WOMEN, GOSSIP AND MARRIAGE IN EARLY MODERN VENICE*

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This article arises from my recent study of the prove di nobiltà, which was published by Ashgate in November 2007.[1] Witnesses interviewed by the magistrates of the Avogaria di Comun gave detailed oral testimony about the women who wished to obtain official approval to marry patrician husbands and bear sons who would go on to serve as members of the Maggior Consiglio. Some of this testimony was based on direct personal knowledge, but much was based on hearsay, or, in other words, on gossip. These records are used here to explore the mechanisms by

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[1] A. Cowan, *Marriage, Manners and Mobility in early Modern Venice*, Aldershot, 2007.

which information about the making of marriages and its context circulated within Venice.

Definitions of gossip vary. For the men of early modern Europe, it was a pejorative term for conversation between women, and was used to counteract a perceived threat to male hegemony from an activity over which they had no control.[2] The content of these conversations was belittled in order to give greater value to the purposeful exchanges between men. These value-loaded associations persist in present-day terms such as *commèrage* (French) or *pettegolezze* (Italian), the one drawing attention to the exclusive participation of women, the other to the potentially scandalous subject matter of gossip. In the English language, on the other hand, the term 'gossip' has begun to lose some of these associations as it has become the subject for serious academic study. In anthropological terms, it can be considered as two associated phenomena that have endured over time and in different societies: the transfer of information through conversation, and the actual information that is communicated. These bring together process and content. Gossip is no longer considered to be gender-specific in the sense that the term embraces both male and female conversation. On the other hand it is also recognized that the process of gossip can be highly gendered. For the history of culture, also, the subjects of gossip and the implications behind their selection and the way in which they were discussed all open the door to an

[2] B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet. Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England*, Oxford, 2003, pp. 49-55.

understanding of a widespread set of cultural values. These provided a framework within which people could pass judgment on one another.

In a conference about the history of women in Venice, a discussion of this kind might be expected to focus on gossip as a female activity. This will not be the case. It is argued here that, far from being an exclusively female practice, both men and women engaged in gossip. This exchange of information has much to tell us about a range of social norms. This article also suggests that the spatial location within which the circulation of information took place was of almost as much importance as the identity of the individuals involved. Rather than seeing gossip as something which took place exclusively in public, we can conclude that the way in which it took place undermined formal distinctions between the public and the private. Examining the spatial context also emphasises the importance of visual observation in starting a chain of comments based first on unspoken assumptions. The last part of the article argues that as far as information about impending marriages was concerned, gossip was far from an uncontrolled circulation of information which individuals and their families wished to keep private. On the contrary, gossip networks were deliberately used by the families of brides about to marry patrician husbands in order to spread the news as a way of enhancing their own standing within their immediate localities.

While there were many subjects for gossip in early modern Venice as in other urban societies at the time - political speculation, meteorological phenomena, slander,

domestic disputes, information about trading conditions and so on - this discussion is restricted to gossip about marriage and in particular to gossip about the preliminary stages of the making of marriages. The oral testimony given to the Venetian magistracy of the Avogaria di Comun on which this based generally took place before any religious ceremonies has been completed but after a marriage had been arranged between a Venetian patrician and the family of a woman who did not belong to the patriciate. A succession of laws from 1589 established a series of tests to evaluate the social status and moral reputation of potential patrician brides and their families. Failure to pass these tests meant that any sons born to such mixed marriages were automatically excluded from the Maggior Consiglio.[3] The testimony which was given therefore concerned not only the knowledge that a marriage had been arranged, but also judgments about the future bride and her family.

Visual observation: the case of the Campo San Barnaba

Visual observation gave rise to gossip for one of two main reasons. In one case, the gender, status or age of the person being observed gave rise to certain expectations

[3] For an extended analysis of these investigations, see Cowan, *Marriage, Manners*, cit. This is based on 579 surviving cases considered by the Avogaria di Comun between 1589 (the year in which these investigations were first established) and 1699.

about their behaviour. Generally, social observation operated within a narrow range of conformity, but in the case of widows or nubile girls, these expectations sometimes provoked appraisal that ranged between two extremes. At such times, they aroused curiosity and invited swift, firm judgment. Was a widow chaste, or was she lusty? Was a nubile girl modest, or was she incautious in her interaction with others in public? Observers looked for evidence to answer these all-important questions in order to reinforce their cultural world and to police their social world.[4] On observing something out of the ordinary, their response was so strong that they then proceeded to speak to someone else about it, initiating a chain of gossip.

