

Brides in Family or in Institute: Dowry Between Customs, Symbols and Rituals in Southern Italy (18th-19th centuries)

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Abstract

This paper, mainly based on unpublished archival sources, focuses on marriage customs in Terra di Bari between the 18th and 19th centuries. Daughters in marriageable age and future brides become protagonists of a period of their life, prior to the celebration of marriage, in which family strategies, dotal systems, symbols and rituals were strongly conditioned by social belonging and the juridical status of the girl. The focus is, in fact, not only on the legitimate daughters “in the family”, but also on the orphans and institutionalized foundlings for whom the institutes also took on the role of their “welfare family” as regarding marriage.

Keywords: marriage, dowry, foundlings and orphans, Southern Italy, 18th-19th centuries

Introduction

In the early modern period, marriage in Italy represented a crucial moment for a person’s life, and even more for their families¹. It represented a fundamental act that certified a “trade” of women and goods between families. Marriage, from private matter, also matured into a public event aimed at consolidating and increment wealth between families. In the past, the concept of marriage was shared between parents and progeny mostly as an alliance bound to transcend the needs of a single person. Since childhood, children were introduced to social norms regulating marriage and its customs. This teaching was not exclusive to high society, where these bonds needed to reinforce status, but was also prominent in low

¹ For a general overview see: A. Fauve-Chamoux, *Matrimonio, vedovanza e divorzio*, in M. Barbagli, D.I. Kertzer (eds.), *Storia della famiglia in Europa. Dal Cinquecento alla Rivoluzione francese*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari 2002, p. 307-351; G. Da Molin, *Famiglia e matrimonio nell’Italia del Seicento*, Cacucci Editori, Bari 2000; D. Lombardi, *Storia del matrimonio. Dal Medioevo a oggi*, il Mulino, Bologna 2008; G. Da Molin, *Storia sociale dell’Italia moderna*, La Scuola Editrice, Brescia 2014; S. Sovič, P. Thane, P.P. Viazzo (eds.), *The History of Families and Households. Comparative European Dimensions*, Leiden-Boston, Brill 2016; S. Seidel Menchi (ed.), *Marriage in Europe, 1400-1800*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press 2016; F. Chacón Jimenez, G. Delille (eds.), *Marriage and Alliance. Dissolution, Continuity and Strength of Kinship (c.a. 1750-c.a. 1900)*, Viella, Roma 2018.

society because it still represented an exchange of goods. Therefore, marriage was a complex “deal” that required various factors: demographic, economic, social, cultural, religious². These factors influenced the matrimonial market gravely and also determined practical details about the marriage such as participation and organisation. These characteristics were also fundamental for every marriage decision and the juridical status of the woman, central element of the entire process.

The present paper focuses on the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of matrimony in Southern Italy from 18th to 19th centuries in a comparative study centring on the social and legal position of the bride³. Research, mainly based on unpublished archive sources, traces two routes: the first regarding matrimony of legitimate daughters born to, and brought up in “a family”; the second, the thousands of foundlings and orphans for whom the institutes also took on the role of “new family” as regarding matrimony.

1. “Young girls in the family”: from choice of partner to celebration of marriage

In 18th and 19th century Southern Italy, matrimony was regulated by a precise set of rituals which laid down procedures, roles and functions. Marriage was not perceived as just a single act, a one-day event, but rather as a long process involving various stages, dictated by traditional unwritten laws and customs.

Upper social classes, from nobility to aristocracy, had no freedom of choice. Often arranged since the adolescence of the noble heirs, matrimony followed the specific family strategies and alliances aimed at creating or furthering existing political, social and economic bonds.

In the case of the lower classes, the choice of partner was seen as a “business deal” not only affecting the whole family but also relatives, friends, neighbours who often pushed for unions between youths of marriageable age and the quick re-insertion in the marriage market of young widows and widowers.

In both small and large cities of Southern Italy, in order to sound out possible future unions, an “ambasciata” (marriage proposal) was approached, an ancient custom which, though never legally recognized, did follow precise and widely-accepted norms⁴. The “ambasciatore” or a friend, relative or father confessor, played the role of negotiator, bearer of a message relayed by the future groom, proposing a dialogue or possible meeting with the

² J. Hajnal, *European Marriage Patterns in Perspective*, in D.V. Glass, D.E.C. Eversley (eds.), *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography*, Edward Arnold, London 1965, p. 101–143; D.S. Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe: Persistent Contrasts*, «Population and Development Review», 24, 1998, p. 203–234; M. Lanzinger, R. Sarti (eds.), *Nubili e celibi tra scelta e costrizione (secoli XVI–XX)*, Forum, Udine 2006; G. Alfani, V. Gourdon (eds.), *Spiritual Kinship in Europe, 1500–1900*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2012; G. Alfani, V. Gourdon, *Entrepreneurs, formalization of social ties, and trustbuilding in Europe (fourteenth to twentieth centuries)*, «Economic History Review», 65 (3), 2012, p. 1005–1028; S.G. Carmichael, A. De Pleijt, J.L. van Zanden, T. De Moor, *The European Marriage Pattern and Its Measurement*, «Journal of Economic History», 76, 2016, p. 196–204.

