most part still declines to accept the reality of underlying belief for people in the past. Prevalent is a functionalist approach that views religious practice solely in terms of strategies for pacifying the body social, reinforcing hierarchy, constructing corporate and civic identity, building states, placing excess daughters, impressing restrictive models on women, socializing the young, immortalizing the individual, controlling descendants after death, and so forth. To accept conviction is to engage in self-deception.²

Authorities certainly realized the power of devotion and sought to channel it for mundane ends. To give primacy to the utility of religious observance, however, is to ignore cause and elevate effect. People of the fifteenth century practiced religion because they believed in it. They welcomed desirable social consequences, but these were not the intent of worship. Rituals could have had no resonance if participants had not accepted the need for expiation, the efficacy of works of faith, the power of God to heal and make right, and the need for humans to reach out to the divine. If reverence was formulaic and routinized, it was no less honest for that fact.³

That memorialists of the Veneto were hard-nosed and self-interested is beyond question. Are we, on that account, to conclude that their more high-minded professions were merely the products of covering ideologies? To do so is to impose arbitrary partiality on the documentary record, accepting cold-blooded materialism at face value but rejecting the idealistic out of hand. To do so is also to introduce a patronizing note, asserting that they did not be-
lieve what they so manifestly said they believed. And to do so is, in the end, to assume that self-interest and inspired ideals are ultimately incompatible. The many acts of kindness that emerge from the memoirs, for example, have both a sacred rationale and a mundane purpose. Arbitration pacified family tensions and smoothed the flow of money; it equally served the interests of caritas. Stated affection for wives, and calls to protect widows and stray female kin, might indeed have aspired to keep dowries close to home; they equally observed Pauline injunctions. Dowries themselves may seem constrictive, even cynical devices, but those who constituted and protected them claimed to have the welfare of their wives and daughters in mind. If writers chose to emphasize the higher values, we dismiss their professed convictions only at the cost of imposing our own values on them. An empirical approach aims at sympathy—with due caution, to be sure, but with equally guarded confidence that words of sentiment are not altogether remote from actual motivation.

There remains an underlying question: if these were indeed obscure people, living in minor societies, can their experience support any degree of generalization? The least dubious of possible answers rests on this book’s comparative approach. Conclusions drawn from the Veneto are matched with conclusions drawn from Florence, Venice, and beyond; when the Veneto provides a match, it helps confirm and universalize positions derived from discrete case studies; when patterns from the Veneto are at variance, they indicate that Italian society as a whole was highly nuanced and that extrapolation from metropolitan models is unwise. Still, a dozen memoirs from two cities cannot themselves support rethinking of the field; nor can they aspire to sketch the experience of provincial societies generally.

Another answer, taking refuge in the very genre of the case study, would evade the question. Examination of a few families in Verona and Vicenza allows small-scale generalization only; future study of other provincial settings will demonstrate whether the Veneto experience is eccentric or representative. The burden of proof lies with eventual synthesis by others. But to say that is to offload responsibility onto a future generation—and it is far from certain that other cities will yield similar texts, or that other historians will choose to undertake comparable studies.

A final answer would deny the question altogether. The essential problem is that faced by microhistories: how can an abundantly documented but sharply circumscribed case study connect to larger contexts? Carlo Ginzburg has tried to do so by means of agile but often problematic leaps from the particular to the general; his refuge in assertion when he cannot provide demon-
stration has been much criticized, though it is hard to see what alternative he had. More recently, Giovanni Levi has largely given up the attempt at linkage. The specific, he has said, is precisely that: it describes the particular accurately, but cannot and should not serve as the basis for broad generalization because all attempt at universalization is inevitably reductive. This, however, cannot dispel charges that the small-scale case study is potentially only anecdotal, indeed admits charges of nominalism.

The question must remain open. These are indeed modest subjects. Study of Veneto memorialists cannot serve as the basis for grand endeavors, and their experience cannot by itself reshape our understanding of Renaissance society. But those who teach, and those who read reviews of their books, know well that no scholar can predict what audiences will receive from his or her exposition, or how they will use it. The case study offers only hope that its data and positions may yet, in other hands, somehow contribute to larger discussion.