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## Book Review

KLAPISCH-ZUBER, CHRISTIANE, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 338.

Those of us with an ardent feminist bent can greet the English publication of Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's essays on *Women, Family and Ritual* with cries of joy; however, it is not an unalloyed joy. Unfortunate lapses of methodological rigor, as well as instances of excess bias, mar what is otherwise a sound and needed series of studies.<sup>1</sup>

Klapisch-Zuber draws much of her work from the great Florentine *catasto* of 1427-30. The *catasto* consisted of the tax records of approximately 60,000 families residing in Florence and the surrounding Tuscan countryside under its sway (excepting Siena and Lucca).<sup>2</sup> Klapisch-Zuber begins by discussing the methodological use made of that vast document and some of the demographic insights which it afforded.<sup>3</sup> She then explores whether there might have been a change in familial structure from the later Middle Ages into the Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> She uses the city of Prato, in Florentine Tuscany, as a model to determine the answer for the late fourteenth to late fifteenth centuries. It is here, in impersonal statistical compilations and straightforward reportage, that Klapisch-Zuber is at her best. Using a number of *catasti* and *estimi* from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, she traces the disastrous effects on family composition after the Black Death.<sup>5</sup>

Prato was a town already in decline at the advent of the plague, and by 1410, after successive waves of plague, had been reduced to 950

households from 4,000 in 1310.<sup>6</sup> As the epidemics abated in severity, children, always the hardest hit, rebounded in numbers. Women, however, continued to remain fewer than men, a poignant attestation to the fact that, in rebuilding the population from the bottom through birth, women sacrificed themselves from the top the same way. Klapisch-Zuber states that it is difficult to ascertain the reasons for this “differential decline in the ratio of women to men,”<sup>7</sup> but it would seem that a double vulnerability to both the Black Death and child-birth could account for a good deal.<sup>8</sup>

One result of the drastic population reduction was a change in matrimonial practices. The average age of women at marriage fell at the end of the thirteenth century, but as the population stabilized, ages rose again somewhat.<sup>9</sup> Households were down to 3.4 persons on the average in 1371, as opposed to 3.9 in 1339, but on the rise again to 3.7 persons in 1427. The number of households headed by women fell, and more tended to be headed by older males in conformity with the general aging of the population. Extended families became more common with more and more married sons residing at home with their fathers.<sup>10</sup>

Klapisch-Zuber’s more pressing concern, however, is the condition of women in her carefully described households. One could say from her figures that discrimination against females (at least as represented in Florence) began at birth. Although the general practice during the fifteenth century was to put more infants out to nurse—seemingly without prejudice, Klapisch-Zuber suggests that the statistics tell a different story.<sup>11</sup>

Paying a *balia*<sup>12</sup> to raise one’s infant was, it appears, less prevalent in the fourteenth than in the fifteenth century, and confined at that time almost entirely to the most prominent families.<sup>13</sup> After 1450, however, she asserts that one-half of the families were of fairly modest circumstances.<sup>14</sup> Contracts between the family of the infant and the family of the nurse were arranged strictly by the father of the infant. The mother appears to have been almost entirely excluded from the proceedings, as she is rarely mentioned. The father most usually contracted to send the child to the home of the nursing couple. This was the most economical solution and represented a considerable savings in salary.<sup>15</sup> Having a nurse take a child into her home, naturally meant

a separation from the child for periods up to three years (fifteenth century contracts generally stipulated thirty months). History is silent on how the mother felt about this separation, but Florentines rationalized the necessity by praising the salubrious air of the countryside and other benefits of rural life.<sup>16</sup>

It was at the time of weaning, according to Klapisch-Zuber, that subtle differences in attitudes of fathers towards sons or daughters appeared to manifest themselves. Weaning began, from her sample of well-documented contracts, on the average at 18.7 months and the child returned home at about 20.4 months. In some cases, the child was transferred to another nurse who specialized in weaning, or was left with the same nurse who was paid less during the period in which the child gradually shifted to a more solid diet. In some cases this period lasted up to six months. Klapisch-Zuber attempts to prove that Florentines were more willing to pay for an extended period of weaning for their sons than for their daughters. Her statistics, however, do not support her contentions, since two-thirds of all children, of either sex, appear to have been weaned abruptly and simply returned home. For only a small number of children does she show that more girls than boys made this difficult transition without gradual withdrawal. Girls were, however, nursed for a somewhat shorter period than boys—18 months on the average as against an average of 19.4 months for the boys.<sup>17</sup>

