

Isabelle Chabot. *La dette des familles: femmes, lignage et patrimoine à Florence aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles.*

Collection de l'École française de Rome 445. Rome: École française de Rome, 2011. viii + 450 pp. €60. ISBN: 978-2-7283-0900-3.

This book is a specialized study of female property relations in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence. It is set in the context of historical changes in Florentine property law, and of current scholarship on female property holding, with many comparisons to other Italian cities. It consists of linked essays on female inheritance, rituals of marriage, widowhood, and female opportunities for agency. There are twenty-four tables, based on a substantial number of sources about inheritance, dowry size, widowhood, and the marital and maternal status of women in each category. It is, however, not always easy to know the size of Chabot's sample when she lists her findings only as percentages.

The book's overall theme, as indicated by its title, is that females were usually creditors for, not proprietors of, the property listed in their names — meaning that they only occasionally managed the property they were owed. Their dowries, which usually excluded them from succession to the family estate, passed into the control of their husbands and, often, later their sons, or perhaps returned to the control of their birth family in widowhood. Legacies and other non-dotal property followed a similar pattern. Chabot describes an aggressively patrilineal system that sought to keep family property intact in the male line and avoid dispersal to the female line or to the Church, a patrilineal bias exacerbated by the need to turn to distant male relatives when close male relatives died in the plagues of 1348 and beyond. Chabot discusses similar patrilineal systems in other Italian cities, but finds that the one in Florence was particularly restrictive for women, whereas the one in Venice was somewhat less so.

Part 1 discusses men and women's inheritance choices in their wills, and considers the constraints that reduced the number of women making wills, especially wives. Chabot notes that women made more use of donations than men did, donations being an alternative to wills for property transfer; this reviewer wishes that Chabot had pursued the subject further. Part 2 emphasizes the reciprocity of property transfers in marriage and at the time of the husband's death. These transfers formed part of a ritual exchange aimed at minimizing the conflict potentially arising from the woman's side bringing much more property to the marriage than the husband's — that is, from the woman, the dowry and the woman herself, and from the husband only the much smaller payment, the *donatio propter nuptias*, and gifts of clothing and jewels. The first section of part 3 discusses different options available to the widow, usually dependent on the provisions of her husband's will, and rarely entailing true autonomy: the widow might take her dowry back from her husband's estate and return to her birth family, often to be given another husband; she might be mistress of a household including her children (*donna e Madonna*), with limited powers, however; or she might be part of a group guardianship.

Chabot is generally pessimistic about female property holding, but the final section of part 3 and the conclusion discusses a few areas of resistance against patrilineality. The wife's family would defend her interests against the husband and his family — although in another context, with sons, they would be equally interested in patrilineal inheritance. She also sees signs that the married couple was becoming closer, in spite of patrilineality. Furthermore, women had more agency in their choice of heirs than men did — choice between birth family, marital family, relatives in the female line, and the Church — because men usually felt obliged to leave the bulk of their property to males in the male line. Women's family identity was based on specific relationships in their own lives, unlike men who saw the male line as continuing in perpetuity.

La dette des familles is a carefully researched and analyzed study that can be recommended to those interested in Italian women's history: female inheritance,

marriage, dowries, and widowhood. Part 2 on the ritual cycle of marriage alliance contains insights that are relevant to marriage outside Italy.

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