This can be illustrated by looking at a very specific context, the Campo San Barnaba, and a specific example, that of the responses by local residents to the widow, Camilla Colonna, who lived quietly in an apartment in the campo in the 1640s until she remarried in 1649. Neighbourhood gossip placed her in the category of the 'modest widow'. Other sources, however, make it clear that while she was widowed, Camilla had led a double life.[5] In the patrician Malipiero family palace in the parish of San Samuele, which lies opposite San Barnaba across the Grand Canal, Camilla was not known as a modest widow with no compromising male visitors, but as the mistress of the

[4] See Cowan, *Marriage, Manners*, cit. chapter VII, *Gender, honourable and dishonourable behaviour*.

[5] The case arose when the two daughters of her second marriage were considered many years later by the Avogaria di Comun. Archivio di Stato, Venice, *Avogaria di Comun* (hereafter *AdC*) 235/46; 241/70.

rather corpulent Ottavian Malipiero; a relationship that may have continued after she married. The width of the Grand Canal sufficed to separate her two lives. Given its breadth by comparison with Venetian streets and the presence of a single crossing by foot over the Rialto Bridge, the Grand Canal acted as a major barrier to the circulation of gossip. Once Camilla had walked a short distance out of the campo and taken the ferry across the canal from San Barnaba to San Samuele, she was literally in a different world.[6]

As Camilla's story proves, much of Venetian life was indeed parochial. While contiguous parishes often shared public knowledge of their inhabitants, those separated by the Grand Canal or by greater distances across lesser canals were almost separate spheres. Neighbours had no knowledge of someone whom they had ceased to see on a daily basis. When individuals or families moved from one area to another, it was almost as if they had dropped entirely out of sight.[7]

The same was often the case when individuals engaged in contrasting behaviour out of view or earshot of their neighbours. Consequently, when Camilla's neighbours in the Campo San Barnaba were later asked about her behaviour, they saw what they expected to see (conduct by a virtuous widow). Their comments also revealed rather more about their own behaviour and expectations. They took an interest in their neighbours and spent some time

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[6] *AdC* 235/46; 241/70.

[7] See comments by witnesses in the cases of Barbara Raisis (*AdC* 207/63); Vittoria Grotta, (222/47, 2do).

observing them, not for any prurient reasons but because they could see them either from their homes, their places of work, or while crossing the square on day to day business, and that they were accustomed to look around them and to process what they had seen in social terms. These observations were also corroborated by what they heard from gossip. Pietro Pischiato had a barber's shop on the Campo San Barnaba. He knew that Camilla had lived in the Campo for two or three years in an apartment above the fruit shop in a house belonging to the Pasqualigo family. She had three servants: two maids and a cook, and lived comfortably. He saw the fruit merchant come to her house to do errands for her. He was also asked if she had any other male visitors and replied that, apart from her landlord, her only visitor was her brother. This was clearly a leading question and the part of the investigating magistrates. A woman's moral reputation would have been seriously compromised if it were known that she had several male visitors. On the other hand, the readiness with which the question was answered also suggests that the same question must also have occurred to her neighbours. A youngish widow, living alone with servants, would always arouse curiosity and speculation about her morals.[8]

Pietro Pischiato would also have been able to complement any visual observations with gossip as a result of his profession. As a barber, he not only visited men in

[8] *AdC* 235/46. For attitudes to widows, see A. Cowan, *Lusty widows and chaste widows in seventeenth-century Venice*, in ed. by A. Bellavitis – I. Chabot, *Famiglie e potere in Italia tra medioevo ed età moderna*, Rome, forthcoming 2008.

their own houses in order to shave them or cut their hair or give them basic medical treatment, he also worked in a shop in the campo.[9] In both circumstances, the exchange of gossip was part and parcel of his work. It was quite common for barbers to be called as witnesses before the Avogaria di Comun for this very reason.[10]

Public space and domestic space

In Venice, the nature of observation was also closely linked to the organization of space. The case discussed so far involved a comparatively open space, the campo San Barnaba, which had houses along two sides only. The other two sides were bounded by a canal, the rio di San Barnaba, and by the parish church. Most Venetian space, though, was much more densely populated with narrow streets and alleys overlooked by buildings several stories high. To the

[9] The dividing line between barbers and surgeons was very thin. A barber from the calle de Botteri in San Polo claimed to have known Egidio Paganuzzi for thirty years because he always practised medicine in his house. *AdC* 223/58.

