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## The Family in Renaissance Italy

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In the long history of the Western family, the period of the Renaissance in Italy — an age which we shall date from approximately 1300 to 1550 — has a special significance. The Renaissance has left us an extraordinary volume of sources, both literary and statistical, which illuminate the family and which, in their clarity and precision, cannot be equalled in any prior epoch. For the first time, historians can intensively study the family in both city and countryside, at rich and poor levels of the population, in both its internal structure and emotional world. Our own consideration of the family in Renaissance Italy should therefore appropriately begin with a review of the sources, many of them unique for their age, upon which our knowledge principally rests.

Those sources may be divided into two large categories — private and public, those written by



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private persons and those prepared by government officials.

A new consciousness of family life, and a new awareness of the moral problems, pains and satisfactions associated with it, infuses the literature of the Renaissance. Writers such as Giovanni Boccaccio in his *Decameron* (composed shortly after the Black Death of 1348) introduced a new realism into their stories and dramas, and they frequently exploited in their narratives familiar domestic situations. We might note that the fine arts too were influenced by this taste for realistic portrayals. Laymen, who commissioned many of the works of art, liked to have portraits of their loved ones, and they also preferred to see scenes from sacred history (the birth or espousal of the Virgin, for example, or the Holy Family itself) set in domestic surroundings they could recognize. In the field of family history as in many other areas, the splendid art of the Renaissance is an important social document.

Even more novel than depictions of the family in imaginative literature and art are theoretical tracts, specifically devoted to the family and its problems. The intellectual and moral leaders of the preceding Middle Ages had been, in the main, clerics; many were contemplative monks or speculative theologians attached to the universities. These men tended to view the world in highly abstract terms, and they paid little direct attention to the practical moral problems of daily life. The intellectual and moral leaders of the Renaissance, including those men inspired by classical learning whom we call humanists, were, on the whole, laymen. In their works they sought to provide help and guidance to men who were actively engaged in the affairs of the world. Then as now, life in the world usually involved life in a family.

Two of these Renaissance tracts concerning the family may be cited here, as both are available in English translations. Not long after 1400, a Florentine Dominican friar, named Giovanni Dominici, wrote an essay entitled *Rule for the Governance and Care of the Family*. He composed it for the benefit of a Florentine matron, whose husband had been exiled, and who was seeking to manage her home and raise her children alone. Some time

later, ca. 1435, the Florentine humanist Leon Battista Alberti wrote a still more celebrated essay, entitled *On the Family*. Cast in the form of a conversation among members of the Alberti family, the tract was intended to show how marriages should be arranged, children educated, the household managed, friends acquired, and the fortunes of the family promoted. These and similar tracts show the singular importance which men and women of the Renaissance attributed to the good management of households and the proper rearing of children.

Fictional literature, art and theoretical tracts on household management give us, to be sure, an idealized picture of the Renaissance family, and they do not tell us how closely the ideal followed reality. But we also possess records which show how families lived in fact as well as aspiration. A dominant cultural trait of the epoch was a high level of literacy, at least within the middle and upper classes of the towns. Women as well as men were taught to read and write, and they kept and valued written records. For example, in the 1460's a Florentine matron, Alessandra Strozzi, carried on an extensive correspondence with her two exiled sons; she gave them, and now gives historians, spirited comments on her household affairs, on society and on the *mores* of her times.

Moreover, from as early as the middle thirteenth century, the heads of households in the cities, especially Florence, commonly kept memoirs or diaries, called *ricordi*. In them the *paterfamilias* faithfully noted the births, marriages and deaths of family members, the acquisitions or sales of properties, and other important acts or events affecting the family or the community. The *ricordi* were primarily intended to benefit the direct descendants of the writers. Their authors therefore freely included extended advice on all sorts of family problems; they sometimes also described their own emotional reactions to the births, deaths and marriages of their loved ones. Through such explicit sources, the historian can gain vivid glimpses into the emotional world of the Renaissance household.

Another source which records for us important events in the life of the household

is the notarial chartulary. Traditions of Roman law remained alive in Italy across the Middle Ages, and one tradition was that all important contracts or declarations should be preserved in writing. By the twelfth century, the Italian who wished to convey a piece of property, arrange the marriage of his daughter, make a will, or assent to any sort of important agreement, would usually go before a public notary. The notary drew up a formal contract, noted the names and recorded the assent of the principals, listed the witnesses, and entered all this information into a large volume called a chartulary. These entries offered certain proof, acceptable in the courts, of the existence and terms of a contract or will. Notarial chartularies have survived by the scores from the twelfth century (notably from Genoa), by the hundreds from the thirteenth and by the thousands from the fourteenth. They allow the historian to observe the great and solemn acts — marriage agreements, dowry payments, emancipations of sons, and last testaments — which punctuated the history of the households.