Klapisch-Zuber introduces considerable anecdotal material throughout her essays to support her allegations of discrimination against females. Unfortunately, she has a tendency to pick examples which do the most to undermine her thesis. For example, she reports the case of one father who laments the premature leavetaking of the nurse in June, "when she had promised us to remain with us until September, so that we could avoid having Cecchina weaned during the great heat and before she has all her teeth." Certainly this is an instance of proper parental concern for the well-being of one's child.<sup>18</sup> In addition, she cites one Tribaldo dei Rossi, who deplures the fact that poverty forces him to conclude the breastfeeding of his daughter, Maddalena, at one year, when her brothers and sisters had nursed for up to twenty months. Klapisch-Zuber's claim is that this is a statement not just of financial difficulties, but of sexual discrimination as well. To my mind, Maddalena's father speaks to us not as Klapisch-Zuber would have it, coolly

indifferent, but with every appearance of genuine distress. Birth order definitely served Maddalena badly, however that is no evidence that gender entered into the matter.<sup>19</sup>

Other questions arise with regard to Klapisch-Zuber's accuracy when dealing with gender. In Chapter Five, "Childhood in Tuscany," she claims that putting a child out to nurse "may have represented more of a threat to girls than to boys. Florentine parents, in fact, left their babies of the fair sex with a nurse longer than their sons."<sup>20</sup> This is in direct contradiction to the picture she paints in Chapter Seven, which I have discussed above. Furthermore this contradicts another statement Klapisch-Zuber makes in Chapter Seven that infant mortality was higher among male infants put out to nurse than it was for female. Inconsistently again, she stresses that breastfeeding provided a better overall chance for survival—better, certainly, than those poor innocents who filled the foundling homes.<sup>21</sup>

It is probable that in the cases of foundlings, Klapisch-Zuber does not overstate when she blames indifference to the well-being of girls. Many more girls than boys were recorded as being taken into the hospices.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, more girls than boys seem to have been abandoned in times of crisis than in times of relative peace.<sup>23</sup> The charge of gender discrimination seems to be real, although, once again we must be careful with Klapisch-Zuber's conclusions. Because more girls than boys suffered abandonment, she judges this to be one reason for the imbalance of the sexes between the ages of one and seven.<sup>24</sup> She ignores that fact that infant mortality was higher in general for infant boys than for infant girls (except possibly during periods of plague).<sup>25</sup> This would have somewhat reduced the imbalance, even accepting the larger number of abandoned females, unless the girls were deliberately starved.

A girl of the upper classes need not fear the foundling homes, but abandonment of another sort. She might be educated at home, however it was equally possible that she would be educated in a convent. Separated from her family by the age of seven, she would remain in the convent until marriage, if so destined. If intended for the religious life, she would remain there forever.<sup>26</sup>

The most common age for marriage was between 17 and 18 for young women.<sup>27</sup> If a girl had been educated in the convent, she would pass

as a stranger from the house of her father to the house of her husband, where, because of her "foreign" lineage, she would be even more a stranger. Frequently, her husband would be much older than she. She would often find herself the step-mother of six or eight children, destined to add eight or ten of her own to the already tumultuous brood. Spoken of only in reference to her father or husband, she would be forgotten quickly. If she were mentioned in the *ricordi*, there would be an explanation of this untoward inclusion, as though the chronicler needed to excuse himself. Most often, while alliances with important lineages were recorded, the given name of the women who "built" the alliance would be omitted.<sup>28</sup>

If widowed young, a woman of the upper class would become a pawn in a relentless game of political and economic chess. Although theoretically she had some options concerning the way she would live the rest of her life, in actuality she would be subject to ruthless pressures. On the one hand, the pressure would come from her own family wanting her to remarry in order to reuse her dowry, and on the other from her husband's family wishing her to stay and keep the dowry with them.<sup>29</sup> Dowries, were "irrevocably attached . . . to the physical person of the woman for the duration of her life,"<sup>30</sup> and, if a widow could be coaxed home, her dowry came with her. If she were young enough, her remarriage was a chance for her family to possibly make a more advantageous alliance, or at least create a "whole new circle of affines."<sup>31</sup> A most unfortunate consequence of this custom was that when a widow went home, she took her dowry but not her children. Children "belonged" to their paternal lineage. It was rare that their maternal kin would take them in, and nearly inconceivable that a step-father would accept them. When the mother left, taking her dowry, the children were abandoned to a destitute fate, except through the intercession of their charitable agnatic kinfolk.<sup>32</sup>

Imagine the dilemma for the young widowed mother. All her life she had been taught obedience, first to her father, then to her husband. On the death of their husbands, many young women reverted to earlier habits—subservience to their own families. The weight of public opinion, in addition, was on them to remarry. If they remained unmarried they were suspect, even older widows were subject to the accusation of unchastity. As virtual aliens in their husband's families, they could look

forward to a bleak existence at best, and submission to the demands of their own lineage separated them from their children forever.