³ A very interesting examination of the women’s life cycle is provided by M.E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Le donne nell’Europa moderna*, Einaudi, Torino 2017.

⁴ F. Martino, *Matrimonio e divorzio nell’Ottocento barese tra leggi e consuetudini*, Levante Editori, Bari 1996.

family of his chosen one. Relaying such a message required parental consent; granted consent meant the family had already carried out an investigation usually delegated to the mother with a view to ascertaining girl's physical appearance, health, moral rectitude, but more importantly, her virginity, of upmost importance and to be preserved and protected until the day itself⁵.

If the negotiator's mission proved successful, this led to the opening up of an important and delicate phase, the marriage promise, after which came the stipulation of the dowry. In the past, the dowry represented, on the one hand, a contribution from the future bride and family in support of marital obligation and leaving the family, on the other, it represented the daughter's portion of inheritance and her becoming part of the groom's new family. The dowry did not automatically become part of the future husband's wealth but remained separate thereof; he could benefit from it though having no full ownership, since it was subject to the conditions of restitution in the event of premature death of the wife, be she childless or mother of minors⁶.

2. The marriage contract: an excellent source in analysing the dowry

In the old southern society, the dowry was therefore, the result of a contract negotiated by members of both families and was legally drawn up in the presence of a notary⁷.

The marriage contract is an extremely prestigious notarial source⁸. Putting aside the the legal aspects and the legislative changes occurring in the course of this period – since not my task – sourcing these documents has aided in analysing details of the bride's dowry as well as its complex structure dictated by religious convention, political and economic choices and, last but not least, the existing traditions and customs of the region in question.

⁵ The role of women in the family in the preliminary phase of the construction of the union is fundamental. They appear to be, in this specific context, ideal mediators. The relationship with women is sought precisely by virtue of its informal nature, which allows to probe opinions, provide and receive information without risking commitments from which it is difficult to disentangle. R. Ago, *Carriere e clientele nella Roma barocca*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1990; Id., *Maria Spada Veralli, la buona moglie*, in G. Calvi (ed.), *Barocco al femminile*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1992.

⁶ For further details see C. Fayer, *Sponsalia, matrimonio, dote*, L'Erma di Bretschneider, Roma 2005, in Id., *La familia romana. Aspetti giuridici ed antiquari*, 3 vol., L'Erma di Bretschneider, Roma 1994/2005.

⁷ G. Delille, *Famiglia e proprietà nel Regno di Napoli, XV-XIX secolo*, Einaudi, Torino 1988; Idem, *Famiglia e potere locale. Una prospettiva mediterranea*, Edipuglia, Bari 2011; M. Fubini Leuzzi, «Condurre a onore». *Famiglia, matrimonio e assistenza dotale a Firenze in età moderna*, Olschki, Firenze 1999; P. Malanima, *Il lusso dei contadini. Consumi e industrie nelle campagne toscane del Sei e Settecento*, il Mulino, Bologna 1990; R. Ago R., B. Borello (eds.), *Famiglie. Circolazione di beni, circuiti di affetti in età moderna*, Viella, Roma 2008; A.M. Cuccia, *Lo scrigno di famiglia. La dote a Torino nel Settecento*, Pisa University Press, Pisa 2014. For marriage contracts in various European contexts we suggest the essays in «Annales de Démographie Historique», *Le contract de mariage*, 2011-1.

⁸ For the detailed explanation of this archivist source, see G. Da Molin, A. Carbone, *Gli uomini, il tempo e la polvere. Fonti e documenti per una storia demografica italiana (secc. XV-XXI)*, Cacucci Editore, Bari 2010, p. 105-109.

Studying the hundreds of marriage contracts pertaining to Puglia and Basilicata in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, allowed identification of some characteristic elements of a dowry, terms and times of payment, details of the trousseau as well as the ritualistic objects contained therein⁹.

Carefully comparing the differences between social classes, the amount of the dowry is an interesting indicator of a family's wealth or poverty, since it is closely linked to their social status¹⁰.

These marriage contracts reveal how the groom was always one of the contracting parties, though in collaboration with his father if still under parental responsibility; it is noteworthy that marriage represented the son's freedom from parental responsibility. As regards the bride, her role in the contract was overseen by her father, where he no longer alive, by a brother or the widow. On occasion, the future bride herself oversaw proceedings though in the presence of a male relative or a guarantor which could also be the notary himself. This was usually the case when the future bride was a widow. The dowry contained fixed assets. Fixed assets were normally the house and land and handed over to the spouse just before or directly after the religious ceremony. Moreover, part of the dowry was a sum of cash, obviously in line with the economic condition of the future bride. Payment of this sum was usually deferred to a variable later date and terms of payment were linked to the type of dowry. As far as cash payments were concerned, a part was paid to the groom upon celebration of the marriage with the rest of the dowry. The remainder was paid in instalments over a maximum limit of four years.