Our second major category of sources, the official records of governments, gives us an even broader, if perhaps less colorful, view of the Renaissance family. Italy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance was a land of many cities, many of which were ruled by independent governments called communes. These communal governments drew up their own statutes, which were revised at irregular intervals. Invariably too they kept records of day-by-day governmental decisions, usually called provisions. Many of these statutes and provisions have survived, and frequently they set conditions of engagements, marriages, inheritances and the like, and defined the authority and responsibilities of family members. Of course, these laws, like all laws, emphasize certain aspects of family life. They tell us more concerning what was forbidden than what was actually done; they illuminate the *mala vita*, the typical broken agreements and crimes associated with domestic affairs, better than the *dolce vita*, the quiet life of the household which had no disputes before the law. To study that household, gathered in peace about its hearth, we can, however, turn

to another type of governmental record — fiscal or tax surveys.

During the Renaissance the cities of Italy carried the arts of government, including the fiscal arts, to remarkable levels of sophistication. The cities were in almost constant need of money, and they soon recognized that the most efficient way of finding it was to distribute the tax burden among the entire community, and according to ability to pay. From the middle thirteenth century, the governments sought to identify what households were present in both the city and surrounding rural areas (usually called the county or *contado*), and also to determine the relative share of the tax burden each household could support. (This system of assessing households according to relative wealth was called the *Estimo*.) By the late fourteenth century, the governments often included in these surveys not only assessments of wealth and the names of the household heads, but the names and ages of all the household members; they discerned that a family with many children or dependents could not be expected to bear the same burdens as households with few or no children. Surveys which combine the characteristics of an inventory of possessions and a census of the population have survived from several cities of Italy. For example, Verona, the city of Romeo and Juliet, possesses no less than twelve surviving surveys of its urban population, dated between 1409 and 1502. But by far the richest of all these surveys is the Florentine census known as the *Catasto*. Redacted in 1427, it included all the domains then ruled by Florence, which were virtually the entire province of Tuscany in northcentral Italy. This immense survey lists the names and ages and describes the possessions of 260,000 persons, distributed among 60,000 households, in Florence itself, in the cities then subject to her (Pisa, Pistoia, Arezzo, Prato, Volterra and Cortona, among the more important), and in the surrounding rural areas. In providing simultaneous data about residence, wealth and family membership, this and other surveys permit historians to judge whether and how families in the countryside differed from those in the city, and whether and how the households of

the rich differed from those of the poor.

What then do these abundant sources tell us about the family in Renaissance Italy? Sociologists and historians once assumed that the typical family in traditional Europe (that is, in Europe before the Industrial Revolution) was large, stable and extended, in the sense that it included other relatives besides the direct descendants and ascendants of the head and his wife. The sources of Renaissance Italy rather show that there is no such thing as a traditional family, or, in different terms, a family with unchanging characteristics. The family in ca. 1400 was perceptibly different from what it had been in ca. 1300, and was to be different again in the sixteenth century. Moreover, the rural family varied in marked respects from the city household, and the poor — can this be surprising? — lived differently from the rich. How precisely did the times, location and wealth affect the Renaissance household?

In Italy as everywhere in Europe, the population between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries experienced powerful, even violent, fluctuations. These directly affected the households in their average size and internal structure. The history of population movements in late medieval and Renaissance Italy may be divided into four periods, with distinctive characteristics: (1) stability in numbers at very high levels, from some point in the thirteenth century until ca. 1340; (2) violent contraction, from ca. 1340 to ca. 1410, to which the terrible Black Death of 1348 made a major but not exclusive contribution; (3) stability at very low levels, from approximately 1410 to 1460; (4) renewed expansion, which brought the Italian population to another peak in the middle sixteenth century.

To judge from Tuscan evidence, the population in our second period (ca. 1340 to ca. 1410) fell by approximately two-thirds. A city of probably 120,000 persons in 1338, Florence itself counted less than 40,000 in 1427. In some remote areas of Tuscany, such as the countryside of San Gimignano, losses over the same period surpassed 70 percent. The region of San Gimignano was in fact more densely settled in the thirteenth century

than it is today.

It is difficult for a modern reader even to grasp the dimensions of these losses; for every three persons living in ca. 1300, there was only one to be found alive in ca. 1410, in many if not most Italian regions. And the population, stable at low levels from approximately 1410, shows no signs of vigorous growth until after 1460. The subsequent expansion of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was particularly notable on the fertile plain of the Po river in Northern Italy and in the Veneto (the region of Venice). Verona, near Venice, for example, had fewer than 15,000 inhabitants in 1425, but reached 42,000 by 1502, nearly tripling in size. Venice itself reached approximately 170,000 persons by 1563; it was not to reach that size again until the twentieth century. Rome and Naples were also gaining rapidly in population. Florence too was growing, but at a moderate rate. In 1562 Florence counted slightly fewer than 60,000 inhabitants, which made the city only a third larger than it had been in 1427. Florence, in sum, even in this period of growth, was losing relative position among the major cities of Italy.