Those women who bowed to the pressures exerted by their families were characterized as “cruel” mothers<sup>33</sup>—greedy, heartless, avid, inconstant, etc. Only a few men were able to look beyond their male biases and see to the truth of the problem, and only a few of these came to the defense of woman’s position. One such was Giovanni Gherardi of Prato, who wrote *Paradiso degli Alberti* about 1425. In that courtly discussion he pitted a young man who denigrates women against a young woman “of great wit and of most noble manners.”<sup>34</sup> The young woman turns the man’s own words against him when she states that since women are less perfect than men, they must therefore obey and follow them.<sup>35</sup>

The young woman’s spirited defense provides us with some insight into the way women really felt in their situations. What Klapisch-Zuber fails to acknowledge is that it provides some clue to the way men felt as well. The two do not seem to be all that far apart, if Gherardi was at all representative.<sup>36</sup> Sadly, men were trapped by the very institutions they themselves had made.

The dowry was one such institution. Generally deplored,<sup>37</sup> it nevertheless flourished. What would make generations cling to a system that seemingly worked such a hardship? The notion that the dowry was the equivalent of a woman’s share of her family’s estate is ridiculous on the face of it. The dowry portion rarely approached the amount awarded to male descendants, and real property was seldom, if ever, included. Moreover, in a family with several daughters, the later-born frequently received less than the eldest.<sup>38</sup>

The argument, that the dowry system responded to the law of supply and demand, is a specious one as well.<sup>39</sup> Presumably men paid a bride-price in the early Middle Ages because women were scarce. Subsequently, women paid a dowry in the later period because men were supposedly in short supply.<sup>40</sup> The above argument makes very little sense if we accept Klapisch-Zuber’s figures on the imbalance between men and women in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, pointing to a definite shortage of women in that period, just when dowry inflation was reaching its peak.<sup>41</sup>

Diane Owen Hughes offers one explanation for the institution of the dowry, when she notes that the exclusion of dowered women from the familial estate had “an unmistakable flavor of masculine privilege.”<sup>42</sup> In Genoa, women were not only barred from the estates of their fathers, but their descendants were also unable to profit from the maternal fortunes.<sup>43</sup> In Florence, if there were not brothers or nephews to inherit, females could recover only up to one-fourth of the estate, with the rest going to agnatic kin.<sup>44</sup> Klapisch-Zuber quotes Hughes to support her supposition that the exclusion of women from the familial estate caused them to become wives “inevitably more subjected to their husbands.”<sup>45</sup>—but, were they?

In his article on Venetian dowry customs, Stanley Chojnacki reveals that not only fathers, but mothers as well, were called upon to provide dowries for their daughters. In cases, also, where an unmarried girl lacked paternal relatives to provide for her, her maternal grandfather or other maternal ascendants assumed the responsibility.<sup>46</sup> This is more than a suggestion of some matrilineal economic control. Interesting, too, is the constant rise in the ratio of women’s wills to men’s. Since the increase occurred after the depredations of the Black Death, perhaps women were more aware of their double vulnerability to plague and childbirth, and thus became concerned with testacy.<sup>47</sup>

As a result of dowry inflation, and a lowering of the age of marriage, even younger women were able to dispose of larger estates, and their first concern was for their daughters.<sup>48</sup> After the middle of the fourteenth century, both frequency and size of women’s contributions rose, by the early fifteenth century amounting to more than one-third of parental contributions.<sup>49</sup> Chojnacki stresses the social significance of this maternal involvement, which he interprets as an increasingly larger role being played by those much less committed to the paternal lineage.<sup>50</sup> Surely, greater involvement indicated greater influence and control by women.

Can it be that Florentines differed from the rest of Italy? Were they more tyrannical, more arrogant, more fiercely chauvinistic than the Venetians or the Genoese? Are Florentine women the “subservient” wives Klapisch-Zuber speaks of? Well, possibly. Thomas Kuehn introduces the institution of the *mundualdus* in support of this view.<sup>51</sup>



The *mundualdus* was an adult male appointed to assist a Florentine woman in her legal transactions, in theory a disinterested party. The important fact was that women were not empowered to act on their own. An equally important fact was that Florence was the only major Tuscan city to preserve this institution in the precise sense as a guardian over women. Kuehn asserts: "The supposed natural inferiority of women justified not only a legal inferiority, but a social inferiority."<sup>52</sup> It may be, then, that Florentine women were in actuality more subservient.