The core of the dowry lay in the list of the trousseau, jewellery, furnishings and furniture the bride had been given.

Following the tradition of this period, the family had to provide the two most essential elements for the marital home which were of a symbolic nature: the marital bed and home furnishings.

The mid 18th century also saw the arrival of other elements connected to the marital bed, such as its wooden framework, mattresses, pillows, bed-linen, the "sprovieri", lengths of cloth used to create a tent-like structure around the bed, the "cappitello, a roof to the bed, and the "giraletto" (a screen which separated the bed from the rest of the room). The bed-

⁹ Archivio di Stato di Bari (herein after ASBA), *Fondo notarile*: Castellana, notary Monsulli Nicola, (1681-1726 and 1729-1737); Castellana, notary Mazzarelli Oronzo Vincenzo (1753-1785); Bari, notary Inzucchi Lorenzo (1767-1803); Bari, notary Calvani Gaetano (1850-1854). Archivio di Stato di Matera (herein after ASMT), *Fondo notarile*: Matera, notary D'Ercole Flaminio (1603-1659); Matera, notary Donato Maria Parvullo (1597-1611); Matera, notary Raffaele Bronzini (1821-1868).

¹⁰ A very important role was played by the daughters of specialized artisans. If the artisan didn't have sons, a daughter would marry a young man who worked in the same craft sector. In this way, the workshop and the continuity of the family tradition were safeguarded. A. Carbone, *La via del rame. Mestieri, strategie matrimoniali e sistemi dotali in Terra di Bari a metà Settecento*, MEFROM, Mélanges de l'École française de Rome, tome 112, 2000, 1, p. 151-172; G. Da Molin, A. Carbone, *Gli artigiani nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia nel XVIII secolo: modelli differenziali della famiglia, del matrimonio e del controllo degli assetti produttivi*, in Fondazione Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica "F. Datini" Prato, *La famiglia nell'economia europea (Secc. XIII-XVIII)*, Atti della "Quarantesima Settimana di Studi", Prato 6-10 aprile 2008, a cura di Cavaciocchi S., Firenze University Press, Firenze 2009, p. 305-324.

cover or “coltra” was an extremely important element of the trousseau since it not only served a practical function. Indeed, in most cases, given the beauty and preciousness of cloth used, such as white linen and wool, it was a tangible expression of family’s wealth. It was put on display on occasions where the family had to “show off”, for example, the birth of a child or death of a family member. In Southern Italy, during religious processions such as Corpus Domini or the feast of a Patron Saint, it was displayed outside the house as a sign of devotion¹¹.

On the contrary, pots, frying pans, “camastre,” chains used to hang pots over the open fire, made up the “hearth” part of the dowry. Other items foreseen were the bride’s clothes and undergarments. The trousseau was an integral part of the dowry and was put on show in the days leading up to the marriage in order to be admired by relatives, friends and the whole neighbourhood. Tradition dictated all items be laid out on the bed, on chairs and tables in the family home: with a view to proving the dignity, decor and pride of the family. This symbolic value justified the care placed in the weave of the various cloths used, thus obliging the parents to make great economic sacrifices. Since childhood, and under the watchful eye of mothers and grandmothers, young girls learned to sew and embroider items for their trousseau. Richer families tended to outsource to specialized embroiderers and seamstresses who worked from home on a commission basis. Although there were no set rules as to the number of items a trousseau should include, in Southern Italy 6 sheets were considered the minimum; whereas the number of items for kitchen and bed-linen were “fixed”. All items prepared over the years, were gathered together prior to the marriage to be appraised by friends or relatives invited by the future couple. The estimate, often written in the marriage contract, was a necessary precaution in that, should the dowry need to be returned, each item, whether worn out or disused, had to be accounted for.

Often, in the dowry acts, some mention of the groom’s trousseau is made, though generally of a much lesser quantity compared to the bride’s.

In the marriage contract the future groom usually gave the bride various pieces of jewellery. Gold rings with precious stones lent the dowry a much greater value than its merely economic one; they were mainly a symbol of good wishes for the new family in the making. Among these gifts of a more symbolic and ritualistic nature, there is coral the same stone used in the amulets mothers placed around the necks of their newly born to ward off evil.

After more than a century, from the study of the marital chapters warranted by notary Calvani, in between variation of the structure of the rite, a more frequent participation from the bride can be noticed. In some cases, the custom of the notary to go to the family’s home for a redaction of the act can be observed.

In short, between the 18th and 19th centuries, items of a dowry remained unchanged: material and intangible assets, items of the trousseau and finery are recorded in registers. The social status of the future groom lent the future bride’s dowry a strong characterization of symbolic and material value.