Inevitably, the collapse in population, subsequent stability, then growth affected the average size of the households. At Prato, for example, a small region and city 20 miles west of Florence, the average size of the rural household was 5.6 persons in 1298, and only 5 in 1427. Within the city of Prato, average household size similarly fell from 4.1 persons in 1298 to only 3.7 in 1427. By the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the urban household widely across northern Italy was extremely small: 3.8 persons per household at Florence in 1427; 3.6 at Pistoia in the same year; 3.5 at Bologna in 1395; and 3.7 at Verona in 1425.

The acute population fall and the ensuing period of demographic stability at low levels (to ca. 1460) also affected the internal structure of the households. The demographic catastrophes, especially the plagues and famines, left within the community large numbers of incomplete or truncated households — those which lacked a married couple and included only widowers, widows, bachelors or orphaned children. At Florence

in 1427, the most common of all household types found within the city counted only a single person; these one-member households represented some 20 percent of all urban households. The numerous, small, severely truncated and biologically inactive families (in the sense that they could produce no children) may be regarded as the social debris, which the devastating plagues and famines of the epoch left in their wake.

The renewed demographic expansion from about 1460 in turn affected average size and the internal structure of the household. Average household size at Verona, only 3.7 persons in 1425, reached 5.2 persons only thirty years later, in 1456, and was 5.9 persons in 1502. Within the city of Florence, average household size gained from 3.8 persons in 1427 to 4.8 persons in 1458 to 5.2 persons in 1480, and reached 5.7 members in 1552. Within the Florentine countryside, average household size similarly grew from 4.8 persons in 1427, to 5.3 in 1470, to 5.8 in 1552.

Several factors explain this increase in average household size in both city and countryside, during this period of demographic growth after 1460. As the plague and famine lost their virulence, the numbers of very small, highly truncated and biologically inactive families diminished within the community. Families were also producing larger numbers of children (perhaps we should say, of surviving children). Paradoxically, however, the large households of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also indicate an effort to slow the rate of population growth. In a rapidly growing community, average household size tends to remain relatively low, as sons and daughters leave the paternal home at an early age to marry, and the community contains many young, hence small, families. But no community can allow its population to grow without limit, and in traditional society the principal means of slowing or stopping growth was to prevent young persons from marrying, or marrying young. These young persons remained in their parents' house for long periods, thus increasing average household size. Many of them, especially males, remained unmarried even after the death of

their parents, living as bachelors in households headed by an older, married brother. Within the city of Florence, for example, in 1427 some 17.1 percent of the households included a brother or sister of the household head, but 26.1 percent did so in 1480. We have no exact figures from the sixteenth century, but the percentage was doubtlessly even larger. The Florentine household, in other words, was much more laterally extended in the sixteenth century than it had been in 1427. The effort to slow or stop population growth, more than the growth itself, accounts for the larger size and more complex structure of the Italian household in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Another factor which contributed to these shifts in average household size was the changing servant population. The drastic fall in the population in the late fourteenth century made labor scarce and forced wages upward, and this meant that households before 1460 could afford to support comparatively few servants. At Verona in 1425, for example, some 7 percent of the urban population were employed as household servants. After 1460, as the population once more was growing, wages tended to decline, and households could afford to support larger numbers of retainers. By 1502 at Verona, servants constituted 12.3 percent of the urban population. The numbers of servants grew especially large in the city of Florence, where, by 1552, 16.7 percent of the urban population were employed in household service; nearly half the urban households (42 percent) had at least one domestic, and one Florentine citizen employed no fewer than 57 servants. This growth in the number of servants has great social and cultural importance. It meant that the Italian urban family of some means could live with considerably greater comfort and elegance in ca. 1500 — during the height of the Renaissance — than had been possible a hundred years before.

By the sixteenth century, the typical Italian household was large in size and complex in structure; it included numerous children, servants, and lateral relatives of the head. Sociologists and historians used to consider this extended household

characteristic of traditional European society. Today, we can discern that this type of household was characteristic only of particular periods and circumstances in the varied history of the Italian family.

The location of the household, its surroundings or environment, also exerted a powerful influence upon its internal structure. Unlike the long-term demographic trend, this factor exerted a largely uniform influence over time. In most periods and places, the rural household was larger than its urban counterpart. At Prato in 1298, the average household size was 5.6 in rural areas and 4.1 in the city; at Florence in 1427, the comparable figures are 4.8 in the countryside and 3.8 in the city. However, the changes we have already considered — particularly the great growth in the number of servants, which was more characteristic of the cities than of rural areas — tended to reduce these contrasts in the sixteenth century. In 1552, the average size of the urban household at Florence was 5.7 persons; it was 5.8 in the countryside.

Average household size, however, reveals very little about the internal character of the family. No matter what their relative size, the households of the countryside remained fundamentally different from those of the city. Perhaps the most evident contrast was this: almost invariably, the rural household contained at least one married couple; households headed by a bachelor, widower or orphans were rarely found in rural areas. In the cities, on the other hand, bachelors and widows frequently appeared at the head of households at all periods. Households which lacked sexually active partners were therefore common in the city, but rare in the countryside. So also, the number of children supported in urban households tended to be below the number found in rural homes. As Dante himself noted early in the fourteenth century, the city of Florence contained many *case di famiglia vuote*, "houses empty of family."

