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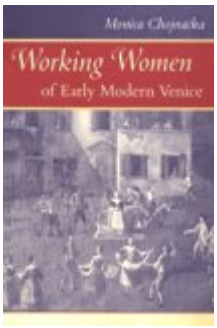

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Networking Neighbors and Neighborhoods: Laundresses, Prostitutes, Bakers, and Maids

No one would deny that early modern Venice, while not fundamentally special among other Italian communes, had its own unique flavor. It is just this flavor that lingers in the mind after reading Monica Chojnacka's richly detailed book, *Working Women of Early Modern Venice*, which recreates the particular sensual delight that is the Venetian urban experience, from the perspective of being part of "a community of women" (p. xvii) down in the sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century streets. Reassessing the agency of Venetian women is a major goal of this study and, therefore, female actors dominate the pages. While, ironically, much has been written to make visible the more physically invisible women of the patriciate and citizen classes of Venice, Chojnacka focuses on the women of the working (*popolane*) classes, in an attempt to broaden the scope of historical inquiry.[1] She does not ignore the more restricted females of the upper ranks, however, as she examines their habits in wills and bequests, and in their roles as *prottetrice* or *governatrici* of charitable institutions geared toward a variety of needy cases. She also interweaves fascinating information on immigrant women originally from many locations outside the city (from the Friuli, to Poland and Greece), as well as including the men of the families and parish (*parrochia*).

By organizing her research from the perspective of increasingly larger frames beginning with the household, Chojnacka convincingly evokes the labyrinthine interconnectedness of these predominately working-class city-dwellers, where contact could be based upon simple physical proximity, neighborly assistance, ties of kinship, mutual need (or greed), or in some cases, seemingly inexplicable personal malice. She energetically conveys the hard-edged reality of surviving in this cosmopolitan urban center for those who lived outside the cushioned financial life of the elite. For example, her narrative relates dire accounts of refugee widows with children finding their way home from a ravaged Venetian colony after harrowing enslavement by the advancing Turks, foreign-born single male workers portrayed as potentially dangerous and living alone in rented

rooms across the city, and neighborhoods where a household of prostitutes along with their dependents and boarders lived next door to a perfectly respectable working-class family, or a Greek woman who eventually would be accused of witchcraft.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in early modern Venice, everybody seems to have been in everyone else's face. Whether denouncing someone to the office of the Inquisition (S. Uffizio) or taking someone to the Pien Collegio (appeals court), the conflict-oriented documentation upon which this study is partially based, serves up an active and boisterous picture of quotidian life in the working-class neighborhoods of the city. The book's first chapter, "Residence, Sex, and Marriage: The Structure of Venetian Households," establishes the demographic make-up of living arrangements outside the patriarchal, ordered world of the elite. By systematically employing a wide variety of well-suited archival documents, the author is able to reconstruct the unusual demographic composition of early modern households. Here, she also notes the close relationship and age between *popolani* husband and wife, which is consistent with Cohn's findings for the working class in Florence (p. 45).[2] What is surprising, however, is the apparent on-going contact between even a married woman and her brother, who could occasionally be found living under the same roof as his sister and her husband (p. 9). This enduring tie between a female and her natal family is suggestive and could link to previous findings on the agency exerted by wives of the patriciate who continued to represent their birth families' interests within their husbands' patrilineage.[3] Chojnacka uses the "soul counts" (*status animarum*) of two-thirds of the seventy-one Venetian parishes available, to show us the many females living in a range of domestic configurations outside the direct control of a male. But her language may be a bit too benign when she describes a working woman's ability to "choose from a surprising range of housing possibilities" in Venice (p. 1). From the subsequent discussion of the social forces pressuring especially poor and unmarried (*nubili*) women in early modern Venice, it would seem that their "choice" was too often dictated by simple dire necessity.