Therefore, for instance, if Vito Lavermicocca, a proprietary farmer, donates 300 “ducati” to pay in between four years from the day of the marriage of his daughter Antonia Rosa,

¹¹ V. D’Amelio, *Dote, matrimonio e famiglia. Approfondimenti a margine di una carta dotale uggianese di fine ‘700*, autorinediti, Napoli 2010, p. 73.

then the family of his groom would significantly contribute. Don Francesco Saverio Caravita e Donna Nicoletta Dursi would donate, aside from the outfits of the family, a total amount of 10 000 “ducati”¹².

If the stage of the promise and engagement was exclusively dominated by mere economic aspects, the features of the actual ceremony would be dictated by the local tradition. In particular, the liturgical rite of the 18th century and 19th respected what imposed by the Sacred Roman Church following “Tridentine” dispositions¹³. Considering what ruled by the “Tridentine” Canon, the wedding needed to be celebrated in *Facie Ecclesiae*, after being confessed and “declared”. Granted that the couple chose marriage independently, the priest solemnly blessed them and registered the wedding on the parochial registry (detailing the couple and their respective testimonies). In Bari and most of its province, it was custom to make remunerative donations to the Church or its representatives. Couples belonging to higher society often adorned the place of worship, the poorest donated candles or other sacred objects. After the ritual, there was the wedding reception, usually organised by the “compare”. It was a well-known character in the community, which usually established the “tone” of the marriage. The “compare” is a similar figure to the modern wedding planner. He was the one organising dances, declaring toasts, coordinating presents and assisting guests. Often, the celebration could last for days, from Saturday to Monday. The first day, after the ceremony, the couple was brought by a carriage to the bride’s home for a reserved lunch with close relatives. In the evening guests arrived, it was a moment dedicated to dance and dining. The second day followed a similar routine. Monday evening was dedicated to young friends where refreshments and another dance was organised. At the end of every feast, the couple would retire in their new home, precedently prepared by their respective mothers. Generally, after a week, the couple was ready for the first public apparition and, according to an ancient tradition, a lunch with the “compare”. Differently, in Sicily in the 18th century, the tradition imposed a banquet with specific cooking, ending with dancing and the nuptial dance called “sonu”. Accompanying the couple in their new house, parents and friends, while a tradition in Palermo wanted the bride to be undressed and put to bed by the mother in law (if not available the privilege was designed to the sister in law)¹⁴.

3. Marriage in high society: sonnets and rituals

In high society, in 18th and 19th century Southern Italy, sources that allow further investigation over the ritualization of weddings are enriched. Alongside marriage contracts, in this case particularly abundant, family archives provide the researcher an incredible amount

¹² ASBA, *Fondo notarile*, Bari, notary Gaetano Calvani, 1850-1851-1852-1853-1854.

¹³ For further details please consult: A. Marongiu, *Matrimonio e famiglia nell'Italia meridionale (sec. XIV-XVI)*, «Società di storia patria per la Puglia», vol. XXXIX, Bari 1976; A.L. Sannino Cuomo, *Il matrimonio in Basilicata prima e dopo il Concilio di Trento*, in G. De Rosa, A. Cestaro (eds.), *Il concilio di Trento nella vita spirituale e culturale del Mezzogiorno tra XVI e XVII secolo*, Atti del convegno di Maratea, 19-21 giugno 1986, Osanna Edizioni, Venosa (Pz) 1988; D. Lombardi, *Fidanzamenti e matrimoni dal Concilio di Trento alle riforme settecentesche*, in M. De Giorgio, Ch. Klapisch-Zuber (eds.), *Storia del matrimonio*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari 1996, p. 215-250.

¹⁴ G. Pitre, *Il popolo siciliano*, Brancato Editore, Milano 2002, p. 177.

of private documents, accountants books, singular epistle and manuscripts that add new bits of knowledge to the matter.

From the study of the documentation from the “Archivi di Famiglia” deposited in the “Archivio di Stato di Bari” emerged, concerning high society, a peculiar tradition of donations of sonnets, odes, compositions, texts about love, to original publications containing different essays by several writers to celebrate the marriage.

Inside the Caracciolo Carafa Archive, regarding one of the noblest and important families in the Kingdom of Naples between the 17th e 19th century, is preserved a volume of extreme value. In 1780 Giuseppe Pignatelli of the Montecalvo Dukes dedicated to his sister Emanuela Pignatelli, given as a bride to Antonio Francesco Caracciolo, a dissertation on conjugal love¹⁵. The occasion is the birth of Marianna, daughter of Emanuela, the 19 December of 1780. The volume is a bound hardcover covered in golden leaves. The frontispiece depicts an allegory of conjugal love, which crowned, hugs the couple and a childlike figure while on the right (over the burning flame of love) there’s an angel that bears the word “happiness”.