These contrasts point to fundamental differences in the functions of the family in the countryside and the city. In the countryside, the family fulfilled both biological and economic functions: the procreation and rearing of children, and the

maintenance of a productive enterprise, the family farm. In Italy, as everywhere in medieval Europe, a peasant economy dominated the countryside. In the peasant economy, the basic unit of labor was not so much the individual but the family. A single man or woman did not have the capacity to work an entire farm, but needed the help of a spouse and eventually children. The young peasant who wished to secure his own economic independence consequently had to marry. For the same reason, if a peasant or his wife was widowed, he or she tended to remarry quickly, unless a young married couple was already present in the household, for the farm could be successfully worked only through family labor. In rural areas there were consequently very few truncated households, that is, those which did not contain at least one married couple. The rural environment encouraged marriage, not only for biological but for economic reasons. Conversely, those residents of the countryside who did not wish to marry or remarry were strongly drawn to the cities.

Within the cities, the family of course continued to perform its biological functions of rearing children, but its economic functions were very different. The young man seeking to make his fortune in most urban trades or professions often found a wife more of a burden than a help. He frequently had to serve long years at low pay as an apprentice. He had to accumulate diligently his earnings and profits; capital alone permitted him one day to pursue his trade in his own right and name. Such a man could not usually contemplate marriage until his mature years, when he was economically established; even then, the urban family was not cemented, as was the rural household, by close participation in a common economic enterprise.

The urban environment, in other words, tended to be hostile to the formation of new households, and added little to their inner strength. Moreover, at the death of a spouse, his or her partner was not under the same pressures to remarry, as was the rural widower or widow who needed help in farming. Urban communities consequently contained far greater numbers of adult bachelors and

widows than could be found in the rural villages. The urban environment was often hostile to the very survival of lineages. Both inside and outside of Italy, the city frequently proved to be the graveyard of family lines. A German commentator of the sixteenth century noted, for example, how in one German city, Lübeck, few of the great houses managed to survive for more than four generations.

The third factor which strongly influenced the character of the household was wealth or social position, but this influence was exerted in complex ways. In some respects, wealth reinforced the environmental influences reviewed above. Thus, in the cities, rich young men tended to approach marriage even more cautiously than their poorer neighbors. Marriage among the wealthy involved the conveyance of substantial sums of money through the dowry. Marriage also called for the sealing of family alliances, which affected the political and social position of all parties involved. The high stakes associated with marriage frequently led the wealthy young man (or his family) to search long for a suitable bride, and to protract the negotiations when she was found. Marriage, in other words, was not lightly regarded, or hastily contracted, among the rich. Moreover, if death should dissolve the marriage, the surviving partner, particularly the widow, usually controlled enough wealth in her own name to resist pressures to remarry. Bachelors and widows were therefore especially numerous among the wealthy. The poorer families of the city, in approaching marriage, had less reason for caution and restraint.

In the countryside, on the other hand, the wealthy peasant usually owned a large farm, which could only be worked with the aid of a wife and family. The rich inhabitant of the city looked upon marriage in the light of future advantages — the dowry and the family connections it would bring him; the substantial peasant needed family labor to make himself rich in harvests as well as land. Among the rural rich there were consequently few families headed by a bachelor or widow. Poorer inhabitants of the countryside — peasants who possessed less than an entire

farm and who worked primarily as agricultural laborers — were less eager to take a wife, who, with children, might excessively tax already scant resources. Wealth, in sum, facilitated marriage in rural areas, while obstructing it within the city.

We must note, however, that there are important exceptions to the rule we have just enounced. In Tuscany, and widely in central Italy, there existed large numbers of sharecroppers, called *mezzadri*, who leased and worked entire farms in return for half the harvest. The owner of the farm provided his *mezzadro* with most of the capital he needed — cattle, tools, seed, fertilizer and the like. With few possessions of his own, the sharecropper usually appeared in the tax rolls as very poor, but he still required a wife and family to help him in his labors. In other words, the need to recruit a family of workers, rather than wealth itself, was the critical factor in encouraging marriages among the peasants.

Besides reinforcing environmental influences, wealth had another effect upon households, which was common to both cities and countryside. In both environments, almost invariably, rich households tended to be larger than poor households. And they were more abundantly supplied with all types of members: they supported relatively more children, more servants and more lateral relatives of the head. For example, if we consider only those households in the city of Florence in 1427 with a male head between age 43 and 47, the average size for the richer half of the urban households was 6.16 persons; it was 4.57 among the poorer half. In rural areas too, and in other periods, wealth exerted a similar, strong influence upon the size and complexity of households. It was as if the family head of the Renaissance, in both city and countryside, equipped himself with as large a household as his resources could reasonably support.