Since we have seen that many superfluous upper-class girls were relegated to the convent, was domestic service a viable alternative for the poorer girl? It would seem from Klapisch-Zuber's statistics that more domestic servants were drawn from the ranks of married and widowed women than from the unmarried—a ratio of about two to three. It is unfortunate that again we cannot rely on Klapisch-Zuber, since her figures do not agree with her conclusions. While on one page she states that she is using a sample of 132 women, on the next page the number has dropped to 111 women. Of these, she claims 52 are unmarried and 80 are married. These numbers do add up to the original 132 women, but she further avers that these are 44% and 56%, respectively, which is inaccurate, regardless of which number correctly represents the universe of her sample.<sup>53</sup>

However, domestic service could have been a good thing for the undowered girl, or for the woman who intended to reject matrimony altogether. There are a significant number of contracts which promised dowers to girls when they reached marriageable age, and others were guaranteed a home until death if they were not to marry.<sup>54</sup>

This, then, was a Florentine woman's destiny during the fifteenth century. Separation, lifelong alienation, and then death, if not from the plague, then certainly from the toll of child-bearing.<sup>55</sup> As David Herlihy has put it, these are "bleak" statistics.<sup>56</sup>

If the statistics are bleak just of themselves, it is a shame that Klapisch-Zuber did not let them stand on their own, without overstatement. In too many cases, poor choices of support material or inaccurate figures cast some doubt on the study, and her determination to see discrimination even where unnecessary further weakens her thesis. One

must acknowledge that she has performed an enormous service to history by her efforts to shed light on the structures of the family and the role of women. One must note as well, however, the pitfalls inherent in such an undertaking. A little more care with regard to these pitfalls would have made Klapisch-Zuber's contribution truly outstanding.

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## Notes

1. David Herlihy's remark in the Foreword that the *ricordanze* "admit of some statistical manipulation," is more apposite than he realizes, and unwittingly ironic. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. viii.

2. *Ibid.* p. 2. After 1427 *catasti* were limited to Florence and the immediate surroundings (*contado*).

3. *Ibid.* Klapisch-Zuber and colleagues embarked on an analysis of the 1427 *catasto* some 20 years ago—an exhausting, although not exhaustive, task.

4. *Ibid.* p. 23.

5. *Ibid.* p. 26.

6. *Ibid.* This reduction constituted a shocking loss of 72% of the population in only one century.

7. *Ibid.* p. 27. Klapisch-Zuber has some further suggestions which she does not introduce here (chapter 5).

8. *Ibid.* This is an inconsistency on Klapisch-Zuber's part since she notes the toll which childbirth exacted from women.

9. Ages for women were down from twenty-five at the end of the thirteenth century to sixteen in 1371. Men's ages fell from forty to twenty-four. *Ibid.* p. 29.

10. *Ibid.* p. 31.

11. *Ibid.* pp. 138ff. She describes the circumstances of this practice, taking her information from the *ricordanze*.

12. Wetnurse.

13. *Ibid.* p. 134. Klapisch-Zuber states that between 1302 and 1399, out of fifteen families known to have put children out to nurse, only two did not come from the highest rank.

14. *Ibid.* It is uncertain, as Klapisch-Zuber points out, whether the above represents an actual change in societal practices or simply reflects a trend toward better record keeping.

15. Ibid. pp. 136, 143. Nurses *in casa* were paid approximately eighteen to twenty *fiorini* a year, as compared to a nurse in her own home, who received from nine to fifteen *fiorini* a year depending on the distance of her home from Florence. These *fiorini* were *fiorini da serva* which amounted to about 4 *lire* to a *fiorino*—not as valuable as a *fiorino d'oro*.

16. Ibid. p. 137. One ironic side effect of the practice of wet nursing was that the nurse, herself, often had to find an even poorer woman to nurse her own child, and paid out of her own wages. There is something horribly humorous about this “stair-step” system of child-rearing, as children were passed from household to household in the manner of rented commercial commodities.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid. p. 158. Klapisch-Zuber acknowledges this fact but feels it is a rare instance, but without any other evidence that it is rare.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid. p. 105.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid. p. 104. At Santa Maria della Scala, for example, there were 98 girls recorded, as opposed to 41 boys.

23. Ibid. During the years from 1430–39, a period of war and poverty, two-thirds of the foundlings in San Gallo were girls.

24. Ibid. pp. 103–105. Klapisch-Zuber makes a puzzling choice of examples when she cites figures from the baptismal records of San Giovanni to “reflect” the practice of abandonment. She states that there was a ratio of 104 boys to 100 girls. This is a normal birth ratio, as she, herself, remarks.

