“A Pattern of Perfect Friendship”: The Utility of Love in Italian Renaissance Marriage

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In 1415, while staying in the house of Cosimo de Medici1, Francesco Barbaro wrote his treatise on marriage, titled On Wifely Duties (De re uxoria) dedicated to Lorenzo de Medici “from your friend Francesco”2 as a wedding gift. In this work Barbaro identifies what he deems the three attributes of a good wife, as “love for her husband, modesty of life and a diligent and complete care in domestic matters”.3 The concept of love as key to a successful marriage is interesting as Barbaro wrote his treatise during a period in which marriage served a significant political purpose of preserving noble lineages and with them the continuity of the republic.4 This was particularly true for republican city states like Venice and Florence. Within this context, Renaissance Italian elites considered marriages for the alliances they forged between families and their potential profitability5 and so on the surface Barbaro’s construction of conjugal love and “pattern of perfect friendship”6 within an ideal wife seems at odds with the realities of marriage. Evidence of this can be found in the way in which marriage and marriage negotiations were recorded by families such as the Strozzi. This source reveals a strong concern for practical matters of marriages such as dowry and alliances in order to satisfy the needs of the extended family.7

Comparing Barbaro’s treatise with these accounts of Renaissance marriage then raises the question of why conjugal love was considered an important aspect of a successful marriage to Renaissance humanists. To answer this question it is necessary to examine Barbaro’s context

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1 Kenneth R. Bartlett “Marriage the Family and Women” in The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance : A Sourcebook (North York, Ont. ; Tonawanda, N.Y: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 113
3 Barbaro On Wifely Duties in Kohl and Witt The Earthly Republic, p.192
4 Bartlett “Marriage, the Family and Women” in The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance p. 113
6 Barbaro On Wifely Duties in Kohl and Witt The Earthly Republic, p.196
as a Renaissance humanist and attempt to identify the utility of the humanist construction of love within marriage. Barbaro’s main argument and purpose for writing his treatise is key to this task and reveals the significance of gender roles in Renaissance Italy as well as the inextricable link between patriarchy and political authority.8

As a Renaissance humanist Barbaro reflects the Italian Renaissance attraction to power, wealth and family life9 and legitimises these values within the ruling elite through his construction of the role of the husband as the supreme authority within a marriage, supported by references to classical antiquity including Xenophon, Augustine, Aristotle and Plutarch.10 At the same time his emphasis on the “great power and high dignity”11 of love within a marriage reveals a need to mediate what Caferro identifies as the economic power held by wives due to the dowry system, particularly within the Venetian state.12 Less overtly, Barbaro’s treatise also highlights the need for Renaissance humanists to regulate the structures of families and the role of women in the face of increased participation in political life due to the blurring of boundaries between the personal and domestic and the political and public.

To understand the idealised construction of love within Renaissance marriage that is presented by Barbaro, an understanding of his identity as both a member of one of the ruling Venetian families and his humanist, university education13 is significant. Within this context a broader knowledge of the purpose and method of Renaissance humanist writers can be established. While humanists were primarily interested in reviving classical antiquity, specifically the classical Greek and Latin texts14 they also played a role in the dissemination of ideological truths which did not always necessarily stand up against the political realities of

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8 William Caferro “Gender: Who was the Renaissance Woman” in Contesting the Renaissance (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 64
9 Charles Nauert “Humanism and Italian Society” in Humanism and the culture of Renaissance Europe (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 64
10 Caferro “Gender: Who was the Renaissance Woman” in Contesting the Renaissance, p.64
11 Barbaro On Wifely Duties in Kohl and Witt The Earthly Republic, p.196
12 Caferro “Gender: Who was the Renaissance Woman” in Contesting the Renaissance, p.67
13 Bartlett “Marriage, the Family and Women” in The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance p. 113
Renaissance Italy. In writing *On Wifely Duties* Barbaro was participating in the humanist practice of producing moral treatises that expressed ideas on various traditional or new problems. This specific treatise was written as a wedding gift for a member of one most prominent and wealthy families in Florence and so was written not just to honor a close friendship but as a way for Barbaro to further his own career as both a writer and politician which would happen later in his life when he rose to prominence as a Venetian Statesman. Barbaro also overtly notes his wider purpose of “instructing young men” and therefore reveals a wider audience than just Lorenzo de Medici, to whom the treatise is addressed. In this way the treatise is unavoidably linked to the political landscape of both republican Florence and Venice and presents an example of the dominating force that humanism was to the culture of the ruling elites. Another key aspect of humanist works was the legitimising of new and modern concepts by looking to the past and classical antiquity. As noted by D’Elia in his examination of fifteenth century wedding orations in Italy, humanists had a tendency to promote ideals and attributes in brides that were absent from earlier constructions of marriage. Simultaneously, these brides were compared to the women of classical antiquity in order to demonstrate these same virtues and their excellence. In recognising this broader humanist approach to the social and political conceptions of marriage, Barbaro’s treatise is grounded in its context and therefore represents a humanist construction of idealised love in Renaissance marriage.