Chojnacka's second chapter, "Women of Means: Property and Possessions," establishes the legal agency of women, namely juridical maneuvering that was instigated for various reasons mostly by rich widows, whether to retain rights to property, real and otherwise; to will possessions to others; or to contest the awarding of assets. Sometimes women were simply paying taxes. Here, the very fact that women were so often in court, whether before the Dieci Savi Sopra le Decime (tax assessors) or the Pien Collegio, demonstrates their activity in court-related matters. She also shows that in 1582, over 91 percent of those females named as principals in the cases were widows (p. 31). The enhanced agency of women upon widowhood has been established in studies done for the commune of Florence as well, and I was not surprised by Chojnacka's findings here.[4] But her accounts of women initiating legal action and speaking in their own names is extremely different from Tuscany, where the legacy of Lombard law precluded females from direct legal participation.[5] In Venice, the female voice did emerge from courtroom proceedings of various kinds. Here too, the author includes some specifics on the types of remunerative activities in which *popolane* women engaged themselves, from renting rooms, doing laundry, and baking, to acting as second-hand clothes dealers and linen makers, as well as spice and fruit vendors, cobblers, and even boatwomen (p. 45).

Chapter 3, entitled "Around the Neighborhood," is perhaps Chojnacka's strongest chapter in which the author defines the neighborhood world of the *popolana* woman. Chonacka's written description of the neighborhood (*contrada*) is enhanced by nine images of Venetian working-class women drawn from prints, drawings, and paint-

ings of the period. The *popolana*'s parochial existence after her immediate household (from which she often carried on more than one paying occupation), centered on the street or piazza in which she lived, encompassing or being encompassed by the parish (pp. 54-55). Chojnacka convincingly describes the porous membranes of houses, with neighbors freely admitted even to bedrooms where people were sleeping (pp. 66-67). She delineates female/male friendships outside of marriage, *popolano*-foreign living arrangements, and domestic acts of assistance to old and young in need. Ultimately she makes a case for the female dominance of neighborhood life itself (pp. 50-51), where men went off to work (sometimes to sea, sometimes to another parish across town), and where the "action" of the interaction within the neighborhood was left to their wives, mothers, sisters, nieces, and girlfriends. She includes interesting testimony from Inquisition records which gives detailed accounts from women concerning other women as well as men, while male testimony is spotty and disinterested (pp. 60-61). Clearly, this was an extended female world which blurred any neat distinctions between "male" public space and "female" private space.

Chojnacka's fourth chapter, "Immigrant Women: Into the Neighborhood," moves one step further from the native hearth to take on those women who were immigrants to Venice for one reason or another. Here, she seems to be in peculiarly Venetian territory, which is remarkable for its cosmopolitan mix of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, as well as a continual population influx from far and wide. The author discusses the interaction between *popolane* females and immigrants, which included renting single rooms to foreigners, acting as innkeepers, or servicing foreign men as prostitutes, and even marrying foreigners (pp. 97-101). Chojnacka distinguishes between female immigrants, who were more permanent in their living situations once in the city than the male immigrants, who typically came and went as the artisanal jobs were available. Women were also poorer, in fact among the poorest inhabitants of the city, and often worked as exploited, vulnerable domestics, with the goal of earning a dowry (pp. 85-87). For me, some of the most compelling passages of the book were contained in this chapter, where the author recounts the stories of refugees of Turkish-Venetian conflict in the Venetian colonies incurring Turkish domination. Immigrant women could be Venetian-born, but find themselves as widowed survivors of war, slavery, or generally dislocated privation (pp. 88-89).

Females based in their neighborhoods are also found to have traveled "on a regular basis" (p. 105) between parishes. In chapter 5, "Beyond the Contrada: Women and Mobility," the author clearly means to demonstrate that females were not, in fact, as house-bound as they have been commonly portrayed. While the author does accede that patrician females were constricted by the familial necessity to preserve their sexual "purity," her evidence points to a much less controlled environment for some women of the working classes. Especially the *popolane* seem to have ranged far afield from their home turf, over wide swaths of the city landscape. Besides traveling to appear in court or to answer a summons from the office of the Inquisition, Chojnacka shows pairs of sisters who were regularly seen out and about (and were accused of witchcraft and heresy) as well as another woman, among several, crossing various parishes (including the Grand Canal) to sell love charms (pp. 106-109). The documents that recorded such perambulations, however, are often from the inquisitorial S. Uffizio, where these women had been accused of various forms of anxiety-producing *maleficia*. The question arises whether such geographical independence on the part of women also carried with it the stigma of unacceptable female behavior. Was their travel actually seen as benign, or was it a warning sign to those in charge that these women were potential trouble-makers of one kind or another, stepping too boldly outside their proscribed boundaries?[6] If so, what does that say

about female agency in the early modern period, even among the working classes?