The marked influence of wealth upon household size had some paradoxical effects. Considerations of property, as we have mentioned, prompted rich young men in the city to marry late, and some did not marry at all; but once married, the rich were prolific in producing children. (The hypothesis,



sometimes advanced, that rich families were the first consciously to limit their number of offspring finds no support in documents of the Renaissance.) The urban poor were far less hesitant in entering marriage, but the poor urban family was also far less successful than the rich in rearing children. Probably the children of the deprived fell victim, in greater relative numbers than the children of the privileged, to the rampant diseases of the age. Poor parents certainly had strong reasons for exercising restraint in procreating children, and they probably limited the number of their offspring in other ways — through primitive methods of birth control and through the abandonment of babies they could not support. In the countryside, on the other hand, wealth tended to encourage both early marriage and high fertility among those who married.

Our consideration of these three factors — the long-term demographic trend, environment and wealth — which strongly influenced the Renaissance family brings us to the following conclusion. The huge losses and slow recovery in the population in the late Middle Ages precipitated a major crisis within the Italian household, as it did in many other social institutions. Frequent deaths undermined the durability and stability of the basic familial relations — between husband and wife, and parents and children. High mortalities threatened the very survival of numerous family lines. The crisis was especially acute within the city, the environment of which was already basically hostile to the formation of households and to their cohesiveness. Even the possession of great wealth was no assurance of survival for an urban family; wealth, as we have stated, delayed rather than hastened marriages within the city.

This grave crisis did, however, increase awareness of the family and its problems. Writers of the age were led to examine, and at times to idealize, familial relationships and the roles which father, mother and children played within the household. They sought to determine when young men should marry, how brides should be chosen, and how children should be trained, in order to assure the happiness and especially the survival of

the family. Leon Battista Alberti, in his essay *On the Family*, provides an excellent example of this heightened consciousness of the family and of the perils which threatened it. In his prologue, he explained that many great families of the past had declined or disappeared, and he feared that his own Alberti lineage might suffer a similar fate. In his essay he sought to provide, for his Alberti relatives and for all his readers, a formula for family survival.

Against this background, we can now look in more detail at the Renaissance household. Specifically, we shall examine what sociologists call the “developmental cycle” of the household — how it was formed through marriage, grew primarily through births, and was dissolved or transformed through deaths.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Renaissance marriage was the great age difference which separated the groom from his bride. At Florence in 1427-28, in 55 marriages reported in the *Catasto*, the average age difference between the bride and groom was 13.6 years. Demographers can also estimate age of first marriage from the proportions of the population remaining single at the various age levels, through somewhat complicated calculations we need not rehearse here. By this method, the average age of first marriage for women in the city of Florence in 1427 can be estimated at 17.9 years; for men it is 29.9 years.

In this, the city of Florence presents an extreme example of a common pattern. In the Florentine countryside in 1427, the estimated age of first marriage for women, based on the proportions remaining single, was 18.3 years, and for men 25.6 years. The age difference between the spouses, 7.3 years, was less than in the city, but still considerable. In the city of Verona in 1425, the age difference was also smaller — 7 years — but still extended.

The three factors of environment, wealth and long-term demographic trend affected the formation of new households and inevitably therefore the age of first marriage. However, the age of first marriage for men was far more sensitive to all these influences than the marriage age for women. The typical bride was never much older than 20 years, and was



usually much younger. The age of first marriage for men varied over a much wider range of years, from 25 to 35 and at times perhaps to 40. According to a Florentine domestic chronicler writing in the early 1400's, Giovanni Morelli, his male ancestors in the thirteenth century were prone to postpone their first marriage until age 40. We cannot test his allegation, but it does seem plausible. In the period before the devastating plagues, when the mean duration of life was relatively extended, men would be forced to wait long before they would be allowed to marry. The medieval community had already reached extraordinary size in the thirteenth century and could ill support continued, rapid growth.

It is at all events certain that the great plagues and famines of the fourteenth century lowered the average age at which men first entered marriage. Thus, in 1427 in the city of Florence, the average age of first marriage for men was approximately 30 years, which compared to Morelli's estimate of 40 years for the thirteenth century. Subsequently, as the plagues grew less virulent, and lives became longer, the age of first marriage for men again moved upward. In 1458, for example, the estimated age of first marriage for Florentine men was 30.5 years, and it was 31.4 years in 1480.

The age of first marriage for women moved upward and downward in the same direction as that of men, but, as we have mentioned, over a shorter range of years. (The estimated age of first marriage for Florentine women was 17.9 years in 1427, 19.5 in 1458 and 20.8 in 1480.) The reasons for this relative inelasticity in marriage age for women seem to have been preeminently cultural: Italian grooms of the Renaissance, under almost all circumstances, no matter what their own age, preferred brides no older than 20.

