Gender and Law in Milan

Thomas Kuehn

The women of Renaissance Milan have been little studied. One finds only scattered references to women in Milan or to gender differentiation in law, with the important exception of an essay by Maria Carla Zorzoli and now some insightful chapters in Chiara Porqueddu’s massive study of the Pavese patriciate. One does not find the rich studies of scholars such as Christiane Klapisch-Zuber for Florence, Stanley Chojnacki for Venice, or Simona Feci’s delightful and informative Pesci fuor d’acqua about Rome.

Research on women in Florence and Venice can provide a useful context for study of women in Milan, because the two cities are seen as opposites in the spectrum of experiences for women. Chojnacki says Florentine women’s “propertyless dependence contrasts starkly with the social and economic resources of their counterparts in Venice.” Samuel Cohn has declared that Florence “may well have been one of the worst places to have been for a woman in the Italian Renaissance.”


4 Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy (Baltimore, 1996), p. 15.
To be sure, such judgements have come under criticism and been subjected to modification. Chojnacki’s positive image of Venice has been notably contested by Anna Bellavitis, who works on Venetian women, and Isabelle Chabot, who has centered her research on Florentine women. They importantly argue for the continuing control of men over women in ways that do not often appear in legal documents, while it has been such texts, especially testaments, that formed the chief source for Chojnacki’s conclusions. In the other direction, the fairly bleak picture for Florentine women has been subjected to scrutiny by scholars who have noted the possibilities for female agency and the effective enforcement of legal protections of women’s property.

Where did Milanese women’s legal capacities and rights to property stand? If we go by the judgement of one of the Colonna of Rome, writing to Carlo Borromeo, we would have to say that the laws of Milan proved “disadvantageous” for women at least in comparison with Rome. We will examine that claim by inquiring along two lines: the statutory access to property by women, involving mainly inheritance and dowry, and statutory restrictions on women’s legal agency, their capacity to manage and dispose of what property they had. While these approaches do not necessarily tell us what women’s lives were like (a task for which many other types of sources are needed and have to be carefully handled), they give us the comparative parameters in which they operated.