[10] See the cases of Laura Scaramella and Chiara Marcello, *AdC* 217; *AdC* 207/87. There are close parallels with the behavior of pharmacists, whose shops were also known as centers of gossip and information. See F. De Vivo, *Pharmacies as centers of information and sociability in early modern Venice*, "Renaissance Studies", XXI (2007), pp. 505-21. I am very grateful to Dr. De Vivo for allowing me to see his work in advance of publication

eyes of local observers, the boundaries between public and domestic space were real, but hardly sharp and not always significant. This can be illustrated in terms of gossip based on observation, because visual observation took place in both directions between individuals inside and outside buildings. This complex observational relationship between the public and domestic space was enhanced by a flexible organization of work and time that gave individuals ample opportunity to stop and stare, and to process information obtained from a variety of sources. This porousness enabled individuals to learn key details about their neighbours. In the 1660's, Giovanni Maria Mutti was living in the parish of San Giacomo dell'Orio. The patrician, Alessandro Contarini, lived in the adjacent house. As a neighbour, whose contact with Contarini did not extend to friendship or to domestic visits, Mutti still learned a certain amount of information about him which could only have come to him by way of gossip. He knew, for example, that Contarini had married Bernardina Tomitano, a widow from Uderzo who had a nubile daughter from her first marriage, Cattarina Melchiori. He also knew that negotiations to marry off Cattarina this daughter were in progress.[11]

While this information was conveyed through verbal gossip, other witnesses were close enough to see activities in their neighbours' houses, either from their own homes, or from the street. Steffano Bonini, of the parish of San Pantalon, was able to confirm from visual observation that both Alba Gritti, the daughter of his neighbour across the

[11] *AdC* 223/66.

street, and her mother, Dolfina Dolfin, behaved in such a way that they met the norms of modesty and honesty. «My windows», he said, «correspond to their balconies».[12] Iseppo Antelmi also based his testimony about the fatherless sixteen-year old Maria Michiela Vidali on visual observation. «We have always been close neighbours… According to what I have seen as a long-standing neighbour, she has always lived in all civility».[13]

When a woman used a balcony, this always exposed her to the gaze of her neighbours. It was necessary to moderate her behaviour in order to guard against imputations against her modesty. Grimana Peracca and her patrician mother, Benetta Grimani, were frequently observed on their balcony by their neighbour, Antonio Cesana. He was at pains to counteract a suggestion from his questioners that they had behaved with too much liberty. «I could see them clearly on their balconies and never saw or heard anything which could possibly cast a shadow on their honesty».[14] A wool merchant in the parish of the Angelo Raffaele lived so close to the house of the doctor, Michelangelo Formenti that he was able to see through the latter's windows. We know this

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[12] *AdC* 227/5. This can be complemented by the Roman case of Clemente Sanguinea and her Spanish neighbours across the street. E. Cohen – T. Cohen, *Open and shut: the social meanings of the cinquecento Roman House*, "Studies in the Decorative Arts", IX (2001-2), pp. 73-79. This citation of ways of seeing was characteristic of Roman Law testimony. Bonini's phrase was not intended to demonstrate that he spent much time looking. Rather, he felt that he could cite the balconies as a canonical token of neighbourly knowledge.

[13] *AdC* 248/83.

[14] *AdC* 208/20.

because of negative evidence. He recounted that he had seen the girl leave her house from time to time, but that he had not been able to see her inside her house through the windows. She did not enter these rooms, at least when it was possible to look through the windows. The inference was that she led a modest and retiring life. He concluded that her reputation within the parish was one of great respectability[15].

It is interesting to see the social effects of this close proximity of houses confirmed by evidence from the Inquisition case of a lusty friar studied by Guido Ruggiero. Ghielmina, the wife of Antonio explained to the Inquisitors that «certainly I do not want to look because I mind my own business but one has to see the neighbourhood from the balcony, and I have seen in three years that I have been in this house that the friar has a reputation for a most evil life and keeps dishonest people in his house»[16].