So also, between city and countryside, the differences in age of first marriage for men (29.9 and 25.6 years respectively in 1427) were much greater than the differences in age of first marriage for women (17.9 and 18.3 years respectively). Women were slightly older at first marriage in rural areas, perhaps because the agricultural labors they were to perform required physical maturity. Again

within the city, the richest Florentine males in 1427, from households with an assessment of over 400 florins, entered marriage for the first time at an estimated age of 31.2 years; their poorest neighbors, from households with no taxable assets, were considerably younger at first marriage — only 27.8 years. But rich girls and poor girls married for the first time at nearly the same ages — 17.9 and 18.4 years respectively. Rich girls tended to be slightly younger, perhaps because their worried fathers wanted to settle their fate as quickly as possible. But almost all Florentine brides, in every corner of society, were remarkably young, at least by modern standards.

We should further note that in those segments of society where men married late (that is, in the towns, and particularly among the wealthy) many men, perhaps 10 percent, did not marry at all, but remained as bachelors, usually in the households of married relatives. On the other hand, girls who did not marry either entered domestic service — an option not open to girls from well-to-do households — or joined a religious order. There were almost no lay spinsters in urban society, apart from servants.

How does this pattern of marriage compare with modern practices? Sociologists now identify what they call a "west European marriage pattern," which is apparently found in no other, non-Western society. This pattern is distinguished by late marriages for both men and women, and by the presence in the population of many adult men and women who do not marry at all. How "modern" were the men and women of the Renaissance? Clearly, within the cities, male behavior already corresponded closely to this modern pattern; men married late and some did not marry at all, especially among the wealthy. The women of the Renaissance, on the other hand, even within the cities, were far from modern in their marital behavior; they married young and those who did not marry rarely remained in the lay world. Renaissance Italy, in other words, was not the birthplace of the modern marriage pattern, at least not for women.

The long span of years, which separated the groom from his bride, had distinctive effects upon both the character of the

Renaissance household and upon the larger society. The young girl had little voice in selecting her mate, and usually no competence to choose. The first weeks of marriage must have been traumatic for these child brides. In Alberti's essay, *On the Family*, one young bride is depicted as homesick and weeping for her mother, as her mature groom sentimentally instructs her in her household duties. But the position and status of these young matrons thereafter improved, for several reasons. The husbands were older, occupied men; many were already past the prime of their years. The brides, themselves only reaching maturity, rapidly assumed chief responsibility for the management of their households. They grew, as it were, into their *métier*. For many women, ultimate liberation would come with the deaths of their much older husbands. At the death of the husband, the dowry returned to the widow; the large sum of money which had taxed her family's resources at her marriage now could make her a woman of means, independent enough to resist a second marriage if she did not want it. As a widow with some property, she was free from male domination in a way she had never been as a child and a wife. The years of childhood, of service as a wife, were hard but often abbreviated for the lady of the Renaissance; and time worked in her favor.

Within the larger society, especially within the cities, the tendency for males to postpone marriage meant that the community would contain large numbers of unattached young men, who were denied legitimate sexual outlets for as long as two decades after puberty. Erotic tensions thus ran high within the city, and the situation inevitably promoted both prostitution and sodomy, for which the Renaissance cities enjoyed a merited reputation. The typical triad of many contemporary stories and dramas — the aged husband, beautiful young wife, and clever young man intent on seducing her — reflects a common domestic situation. These restless young men, uninhibited by responsibilities for a wife and family, were also quick to participate in the factional and family feuds and battles which were frequent occurrences in Renaissance social history.

It is also worth observing that Shakespeare's depiction of Italian society in *Romeo and Juliet* has a solid kernel of authenticity. Juliet is not yet 14, but she is told that many ladies of Verona, younger than she, are already mothers. Romeo, whose age is not expressly stated, is one of the numerous young bachelors who filled the cities, waiting until perhaps age 30 for marriage. So also are Tybalt and Mercutio, the boisterous young men responsible for much of the violence in the play.

Delayed marriage for men inevitably affected the treatment and the fate of girls. Because of high mortalities and the inevitable shrinking of the age pyramid, there were fewer eligible and willing grooms, at approximately age 30, than prospective brides, girls between 15 and 20. The girls, or rather their families, had to enter a desperate competition for grooms, and this drove up the value of dowries to ruinous levels. The *Divine Comedy* of Dante already observes, in the early fourteenth century, that the size of dowries had exceeded all reasonable bounds, but we know that they continued to grow. Since prospective brides outnumbered available grooms, many girls had no statistical chance of finding a husband. For most of them, there would be no alternative but the convent. A great saint of the fifteenth century, Bernardino of Siena, once described these unhappy girls, placed in convents because they were too poor, too homely, or too unhealthy to be married, as the "scum and vomit of the world."

The acts by which the marriage was contracted were several. The formal engagement usually involved the redaction of a notarial contract, which stipulated when the marriage should occur and how the dowry should be paid. The promise of marriage would often be repeated solemnly in church. On the wedding day, the bride and groom would often attend a special Mass, at which they received the Church's blessing. But that blessing, or even the presence of a priest, was not required for a legitimate marriage until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century made it obligatory for Catholics. The central act in the wedding ceremony was a procession, in which the groom led his bride

from her father's house to his own. Through this public display, society recognized that this man and this woman would henceforth live together at husband and wife. The groom then usually gave as lavish a feast as his resources would allow, which sometimes lasted for days.