The idealised, humanist construction of conjugal love within Barbaro’s treatise is specifically addressed in chapter two where he states “let her (a wife) be so close to him that
nothing seems good or pleasant without her husband”. This establishes the tone of the treatise in its treatment and construction of love and imbues this concept with the ideals of devotion and sacrifice tempered by obedience. Also key to Barbaro’s construction of conjugal love within a marriage is the need for authenticity from a wife in her love for her husband, illustrated by his use of the analogy of the farmer, the physician, the horseman and the musician. Barbaro supports this idea with references to classical antiquity, specifically the Cretans. This reference highlights an interesting point of tension in Barbaro’s argument. While he acknowledges the way in which the Cretans allowed their daughters to choose their own husband based on suitability he tempers this by pointing out how they also believed that it was impossible for a couple to fall in love immediately and that mutual love should therefore be “freely and diligently acquired”. In this way Barbaro avoids undermining the strategic approach to marriage that was the norm in Renaissance Italy, instead supporting it by suggesting that love is a virtue that can be acquired through diligent devotion.

The best way to understand Barbaro’s construction of conjugal love as a humanist ideal is to compare him with his contemporaries. Kolsky constructs an interesting argument, when examining the biographies of women written by humanist court writers Mario Equicola and Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti and the conclusions he comes to about humanist constructions of marriage during the Renaissance can also be applied to Barbaro’s treatise and construction of love. Key to Kolsky’s argument is the way in which Equicola and Arienti reflect discussions and ideas regarding the role of women, that infiltrated court life and how both their writings display a subtext which broke with traditional constructions of marriage. While Kolsky is clear in pointing out the differences between Equicola’s more radical version of “matrimonial relation” captured through his reworking of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*, and Arienti’s more traditional treatment of the role of a wife, he highlights the way in which both texts attempt to regulate wives and women as they became more politically and economically active during the Renaissance including the increased scope for important tasks being taken on

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23 Barbaro On Wifely Duties in Kohl and Witt The Earthly Republic, p.196
24 Barbaro On Wifely Duties in Kohl and Witt The Earthly Republic, p.198
by wives\textsuperscript{27}. When applied to Barbaro’s treatise, this argument reveals the dual utility of conjugal love in an idealised humanist marriage as both reflective of patrician family structure and reactive to the changing landscape of marriage and the role of wives. The unity that Barbaro praises in his treatise serves the purpose of mediating the public life of the wife by defining her identity as inextricable from her husband. This argument can also help to explain the obvious differences between the ideological humanist construction of marriage and the more transactional reality of Renaissance marriage.

In contrast to Barbaro’s idealised construction of marriage and the wife as defined by virtue rather than wealth\textsuperscript{28} is the economic and politically focussed records of the marriage negotiations of the Strozzi. These correspondences of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi to her son Filippo Strozzi, written between 1464 and 1465 reveal the calculated way in which Renaissance marriages were arranged and prospective wives were analysed. In the case of Filippo, consideration for the idealised virtues of his potential wife, as defined by the humanists are sidelined in favour of choosing a bride who will contribute to the “tranquillity and to the consolation”\textsuperscript{29} of his immediate and extended kin. The matter of the dowry of a potential wife is also given consideration within the Strozzi marriage negotiations, with the small dowry for Francesco Tangali’s daughter being a factor in his likelihood of giving his daughter to Fillipo Strozzi despite Strozzi’s status as an exile at the time\textsuperscript{30}. Alessandra Strozzi goes on to further state that “people who are willing to make a marriage agreement with exiles have some flaw”,\textsuperscript{31} citing a lack of money as the most common of these. The economic factors in the arranging of marriages were incredibly significant in Renaissance Italy and the development of the dowry system, specifically in central and northern Italy impacted society and politics at an ideological level\textsuperscript{32}. As identified by Klapisch-Zuber, the dowry system meant that dowry

\textsuperscript{27}Kolsky “Bending the rules” in \textit{Marriage in Italy}, p. 234
\textsuperscript{28}Margaret L. King “Caldiera and the Barbaros on marriage and the family: humanist reflections of Venetian realities” in \textit{Humanism, Venice and Women} (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), p. 33
\textsuperscript{29}“Marriage Negotiations: The Strozzi, 1464-65” in in \textit{The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance} p. 137
\textsuperscript{30}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31}Ibid.
negotiations generally resulted in a redistribution of economic power. It is no surprise then that in the Strozzi correspondence, Alessandra is less concerned with finding the idealised wife constructed by the humanists and more focussed on the economic implications of a potential marriage. In identifying the economic focus of Alessandra Strozzi, it is important to note that due to the inherent contradictions in the dowry system, particularly in Florence a poorly arranged marriage could result in tensions and complaints for those involved.