Famous sonnets composed in celebration of other marriages of the high society in Puglia are preserved in the Archive of the Esperti family¹⁶. Domenico da Paula, in the 17th century, composed a sonnet for the marriage of the marquis Francesco Saverio Fraggianni and the marquise D. Maria Aurora Esperti. The sonnet is on just one sheet, finely decorated and with floral motifs on the edges representing the beloved “Aurora” allegorically. The archive also contains a sonnet “Per lo Sponsalizio dell’Ill.mi Sig.ri Giorgio Esperti e la Signora D. Rosa Gattola” and an Epithalamic Ode composed by Doctor “Fisico” Francesco Paolo de Leon celebrating the marriage between Don Francesco Saverio Esperti and Donna Eleonora Elefante, nobles of the city of Barletta. The Ode is inspired by the ancient Greek tradition of the nuptial chant which was sung in the nuptial room. Aside from the tradition of producing odes and sonnets, between the 19th and 20th century, the custom of publishing books and collections of essays for the marriage spread through the Italian peninsula. This custom was not only designated to the city’s elites but predominately to the cultural sphere of reference. For instance, in 1910, for the marriage between Armando Perotti – poet and author from Bari – and Maria Fortunata Consiglio, the volume “Cose di Puglia” was published by the editor Laterza. It was a private, 100 copies numbered publication, of which eight were not numbered and were distributed between the couple and the typographic collection.

In between the stipulation of the marriage contract and the actual celebration in Church including the banquet and fireworks, the preparations concerned the different protagonist in the intimate domestic circle. The documentation of the overall funds, for dresses and wedding, of the marriage between princess Anna Caracciolo di Santeramo and prince Francesco Caracciolo Carafa, celebrated in Naples in 1904 it’s fascinating¹⁷.

The total amount for the wedding was 48 669,45 Italian lire. The highest expense corresponds to the amount given to the prince (20 000 Italian lire), next, the outfits for the princess (14 000 Italian lire). Legal costs reached 7 711,45 Italian lire, whereas other expenses, such as invitations (650 copies), wedding favours (50 units), gifts to the priest, gardeners,

¹⁵ ASBA, *Archivio Caracciolo Carafa di Santeramo, Fondo Napoli*, cassetta 4, lettera E, fasc. 4, n. 210.

¹⁶ ASBA, *Archivio Esperti*, b. 1, fasc. 2.

¹⁷ ASBA, *Archivio Caracciolo Carafa di Santeramo, Fondo Napoli*, cassetta 4, lettera I, fasc. 9, n. 390.

tapestry workers and waiters reached the total amount of 4 324 Italian lire to which an amount of 2 634 was added for the prince's gifts. The outfits, meticulously described for kind of dress, fabric, and colour in all its components, with the particulars concerning cost and number, is remarkable. The entirety of this documentation was correlated to the social status of the bride and the fashion standard established at the time. The research also brought up the list of all the gifts given to the princess. A list of 165 gifts, detailed with precision, allows an accurate reconstruction of the most common gifts, along with the social status of the donors. The list opens with the gifts given from the groom, mostly fine jewellery with several gemstones (rubies, emeralds, sapphire, corals, turquoises, pearls, etc.) but also accessories like hand fans, scarfs, parasols, theatre glasses. Other gifts from the attendants of the wedding include personal objects, other jewellery for the princess, home objects, silverware and even mass books and music books.

4. Aiding “the daughters of poverty”: a dowry between cult, devotion and “destiny”

Shifting our perspective to the poorer families on the margins of society, the preoccupation of finding for a daughter a husband took on vital importance. On the one hand, it meant eliminating another mouth to feed, on the other, it was essential to ensure the young girl did not fall by the wayside and lose her virginity, both crucial elements of her future marriage.

Unable to provide a dowry for their daughters given their social position and poor economic conditions, the families turned to an assistance network made up of “Monti di Pietà,” “Monti dotali” and “Monti di maritaggio,”¹⁸ as they were known. Most of these institutes offered dowry allowances, donated by private benefactors or bequeathed in wills: this was part of the charitable legacy to bequeath assets to favour marriages of less fortunate young girls. Criteria for donation, management, objectives and rituals varied based on the community and chronological context considered.

One such example is the Sacro Monte della Misericordia in Matera, founded by Captain Marco Malvini della Forza in 1656, which, among its other foreseen obligations, was to aid

¹⁸ G. Delille, *Un esempio di assistenza privata: i Monti di Maritaggio nel Regno di Napoli (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, in G. Politi, M. Rosa, F. Della Peruta (eds.), *Timore e carità. I poveri nell'Italia moderna*, Atti del Convegno *Pauperismo e assistenza negli antichi stati italiani*, Cremona 28-30 marzo 1980, Biblioteca Statale e Libreria Civica di Cremona, Cremona 1982; D'Amelia M. (1988), *La conquista di una dote. Regole del gioco e scambi familiari alla Confraternita dell'Annunziata (secc. XVII-XVIII)*, in L. Ferrante, M. Palazzi, G. Pomata (a cura di), *Ragnatele di rapporti. Patronage e reti di relazione nella storia delle donne*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, pp. 305-343; Groppi A. (1994), *I conservatori della virtù. Donne recluse nella Roma dei papi*, Laterza Editori, Roma-Bari. In Naples, in 1638 the “Monte Grande de' Maritaggi” was founded on the initiative of 38 noble Neapolitan knights, with the aim of ensuring a conspicuous dowry to the aristocratic girls. See *Capitoli del Monte Grande de' Maritaggi*, Per Pietro Palumbo, Napoli 1746. The results of local researches are provided by: M. Carboni, *Le doti della «povertà». Famiglia, risparmio, previdenza: il Monte del Matrimonio di Bologna (1583-1796)*, il Mulino, Bologna 1999; D. Colaci, *Assistenza alle orfane: l'Azienda e il pio Monte di maritaggio di S. Giuseppe in Alessano tra Settecento ed Ottocento*, in G. Da Molin (ed.), *Istituzioni, assistenza e religiosità nella società del Mezzogiorno d'Italia tra XVIII e XIX secolo*, Cacucci Editore, Bari 2009, vol. 2, p. 91-105; V. Iandiorio, *Il Monte dei Maritaggi nel XIX secolo*, Arturo Bascetta Editore, Avellino 2017.

