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Dowries and Family Property in Venice and Florence (15th to 16th centuries)

This paper focuses on the importance of the dowry in the patrimonial cycle (to use Grendi's expression). In other words, a dowry has three phases: its composition and use, followed by its restitution and then its transmission as part of an estate. There are few studies of this economic dynamic of the dowry, and even historians of gender who focus on dowries have not said much about their economic role in the patrimony. It has been fully established that women had more liberty in their disposition of property in their wills, and demonstrate a sensibility motivated by affection and other factors in their testamentary dispositions that men did not follow. Men were limited by the dominant patrilineal orientation of society and the increasing use of fedecomesso (entail) to restrict their ability to alienate property. It was the freedom and autonomy that women exercised regarding their dotal property that reduced the rigidity of the market for land.

One should not overestimate women's freedom in disposing of their property, because it is well known that most women did not have full control over their dowries. Nonetheless, this does show that economic factors underlying the dowry system can only be understood in the broader context of women's lives. Notwithstanding the range of differences in various Italian cities, dowries in Florence and Venice have received the most scholarly attention. It is not possible, however, due to the fragmentary nature of the sources, to offer any quantitative analysis, and although one must proceed with caution when comparing the two cities it is possible to detect significant differences between them. In Venetian society, for example, by the eighteenth century even husbands were testating in favor of their wives or giving them family property outright. Already in the later sixteenth century we begin to find cases in which fathers left the bulk of the property to their daughters (in the absence of sons) rather than leave it to male heirs in a collateral line of descent. This possibility was allowed for in the Venetian statutes but not in Florence, which allowed inheritance by daughters only in the absence of a much wider circle of collateral lines of male descent.

Daughters received their dowries between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, more or less, when they and the families they were about to establish were in great need of capital to use not only for their living expenses but also for the professional advancement of the husbands.

Sons clearly inherited a larger portion of their father's property than daughters did, but they also had much stronger limits on what they could do with it (and they had to wait until their father died, except in rare cases of 'emancipation'). Furthermore, after the tumultuous early fifteenth century, the construction and maintenance of family patrimonies became 'frozen' by the increasing use of fedecomesso (entail) by male testators. Fedecomesso was used less frequently by female testators, although in the Florentine case women increasingly resorted to it too.