Chojnacka concludes her study with chapter 6, "City of Women: Institutions and Communities." This chapter takes up another peculiarly female setting: the interiors of the charitable institutions established to assist orphans, young women at risk of going down the wrong path, and prostitutes who were retired from the ***mala vita*** but still deemed capable of rehabilitation. Drawing on her previous work on the Casa della Zitelle, she explores these feminine spaces designed for the lucky few who were acceptable (and accepted), to show not their exclusivity, although she is well aware of this (pp. 125-127), but rather their complex connections to the outside world of the contrada, parish, and city at large, which she sees in a fundamentally positive light. These female-run homes for orphans, girls, and other women could require a woman to relinquish quite a bit of control over her own life while there, but the author relates that girls could also leave for various reasons, to return at a later date. She is also quick to emphasize that by dint of their connection to these homes, females could expect a wide range of outcomes. They could be trained in a skill or find jobs as domestics, some would be married, and a few could be adopted while still young. They could also count on the women employed there to act on their behalf as advocates should the need arise with an employer or husband (p. 133). Besides providing a typically safe haven for females of many ages and circumstances (but see pp. xiii-xv), the institutions of the Catecumeni, Derelitti, Casa del Soccorso, and the Zitelle, served as a particular font of employment for a range of women, from the society grande dames as ***prottetrice*** to ***popolane*** as managers, housekeepers, and "big sisters" (pp. 126-128). While these charitable houses did provide another option in the city for women in need of shelter or employment, the necessarily limited nature of their mission, along with an exclusivity which discouraged continued contact with close family members, would seem to have constrained their influence among the larger demographic of ***popolane*** females.

Chojnacka's interesting and useful study is well-documented by extensive research in a wide variety of available Venetian archival sources, as well as a deep reading in the secondary literature on Venice, both in Italian and English. While the scope of this book was specifically Venetian, the author does provide some comparisons with studies made of other northern cities in early modern Europe such as Exeter and Paris (pp. 25, 51). Much work has also been done on Italian cities as well, especially on women, neighborhoods, and the ***popolo minuti*** (working classes), and a few remarks recognizing the commonalities or differences could have strengthened the author's point and diffused the sense of exceptionalism that studies of Venice can evoke.[7] For example, in chapter 1, the irregular nature of ***popolani*** households does have a counterpart in Florence, albeit from an earlier period. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber found that the truncated family demographics typical of Florence after waves of plague, left the average home in 1427 with only 4.42 people, one out of six households in Florence being composed of widowers, bachelors, brothers, orphaned children, or "seemingly unrelated" individuals.[8]

Along similar lines, the discussion of women of means in court contained in chapter 2 would have benefited, in my opinion, from a note of comparison between the freer female participation in Venice and the complete female exclusion in Tuscan lands, especially as part of the author's argument is to demonstrate aggressive female agency among Venetian women. The subject of women and work is distributed between this chapter and the next, with a list of occupations females pursued. Perhaps a more detailed look relating these specific females to the larger economic milieu of the city could provide a focus for future work.[9] Along with the topic of female work in her third chapter, the author presents some fascinating, densely written narrative paragraphs

using primary source findings, which could have been enhanced by including some comparison with another Italian commune, to allow the reader a larger sense of perspective. For example, in the description of personal ties and interactions on the neighborhood level (pp. 52-60), I found myself thinking of the formulaic ***parenti, amici, e vicini*** (relatives, friends, and neighbors) which so many Florentine documents and log books invoke to describe the personal circle of "loyals" that made up their self-identity.[10] Here too, although the images of women did add a nice visual dimension to the author's discussion, some textual references to them and dates for them would have more strongly integrated their meaning into the overall narrative.