the marriage of two poor 'vergini onorate' per year, bequeathing 5 ounces each, whose names were drawn from those put forward by the local parish priests. The draw took place during the celebration of Holy Mass on the feast days of Saint John and Saint Joseph. Along with these allowances, as has emerged from studying requests for charity in "Libro degli introiti e degli esiti" (Accounts Ledgers) relative to the late 18th century, the institute periodically gave sums of money to girls of marriageable age. The letters predominantly show the symbolic value of the marital bed since desperate widowed mothers begged for "uno straccio di letto per maritare mia figlia" ("even a few pieces of wood for a bed for my daughter")¹⁹.

An extremely interesting case is to be found in the 'maritaggi nicolaiani' linked to the worship of Saint Nicholas of Bari, Bishop of Myra. Legend has it that three girls of marriageable age, who due to unfortunate happenstance and having no dowry, decided to pursue a disreputable life. On hearing of their unfortunate circumstances, the Saint secretly left them three bags of gold so they could marry and lead a more decorous life. This episode led to Saint Nicholas becoming the Saint of brides-to-be in Bari and is also the Patron Saint of the city. Devotion to Saint Nicholas led to setting up of marriage foundations for poor and orphaned girls, thanks to large donations, such as that by Queen Bona Sforza who donated 5 000 ducats²⁰. This tradition continued for many centuries.

The State Archive in Bari house a register entitled *Repertorio* which contains an alphabetical list of all girls who participated in the draw of 5 June 1887, for seven dowries as approved by the Commission for the feast of Saint Nicholas²¹.

The details registered for each girl are name, surname, age and residence; moreover, from details concerning their parents, it was possible to define the legal status of each girl.

In 1887, four hundred girls took part in the draw of the 'seven marriages'. They were mainly fatherless (275 = 68.8%) followed by the foundlings (46 = 11.5%). In a lesser measure there were orphans (30 = 7.5%), motherless girls (22 = 5.5%), legitimate daughters with both parents living (22 = 5.5%); lastly there were few cases of daughters of birth mothers (5 = 1.2%). As regards age, the majority were aged from 15 to 22, with a higher number in the 16-17 bracket. In this case, the 'goddess of fortune' together with devotional observance and the practice of age-old customs represented the only chance for a poor, young girl to realize her dream of one day becoming a wife and mother.

The girls chosen were given a personal bank book issued by the Banco di Napoli in Bari containing 150 Lire to be repaid by the age of 30, after having produced a copy of their marriage certificate. Should they not be married by age 30 they could keep the money. Were the girl to pass away before age 30 the sum was handed over to the Congregation of Charity to assist the poor of the city.

¹⁹ A. Carbone, *Tra vicoli e precipizi. Popolazione, società e istituzioni a Matera nel corso del Settecento*, Cacucci Editore, Bari 2010, third chapter, *Ai margini della società: poveri e mendicanti*, p. 121-139.

²⁰ Archivio Basilica di San Nicola, *Ospizio dei Pellegrini, carte dei maritaggi*, XVI-XVIII centuries.

²¹ ASBA, *Comune di Bari*, b. 1334, fasc. 6.

5. A guaranteed dowry: enclosed girls and 'institutional families'

Having no family, or with an existing family unable to look after their daughter, thousands of girls from North to South of Italy were sent to institutes; there foundlings and orphans suffered the moral and financial distress of being termed 'daughters of shame', 'daughters of sin' or 'daughters of poverty'. Conservatories, children's homes and orphanages were founded in an attempt to safeguard and 'preserve' the honour of girls in danger, having no male figure to control or protect them. Institutionalized girls became the focus of a disciplining social policy aimed at their reintegration in the urban and rural social fabric through matrimony, guaranteeing them a dowry²².

One extremely interesting case is the Santa Casa dell'Annunziata in Naples, the largest and most important children's home in the kingdom of Naples throughout the 18th and 19th century. Children abandoned there, called 'daughters of the Madonna' or 'daughters of Ave Gratia Plena', after being entrusted to a wet nurse until the age of 7 or 8, were sent to the conservatory which was later abolished in the 1800s and substituted by the 'alunnato'.

