

Alexander Cowan. *Marriage, Manners and Mobility in Early Modern Venice*. Historical Urban Studies. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007. xviii + 210 pp. index. append. illus. tbls. bibl. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-0-7546-5728-6.

In Venice, Alexander Cowan argues, “the upper levels of society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represented overlapping spaces, where what was shared, be it lifestyle or membership of kinship networks, was more important than what was not, such as the monopoly of political power in the hands of the hereditary patriciate” (91). His proposal for a reformulation of early modern Venetian society is based on examination of *prove di nobiltà* conducted by the Venetian Avogadori di Comun from 1589 to 1699, the purpose of which was to determine the worthiness of non-patrician women proposed as candidates to marry

and give birth to patrician men. Analyzing the *prove* leads Cowan to propose modifying the traditional tripartite division of Venetian society: the patriciate, the merchant-administrative stratum of *cittadini*, and the popular classes. Instead he depicts elite Venetian society as featuring a comprehensive category of *huomini civili* that included the *cittadini* but also embraced other well-off and well-connected non-patricians who shared those lifestyle and kinship similarities with the patriciate.

Cowan sets his analysis in the context of patrician ambivalence about the class's collective identity in the later sixteenth and the seventeenth century. Those decades saw tension between the barricaded exclusiveness that two centuries of legislation had finally secured in the early 1500s and a pressing need for the human and economic resources procurable by admitting new families. This dynamic has been the subject of large-scale studies by Volker Hunecke and Dorit Raines. Cowan's contribution is to gauge reflections of the ambivalence in the testimony of noble and nonnoble witnesses about the status and personal qualities of the families of "outsider" women, as Cowan calls them, who were proposed as patrician brides. He notes that fewer than 7 percent of patrician men married such women, and the 484 *prove* he studied, plus eighty-seven instances of retrospective examinations of outsider wives already married to patricians, add up to an annual average of 5.2 women who sought certification of noble-worthiness during the eleven decades surveyed. That small number enabled the Avogadori di Comun to give applications (*suppliche*) thorough attention, in some cases lasting years, before reaching a verdict. The applicants must have been carefully self-vetted in advance, since nine out of ten *suppliche* proved successful (63, table 3.7). Fifty-one percent of them were daughters either of *cittadini*, of nobles from Venice's mainland territories, or of patrician fathers and their concubines.

Cowan's discussion of those illegitimate patrician daughters, who accounted for sixty-nine (14 percent) of the 484 *prove*, shows that stable concubinage offered an alternative domesticity for male nobles denied marriage by the patrimony-preserving strategy of allowing only one of a group of patrician brothers to marry. Since only women with mothers and grandmothers of irreproachable reputation could pass the Avogadori di Comun's test of noble marriageability, the prospects of illegitimate daughters of patricians rested with the assurances of witnesses that the girls' mothers had been virgins before entering into their monogamous long-term relationships with the fathers. The *prove* also reveal a type of patrician marriage little discussed in the scholarly literature: daughters of nobles marrying non-patrician men; here Cowan's findings nuance Jutta Sperling's claim that monacation was the only alternative to patrician marriage for daughters of the ruling class (*Convents and the Body Politic in Early Modern Venice* [1999]). For Cowan the importance of such marriages lies in the kinship ties they created between nobles and nonnobles, which strengthened the *prove* prospects of girls who had hypogamous patrician kinswomen. That parallels the advantage enjoyed by non-noble families with patrician marriages in their background in the seventeenth-century aggregations of new patricians, as documented by Raines, Hunecke, and Cowan himself.

Cowan's most original findings concern the *suppliche* that were submitted for daughters of non-*cittadino* bureaucrats, merchants, doctors, lawyers, notaries, and others. It was especially important to establish that these girls and their mothers and grandmothers led unsullied lives and that they were at least two generations removed from manual work (*arte meccanica*). So discussion of their *prove*, which accounted for 49% of the total, gives Cowan the opportunity to pinpoint the qualities that made a family worthy of marrying its daughters to nobles, the qualities of the *huomini civili*, even of relatively recent social ascent, that the patriciate assimilated to itself. The yearly average of *prove* is small, as was the percentage of patrician marriages with non-noble women. But the thoroughness of the Avogadori di Comun's examinations and of Cowan's analysis of them, in dialogue with a wide range of scholarship, provides a detailed and persuasive picture of the porousness of the boundaries between noble and non-noble members — whether *cittadini* or not — of the early modern Venetian elite.

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