25. Ibid. p. 104. Mortality rates were particularly high in the hospices—from 26.6% during the “relatively good years” between 1445–47, to an appalling 50% in the years up to 1451, for an average of 40.3% in that short time.

26. Ibid. p. 109. A girl would generally take the veil between nine and eleven years of age, and make her final vows by age thirteen.

27. Ibid. p. 111. The *catasto* does report one 11-year old boy and one 13-year old boy married to girls of 12.

28. Ibid. pp. 118ff.

29. Ibid. p. 120, pp. 123ff. Widows were considerably more numerous than widowers in Tuscan society (13.6% against 2.4% respectively), with the highest ratio in Florence itself (25% widows, 4% widowers). Men remarried much more easily and up to a much older age than women (widowers were generally over 70). It seemed to be much more difficult for “mature” women to remarry. Women who were widowed before 20 remarried two-thirds of the time; those widowed between 30 and 39 remarried only 11% of the time. Men remarried as much as 75% of the time up to age 60.

30. Ibid. p. 123.

31. Ibid. A woman’s kin came to claim her immediately after the funeral, when it was deemed honorable for her to depart with her family.

32. Ibid. pp. 134–127.

33. Ibid. p. 128f.

34. Ibid. p. 130.

35. Ibid. p. 130f. “. . . since [women] cannot take their children nor keep them with them, and they cannot remain alone without harm, . . . it is almost perforce that mothers see themselves constrained to choose the best compromise. But it is not to be doubted that they think constantly of their children . . .” The master of ceremonies, after an astonished speech about the perspicacity of women, awards the victory to the ladies.

36. Even if he were not representative, he proved that there were at least a few men sensitive to the plight of women.

37. Diane Owen Hughes, “From Bridgeprice to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe,” *Journal of Family History*, 3: 262–296 (1978), p. 282. Stanley Chojnacki, “Dowries and Kinsmen in Early Renaissance Venice,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4: 571–600 (1975), p. 571.

38. Hughes. pp. 280–281. To save even more on dowries, it was a common practice to simply lock daughters away in convents, which were often spoken of as being little better than brothels. The will of Leone Morosini, in 1342, provided his daughter Lucia a dowry of 576 ducats, plus a *corredum* of 346 ducats. If his then-pregnant wife were to give birth to a daughter, Morosini had made a provision for that daughter to be placed in a convent and given an annuity of ten ducats, a considerable savings. Chojnacki. p. 576.

39. Both Hughes and Klapisch-Zuber attack it, and I must concur. Hughes. p. 285. Klapisch-Zuber, p. 215.

40. Hughes. p. 285. Due partially, it seems, to the practice of primogeniture, which did not apply in Italy. Hughes also refers to “collective restraint” as a probable cause, but does not define this phrase.

41. Chojnacki. p. 571. Klapisch-Zuber. pp. 102ff.

42. Hughes. p. 280.

43. Ibid.

44. Klapisch-Zuber. p. 214.

45. Ibid. p. 213.

46. Chojnacki. p. 577. Maternal wills provided most of the information regarding dowry bequests.

47. Ibid. pp. 584–585. Many of the wills were drawn up by women who were pregnant. According to Chojnacki’s speculations, the number may have been as high as 49.2%, since 31 of the wills were drawn up by women who may have been pregnant, but did not so state. †

48. Chojnacki. pp. 584–586.

49. Ibid. pp. 586–587.

50. Ibid. pp. 586ff. This meant that property could be more widely diffused into two, or more, separate lineages.

51. Thomas Kuehn, "Cum consensu mundualdus: Legal Guardianship of Women in Quattrocento Florence," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 13: 309–333 (1982), pp. 309–311.

52. *Ibid.* pp. 318–319. Canon law affirmed women's rights to exercise a form of legal control over their husbands. Jurists, however, were willing to accept statutory restrictions on the legal capacities of women on the grounds that they were "protecting" women because of their "simplicity" and supposed weaknesses of mind and body. *Ibid.* pp. 309ff.

53. Klapisch-Zuber. pp. 172–173.

54. *Ibid.* pp. 165–173. Practically speaking, the system seems to have benefitted widows in distress and married women facing an economic crisis more than the unmarried.

55. From *ricordanze* statements, pregnancy seems to have been continuous. Wet-nursing may have been one way to avoid a double burden. One Antonio di ser Tommaso Masi reported that his wife, who died at 57, had given him 36 children, 28 of whom were put out to nurse. He proudly stated that, at the time of her death, the poor exhausted woman still had 9 living male children. Klapisch-Zuber, p. 135, n. 11.

56. *Ibid.* Foreword p. ix.