Chojnacka's conclusions in ***Working Women in Early Modern Venice***, in addition to recognizing the difficulties of being female in a large and porous urban environment such as Venice, also challenge the reader to re-examine assumptions that women were simply passive domestic objects, hidden behind the walls of the family ***casa***. By focusing, for the most part, on females not of the patrician or citizen rank, but rather on the working classes, she is able to establish a suggestively intimate picture of neighborhood life which occasionally spilled over into the greater city when necessity struck. Female agency in living arrangements, wills, charitable bequests, remunerative work, and even simple physical freedom in the streets of the city is shown here to great effect. Certainly, in a university class on the early modern period or the history of women, for example, this study would be useful to provide students with a new and stimulating perspective on the lot of women in the early modern period.

As I read more and more in our increasingly verdant discipline, one fantasy that I have is that someone has developed an overarching "institutional memory" (online?) for the historical findings amassed through archival research on the various Italian communes, so that a historian could easily access comparative data when undertaking a study of a specific topic, or region, or time span. But who, or what agency, would undertake such a selfless, Herculean task?

Notes

[1]. The wealth of ground-breaking work of Patricia Labalme, Stanley Chojnacki, Edward Muir, Margaret King, Guido Ruggiero, Joanne Ferraro, Margaret Rosenthal, and others comes to mind.

[2]. Samuel Kline Cohn. Jr., ***The Laboring Classes of Renaissance Florence*** (New York, 1980). Here, I do not think that Venetian marriage practice was anomalous, at least among the ***popolani*** class.

[3]. I am thinking of the work of Stanley Chojnacki, especially his "Kinship Ties and Young Patricians in Fifteenth-Century Venice," ***Renaissance Quarterly*** 38 (1985). In Florence, the Mediceo avanti il Principato correspondence also reveals both Lucrezia Tornabuoni and Clarice Orsini representing their birth families' interests to their husbands Piero and Lorenzo in the mid- to late-fifteenth century.

[4]. See, for example, Lauro Martines, where he writes for Florence that "of lawsuits handled by Florentine lawyers, disputes over dowries [brought by widows attempting to extricate them from in-laws] were among the most common types." ***Lawyers and Statecraft in Renaissance Florence*** (Princeton, 1968), p. 94.

[5]. Thomas Kuehn's article discusses the required female representative, the ***mundualdus***, in "'Cum Consensus Mundualdi': Legal Guardianship of Women in Quattrocento Florence," ***Viator*** 13 (1982): 309-31.

[6]. In Florentine records, one peripatetic female weaver was castigated to the court as a thieving, no good woman by her husband, for roaming over the city streets with her weaving combs. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Un salario o

l'onore: come valutare le donne fiorentine del XIV-XV secolo," *Quaderni storici* 79:1 (April 1992).

[7]. On women see Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's voluminous work, especially ***Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*** (Chicago, 1985). On neighborhoods see, for example, D. V. Kent and F. W. Kent's work on the *gonfalone* of the Lion Rosso; and Nicholas Eckstein, ***The District of the Green Dragon: Neighbourhood Life and Social Change in Renaissance Florence*** (Florence, 1995), among others.

[8]. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, ***Tuscans and their Families*** (Chicago, 1985), pp. 282-291.

[9]. The author is careful to make use of the recent scholarship on women and work. This growing corpus lately has included ***Il lavoro delle donne***, ed. Angela Groppi (Bari, 1996); Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., "Women and Work in Renaissance Italy," in ***Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy***, eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London, 1998); and ***Women's Work: The English Experience, 1650-1914***, ed. Pamela Sharpe (London and New York: Arnold, 1998), to name just a few.

[10]. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Parenti, amici, vicini," ***Quaderni storici*** 33 (1976): 953-82; and D. V. Kent, "The Florentine reggimento in the Fifteenth Century," ***Renaissance Quarterly*** 4 (1975): 575-638. Both authors have written on this urban statement of identity.