One of the rare occasions in which these girls had any form of contact with the outside world was during the feast of the Annunciation, where they walked in procession through the streets of Naples; they were put on show to enable them to find a husband. A young man who wanted to marry a girl from the conservatory and had not chosen her from the procession, could ask the governors to view the girls so as to make his choice. As foreseen in the regulations of the conservatory in 1739, the young man could only be accompanied by close relatives. In the presence of the custodian, the Abbess and the vicariate the girls were made to line up in the atrium of the conservatory, simply dressed in clothes provided by the Institute, wearing no make-up or jewellery. The indispensable condition to arrange the marriage was the reciprocal consent of the future couple, the girl's wishes were respected, no girl could be forced to marry a man she did not want. With the choice made and application for marriage sent, it was the duty of the parish priest to gather information as to the job, economic situation, and moral fibre of the future husband who, in turn, was obliged to guarantee the dowry be given back in the event of premature death of the wife or of a childless marriage. The dowry, no less than 50 ducats in the 18th century, was paid after the wedding ceremony in the Annunziata's Church; only after having pronounced the fateful 'I do' were the doors of the Institute where she had been brought up, opened to both the girl and her dowry²³.

²² Despite a variety of political and social contexts linked to different local situations, when girls left the institution to marry, they were provided with a dowry, which varied depending on the orphanage. G. Da Molin, A. Carbone, A.G. de Pinto, *Italian Assistance Patterns for Orphans in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, in N. Roman (ed.), *Orphans and Abandoned Children in European History. Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York 2018, p. 87-104.

²³ The foundling girls returned by the external nurses and those brought up inside the institute were admitted in the Annunziata conservatory. The main aim of the conservatory was to educate girls through good religious preparation and physical segregation from the outside world. See G. Da Molin, *I figli della Madonna. Gli esposti all'Annunziata di Napoli (secc. XVII-XIX)*, Cacucci Editore, Bari 2001, p. 29-53.

The notes section of the historical archives of the Santa Casa dell'Annunziata the notary registers which, as of the 16th century, conserve all the notary acts drawn up for the Institute. These registers also contain acts regarding the distribution of dowries²⁴. Among those guaranteed by the Institute, the Annunziata of Naples also took part in the extraction of additional dowries foreseen by the lottery, started in Naples in 1682, and distributed dowries in the city for poor girls, orphans and foundlings²⁵. The draw ceremony was spellbinding; it was held in Castelcapuano, seat of the 'regia Camera della Sommaria' with the entire population present just as at any feast.

A decree emanated by Ferdinando IV di Borbone, the 29 May of 1816, ordered, in fact, the participation of the Santa Casa dell'Annunziata at the weddings of the lot. The decree established that the ninety numbers selected would be divided between the following institutes in Naples: to the alumnae of the Real Albergo dei Poveri numbers from 1 to 30; to the ones of the Santa Casa dell'Annunziata from 31 to 60; to the girls hospitalised in the Ospizio di San Gennaro dei Poveri from 61 to 70; to the alumnae of the Ritiro di San Vincenzo Ferreri and Immacolata Concezione from 71 to 80 and the ones from the Conservatorio di Sant'Eligio and Maddalenella from 81 to 90.

Concerning the selection procedures, to the numbers where assigned the names of the girls. The institutes sent the list of the girls to be named earlier than the day of the selection so that the lists could be printed and distributed. The ceremony of the selection was an actual feast, organised in Castelcapuano, (venue of the Camera della Sommaria) with warm participation from the public. The protagonist of the ceremony was the child drawing the numbers from the bowl: he needed to be seven years old or younger and belong to a low-income family. Apart from these requisites, there weren't other particular rules for the choice. However, the amount provided to the selected child (twenty "ducati") usually caused a competition that resulted in a quick run for recommendations. As a rite to honour the chosen one, a Solemn Mass was celebrated in Santa Caterina church. After everyone took a seat, the child walked on the stage with a bracelet containing reliques on his right arm. One of the magistrates read the names out loud and closed them in spherical containers to be allocated in the bowl. The priest recited some prayer and blessed the child and the bowl, then, the urn was shaken to mix the spheres until the public shouted to stop. Subsequently, the canceler opened the bowl and the child, blindfolded, extracted the five names which were then, read, checked and affixed to the board. To every girl selected a marriage was assigned, to which the expense was twenty-five "ducati". The amount was distributed to the institution only when the girl could truthfully demonstrate her marriage.

Significant innovations came about at the beginning of the 1800s, during the French dominion. As of 1809, the marriage registers contain all documentation pertaining to the foundlings who married and of their spouses. Studying the marriage publications and acts housed in the State Archives in Naples²⁶, it is possible to retrace both the history and life of

²⁴ The archives of the Santa Casa dell'Annunziata in Naples retain a very important documentation particularly interesting for the study of the foundlings' dowry. It's About the "Notamenti". See S. Marino, *L'Archivio dell'Annunziata di Napoli. Inventari e documenti (secoli XII-XIX)*, Laveglia e Carlone, Salerno 2015.