However the question of virtues within a wife is not completely absent from the Strozzi letters. In mentioning Tangali’s daughter in a later correspondence Alessandra Strozzi makes a point of mentioning the girl’s physical beauty and manners. This reveals the way in which marriage was not entirely seen strategically as a tool to maintain status and increase political influence and reveals a concern, albeit minor for a wife who possessed certain attributes. The Strozzi letters also reveal a maternal authority and participation in the organising of important familial alliances by women, a concept which creates an ambiguity around the role of wives and is at odds with the Patrician nature of Renaissance families and humanist constructions of the husband as authoritative and the wife as devotional and not autonomous. This kind of matriarchal authority developed as a new concept during in Renaissance Italy and according to Rogers, contrasted with humanist representations of patrician families. The use of letters to participate in the politics is also echoed in the letters of Isabella d’Este who engaged in extensive correspondence with her husband while he was away, facilitating a level of autonomy and public life that seems misaligned with the relegation of the wife to the domestic sphere and a role of subjugation by the humanists.

In contrast to this subtext of matriarchal power, Caferro argues that the intended purpose of the kind of marriage strategies like those illustrated in the Strozzi correspondence,
was to create fortified patrilineal networks, particularly in Florence.\(^{38}\) This argument is supported by the way in which marriage played a critical role in Italian Renaissance society in terms of forging alliances and increasing wealth with idealised family relationships key to the concept of civilisation\(^{39}\). The kind of Patrician family that Barbaro imagines in his treatise was considered the basis of civil society\(^{40}\). The utility of marriage according to Barbaro and the humanists was therefore related to the natural way in which children and future rulers should be raised in order to uphold civic and family traditions\(^{41}\). By identifying this clear humanist understanding of the utility of marriage, the utility of love within this idealised, humanist construction of marriage is closely related. Within this there is a clear gap between the humanist depiction of an idealised and loving marriage and the reality of marriage as a strategic enterprise. However the utility of conjugal love as constructed by Barbaro, in this regard serves to legitimise the reality of marriage and justify hierarchy of family life and by extension, political life. As noted by Schiesari, texts written by male, humanist authors concerning the regulation of women and their place were themselves evident of a need to redefine and regulate the changing paradigms of family behaviour.\(^{42}\)

While it is clear that the purpose of Barbaro’s treatise on marriage is to overtly legitimise and strengthen the patriarchal structure of Renaissance power and politics, the purpose of love within this treatise cannot be wholly defined as reinforcing the subjugation of a wife to her husband. Contrary to this the deepening affection between spouses that developed in Italy during the fifteenth century which was linked and contributed to the expanding influence of women, specifically wives on the economy and culture of the patriciate\(^{43}\). It can then be argued that the importance of love within idealised humanist constructions of marriage was useful due to the unity it demanded from husbands and wives. This is supported by the

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38 Caferro “Gender: Who was the Renaissance Woman” in Contesting the Renaissance, p.66
41 Ibid. p. 382
way in which wives increasingly participated in the organizing of the extended family and as a consequence became more active in public life. In examining the writing of Arienti, Kolsky argues that through her ability to unify kin, the wife came to represent a feminine ideal of harmony for the humanists as opposed to factionalism. An example of the way in which the function of wives transgressed the boundaries of the purely domestic can be found in the letters of Isabella d’Este as analysed by Carolyn James. These correspondences, according to James show the way in which Isabella and her husband attempted to foster affection and mutual understanding in the face of the changing patriarchal authority and female autonomy within their relationship. With these examples, the utility of love then becomes that of legitimising the increasing shift of elite women from the domestic to the public sphere and their participation in political life. This shift is echoed in the humanist preoccupation with defining the identity of women and wives, such as in Barbaro’s treatise.

The idea of conjugal love within a Renaissance marriage as idealised by humanists such as Barbaro did not necessarily reflect the realities of marriage at the time. As evident in the comparison between Barbaro’s treatise on marriage and the marriage negotiations of the Strozzi, marriage was dominated by economic and political influences rather than the moral virtues of the wife. Specifically the development and of the dowry system and the way in which marriage was valued for its alliance building potential supports this. However as identified by Dean and Lowe the complex nature of marriage in Renaissance Italy means that strategy was not always the defining feature of a marriage. It is undeniable that the idealised, humanist construction of love within a marriage served a dual purpose. On one hand it linked the structure of the patriarchal family to the ruling of the state whilst promoting the virtue of unwavering obedience in a wife for her husband. At the same time, there is evidence that the

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44 Kolsky “Bending the rules: Marriage in Renaissance collections of biographies of famous women” in Dean and Lowe Marriage in Italy, 1300-1650, p. 235
patrician society of Renaissance Italy needed to adopt what Chojnacki describes as “affective culture” in order to mediate changes in relations between the sexes.  

Bibliography