With time, children were added to the new household. Given the character of the marriage, the typical baby was received by a very young mother and a much older father. Within the city of Florence in 1427, the mean age of motherhood was approximately 26.5 years (this is the average age of all women who appear in the *Catasto* with a baby less than one year old); the mean age of fatherhood was 39.8 years. The age differences between mothers and fathers were again, less extreme in the countryside or in other Italian towns, but still must be considered extended.

The great differences in the average ages of fathers and mothers affected the atmosphere of the home and the training of children. The duration of the paternal generation (the mean length of time separating fathers from their children) was extremely protracted — almost 40 years in the city of Florence in 1427. The duration of the maternal generation (the mean length of time separating mothers from their children) was much more moderate, only 26 or 27 years in the same city. The mature, if not aged, fathers would have difficulty communicating with their children, and many would not live to see their children reach adulthood. One reason the male heads of family placed moral exhortations in their *ricordi* is that they feared that they would not survive long enough to give much advice, *viva voce*, to the younger generation.

This distinctive situation placed the wife and mother in a critical position between the old generation of fathers and the children. Much younger and more vigorous than her husband, usually destined for longer and more intimate contact with her children, she became a prime mediator in passing on social values from old to young. Understandably, many of the educational tracts, which proliferate in Italy from the early fifteenth century, are directed at women. One of the

first of them, Dominici's *Governance and Care of the Family*, already cited, beautifully describes both what Florentine mothers did, and what the author, a Dominican friar, wished them to do. Mothers, according to the friar, spent the days pampering and playing with their young children, fondling and licking them, spoiling them with beautiful toys, dressing them in elegant clothes, and teaching them how to sing and dance. An effeminizing influence seems evident here, which was not balanced by a strong masculine presence within the home. The friar recommends that the mothers rather impart spiritual values to their children; in telling them how to do this, he shows the new fifteenth-century awareness of the psychology of children. The home should contain a play altar, at which the young could act out the liturgy, and pictures of Christ and St. John represented as playful children, to whom real children will feel immediate rapport. Clearly, Dominici did not regard the child simply as a miniature adult, without a mind and psychology of his own.

Two conclusions seem appropriate here. The Renaissance household, with an aged, occupied and often absent husband and a young wife, was not ideally equipped to give balanced training to its children. But this deficiency seems to have increased the concern for the proper education of children and inspired many authors to consider the topic. Dominici himself, for example, was writing for a household in which the father was absent. However, no matter what these authors recommended, women continued to dominate the training of young children, and inevitably they inculcated in them qualities which they admired — a taste for refined manners and elegant dress, and a high esthetic sensibility. In the sixteenth century, a character in the *Book of the Courtier*, by Baldassare Castiglione, then the most popular handbook of good manners, attributes all gracious exercises — music, dancing and poetry — to the influence of women. The gentleman of the Renaissance was fashioned to the tastes of women; so also was much of the culture of the age.

Births also helped shape the total society. Here, an important factor was the differences

in relative fertility among the various segments of the community. The rural population, as we have mentioned, tended to be more prolific than the urban, and the rich, while slow to marry, still reproduced themselves more successfully than the poor. Differences in fertility rates inevitably generated flows of people from some parts of society to others. Thus, differential fertility between city and countryside assured that there would be constant immigration from rural areas into the towns. Dante in the early fourteenth century already complained about the alleged dilution of ancient Florentine stock by the immigration of rustics from the countryside. This immigration had important social effects. It appears to have been selective, as the city especially attracted the skilled and the highly motivated. At Florence, many of the cultural leaders of the Renaissance — Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Angelo Poliziano among the humanists; Giotto, Masaccio, Leonardo da Vinci among the artists — were of rural or small-town origins. The urban need for people promoted the careers of these gifted men. On the other hand, by introducing them into a milieu which made their own reproduction difficult, immigration also tended over the long run to extirpate the lines of creative individuals. It was not an unmixed blessing.

Within the cities, the wealthier families, in spite of the male reluctance to enter marriage, still tended to produce more children than the poor. Many of these children would be placed in convents or enter careers in the Church, but some would face a difficult decision. Either they would have to accept a social position lower than their parents, or they would have to seek to make their fortunes outside of their native city, even outside of Italy. A Florentine chronicler named Gregorio Dati noted in the early fifteenth century that the generative air of his city and the fertility of its families produced too many young men to live from local resources. Many were forced therefore to wander through the world in search of fortune. Demographic pressures, in other words, required that even the sons of the wealthy adopt an entrepreneurial stance. This helps explain the ambitions and high

energy of the Florentines and other Italians, and the prominence they achieved all over Europe, in many fields, in the Renaissance period.