²⁵ F. Schiattarella, *La Beneficiata*, EDART, Napoli 1968, p. 135-152.

²⁶ Archivio di Stato di Napoli, *Stato civile, Stabilimento dell'Annunziata, Matrimoni 1809-1865 (Antenati. Gli Archivi per la Ricerca Anagrafica www.antenati.san.beniculturali.it)*.

the foundling until her marriage as well as the demographic and social characteristics of her spouse; age, status, legal status, employment, and residence. When the bride, daughter of 'Ave Gratia Plena' was under 21 years, she was assisted by the Tutor for Abandoned Minors. Data relative to marriage acts dating from 1812 to 1865 of the Annunziata register a total of 918 marriages (for the three years between 1809–1811, marriages had been registered in the section in the city of Naples called 'Mercato')²⁷. Moving from the Kingdom of Naples into the provinces, while considering the obvious differences in age relating to when the girls were allowed to leave, the amount of their dowry, terms of payment, what does become clear from studying archive sources of the institutes is the presence of a ritual which replaces all past traditions and customs characterizing girls of marriageable age who lived with their families. A precise regulation and greater administrative uniformity for all female institutes in Southern Italy was enacted as of the early 19th century.

The norms of the General Council of Institutes in the Province of Bari for the internal regulation of conservatories, orphanages, and homes for young women, dated 1825, adopted thereafter throughout the kingdom, foresaw a maximum commitment to marry off girls in institutes and an obligation, on behalf of those institutes to grant dowries. In the case of a request of marriage by a young man to the institute, the girl was only allowed to meet her future spouse for a few minutes at the inner door of the building, always in the presence of the Mother Superior.

In the period between the marriage request and the final celebration, with the girl leaving the institute for good and subsequent delivery of the dowry, it was strictly forbidden to receive any gift from the future husband.

In the case of orphans, once marriage negotiations had been completed, the girl was sent back to her family of origin. Foundlings were not allowed to leave the institute and only did so when being accompanied by the director or spiritual father to the church for the wedding celebration; after she was definitively handed over to her spouse.

In the orphanage in Bitonto (Bari) founded in 1852, on receiving requests of marriage the institute played the role of the 'head of the family'²⁸. The administrators, after having received the 'ambasciata', made strident checks on the moral qualities, financial circumstances and state of health of the pretender. They questioned parish priests, neighbours, employers or others whose names had been provided by the young man, aware they would be asked for credentials. The family situation and job commitment were the two kingpins around which the figure of a good husband revolved while the man's job was the main guarantee for the couple's future.

At this stage, and with a positive result, the young man was allowed to meet the chosen girl and under the strict supervision of the mother superior the brief encounter between the young couple, which preceded the marriage, could take place. The dowry assigned to the girl was the fruit of work carried out over the years within the institute. Earnings for work done were divided into three sums: one for the institute, one for the communal coffers benefitting all girls and one only for working girls. The historical archives in Bitonto

²⁷ *Stato Civile delle dodici sezioni della città di Napoli dall'anno 1809 all'anno 1865*, Officina Tipografica Dir. Rinaldi e G. Sellitto, Napoli 1879.

²⁸ For a detailed reconstruction of the history of the orphanage in Bitonto, see A. Carbone, *Esposti e orfani nella Puglia dell'Ottocento*, Cacucci Editore, Bari 2000, second chapter, *Fanciulle recluse in Terra di Bar: l'istituto Maria Cristina di Savoia di Bitonto*, p. 67-115.

housed their bank books where money for work done was deposited, later to be given to the girls on leaving the institute for good.

After years of being enclosed and a severe upbringing, the dowry guaranteed by the institute represented, for those thousands of girls, a foot on the first rung of the social ladder of the society from which they had hitherto been shunned and now finally deemed good mothers and honest workers.

Conclusion

The customs, the symbolic dimensions and the rituals that characterized the period before the marriage of girls in Southern Italy between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were strongly influenced by social belonging and the legal status of the girls.

Around the marriage revolved a complex ritual that articulated procedures, roles and functions: from the choice of the partner to the promise of marriage, from the importance of the bride's outfit to the collective participation and to the "spectacle" of the wedding in the higher social classes, through the composition of odes, sonnets and writings in honor of the *nubendi*.

Turning their gaze to the poorest fringes of the population, in the impossibility of guaranteeing a dowry to their daughters, the families turned to a dense welfare network – made up of *Monti di pietà*, *Monti dotali* e *Monti di maritaggio* – for which the donation of charity skills has always been one of the main statutory purposes.

The same experience of habits and customs that interested the girls of marriageable age who lived in the family was carried out, for the orphans and the institutionalized foundlings, by the welfare institutions in charge of them. In this case, on the occasion of a marriage request, the institute carried out the functions of a *good family man*, ascertaining the economic and social conditions of the claimant and guaranteeing a dowry to the girl upon leaving the institution, which, thus, crowned his dream of bride and mother.