The final event in the history of a marriage was death, and we can deal with death more briefly, as we have already referred to its central role in the social history of the epoch. Death was everywhere present during the Renaissance, and the ravages it perpetrated were at the root of the crisis of the family, which was most severe in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Here, we shall note only the distinctive reactions of the surviving partner in a marriage to the death of a spouse. For reasons already discussed, in the countryside it was typical for both widows and widowers quickly to remarry, if they were of suitable age. But in the city, the behavior of widowed men and women was quite different. The urban widower, who as a young man had usually waited long before entering his first marriage, quickly sought out a new wife. The widow, on the other hand, who as a young girl had been rushed into wedlock, delayed remarriage, and many widows did not remarry at all. The cities of the Renaissance consequently contained numerous male bachelors and widows, but very few spinsters and widowers. The mature male, who once had married, found it difficult to live without the continuing companionship of a woman. But the woman, after she had lost a husband, felt little compulsion to remarry. Even in modern societies, women can live alone more comfortably than men in their mature years.

These then are the principal conclusions to which our consideration of the family in Renaissance Italy lead us. The ferocious plagues and famines of the epoch undermined the stability of familial relationships and threatened the very survival of households, especially within the cities. But this crisis prompted numerous Italian writers and philosophers to turn their high intelligence and rich cultural resources to an examination of the family. Given the circumstances, they tended to idealize domestic roles. Alberti, for example, heaps high praise on the large household of mutually helpful members. He

was himself an illegitimate son who apparently never married, and never personally knew the rich, warm relationships he discerns in the bosom of the family. Giovanni Morelli, the Florentine domestic chronicler previously quoted, depicts in a highly emotional light how a father serves his children; Morelli personally never knew his own father, as he was orphaned at the age of three. He also describes his own emotions at watching the development of his son Alberto: the joy he experienced when he first felt under his hand the movements of the unborn baby in his mother's womb; the pride, when the boy, from age six, rapidly mastered the Latin used by merchants in their letters. Morelli reflected upon his emotions, and described them in his memoirs, after his son's death at the age of ten.

In this tumultuous period, the men and women of the Renaissance could not take for granted the services which the family in less troubled times, under less trying

circumstances, was able to provide, almost without effort. They therefore subjected the wounded family of their epoch to conscious examination, and tried to devise cures for its ills. If they did not always describe the family accurately, as it was in reality, they stated lyrically what it could be, and what ideally might be expected from it. In this examination, they illuminated human values — the satisfaction which derives from fulfilling mutually supportive roles, the delight in watching children grow and change, the pleasure in teaching and learning across the generations — which subsequent ages have recognized as valid.

The family has of course endured many crises, and even today voices are occasionally heard which predict its demise. But these voices surely underestimate the resiliency of this ancient human association. Perhaps too, it is only in crisis that the family clearly shows what it contributes to human fulfillment.

*Suggestions for Reading*

Indispensable reading for students of the Renaissance Italian family is Leon Battista Alberti's contemporary tract, *On the Family*, translated by Renée Neu Watkins under the title *The Family in Renaissance Florence* (Columbia, S.C., 1969). Hardly less important is another contemporary essay on the family, Giovanni Dominici's *Regola del governo di cura familiare*; Giovanni's advice on rearing children is translated by A. B. Côté under the title *On the Education of Children* (Washington, D. C., 1927). For further bibliography on the rich literature of the Renaissance dealing with the education of children, the reader may consult William Woodward, *Vittorino da Feltre and Other Humanist Educators* (Cambridge, 1897).

Examples of family memoirs (*ricordi*) and a discussion concerning their character may be found in *Two Memoirs of Renaissance Florence. The Diaries of Buonaccorso Pitti and Gregorio Dati*, translated by Julia Martines and edited by Gene Brucker (New York, 1967). A good view of the many kinds of sources which illuminate the social history of the Italian Renaissance is provided in *The Society of Renaissance Florence, a Documentary Study*, edited by Gene Brucker (New York, 1971). For a brief description of the great statistical compilation known as the Florentine *Catasto*, the reader can consult Christiane Klapisch, "Household and Family in Tuscany in 1427," *Household and Family*

*in Past Time*, edited by Peter Laslett and Richard Wall (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 267-81.

There is no single, broad study of family life in Renaissance Italy, but much information can be gathered from biographies or from examinations of particular groups in Renaissance society. See, for example, Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato, Francesco di Marco Datini* (New York, 1957); Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists* (Princeton, 1963); and Richard Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, 1968). For a statistical view of the Florentine family in the Renaissance, see David Herlihy, "Mapping Households in Medieval Italy," *Catholic Historical Review*, LVIII (1972), 1-24; and "Some Psychological and Social Roots of Violence in the Tuscan Cities," *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500*, edited by Lauro Martines (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1972), pp. 129-154.

For families at Genoa, see also the recent study by Diane Owen Hughes, "Urban Growth and Family Structure in Medieval Genoa," *Past and Present. A Journal of Historical Studies*, LXVI (1975), 3-28.

A valuable recent study, with discussion of the broad issues touching upon the history of the Renaissance family, is Francis William Kent's *Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence: The Family Life of the Capponi, Ginori, and Rucellai* (Princeton, 1977).