Male gossip, female gossip and the street

It is not always easy to find out who was engaged in a specific act of gossip, let alone where. Most of what appears in the Venetian Avogaria investigations is the end-result of

[15] *AdC* 317

[16] G. Ruggiero, *Binding passions. Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the end of the Renaissance*, Oxford, 1993, p. 183.

gossip, rather than the process itself. The magistrates were only rarely interested enough to ask their witness to identify their informants. Usually, witnesses gave hearsay evidence that a particular woman was soon to marry, or that her parents were living together in concubinage. So we find that Battista Manzoni, a fruit merchant testifying that «he had heard that La Dardana had arranged a marriage between one of her girls and a gentleman whose name I do not know».[17] Such gossip circulated not only among merchants, barbers, or boatmen, but also among the patricians themselves, who were equally interested in projected marriages outside their own circles.[18]

Many historians specifically link gossip with women.[19]The predominance of male witnesses before the Avogaria di Comun skews our picture of how far gossip was gendered in Venice. More weight was given to male testimony in the belief that these witnesses would be better informed. On the other hand, this grouping of witnesses also allows us to examine the process of male gossip in general and to approach the issue of gossip as part of street culture from a different perspective. The context of male gossip may be better understood through Robert Davis's work on contested public spaces in Venice. Davis argues that men dominated the streets, making any women who

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[17] *AdC* 215/57.

[18] *AdC* 340.

[19] M. Tebbutt, *Women's Talk? A Social History of 'Gossip' in Working class Neighbourhoods, 1880-1960*, Aldershot, 1995; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*; cit.; S. Thomas, *Midwifery and society in Restoration York*, "Journal of the Society for the Social History of Medicine", XVI (2003), pp. 12-15.

left the private sphere and walked through streets a transitory and subsidiary presence. Only in two public areas, according to Davis, churches and red light districts, was the presence of women so strong that there was air of uncertainty over whether or not they could be considered as male-dominated spaces.[20] One might want to modify these views in the light of a court case discussed by Denis Romano, the late medieval equivalent of a modern exclusion order. To ensure that they never met, the Venetian state forbade a man from entering a specific area of the city where a woman whom he had been importuning was known to go about her daily business. The only way of preventing this from continuing was to ensure that they never met.[21] In reality, this case was the exception that proved the rule that the streets were substantially a male domain. This did not mean that for a woman going out in public was dangerous, but that she was subjected to male behaviour that reinforced men's claim to control the space.

Some of this behaviour towards women identified them as sexual objects, but much of it was exclusionary behaviour intended to communicate to women that they had no part in this gendered activity. Note the telling contrast between dynamic female and static male behaviour. Women, though they might stand in doorways or around wells, mostly used the streets as spaces through which to

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[20] R.C. Davis, *The geography of gender in the Renaissance*, in ed. by J. Brown – R.C. Davies, *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, London, 1995, pp. 19-38.

[21] D. Romano, *Gender and the urban geography of Renaissance Venice*, "Journal of Social History", XXVIII (1989), pp. 339-53.

pass in order to reach their destination – the market, the church, the bake-house, the well, the laundry, or another private house. Men, on the other hand, were frequently static. They stood around in order to speak or to observe, not least because the rhythms and organization of pre-modern work either placed men in buildings open to the streets permitting direct contact with others close by outside, or created requests for work so intermittent that there were many opportunities to stand and talk. The early modern Venetian economy could not have operated successfully without the availability of large numbers of men to transport goods, people or messages from one place to another on foot, or by boat. Between jobs, they waited, and passed their time in the open.

These circumstances facilitated the street as a locus for male gossip. Elizabeth Horodowich's study of political gossip in sixteenth-century Venice helps us to identify where this took place – the Ducal Palace and in the Piazza San Marco, both areas close to the centre of political activity.[22] The piazza San Marco was an ideal place for gossip to spread. It was one of the two sites in the city, the Rialto was the other, to which merchants and others resorted in order to meet each other and to obtain news. Such news was neither exclusively political nor economic. Subjects of the kind that concern us here, such as news of

[22] E. Horodowich, *The gossiping tongue: oral networks, public life and political culture in early modern Venice*, "Renaissance Studies", XIX (2005), pp. 22-45.

an impending marriage, sexual scandal, illegitimacy and concubinage, were also part of the conversation.

At this stage in the discussion, it is necessary to modify the suggestion that gendered street culture was characterized by static males and dynamic females. There seems little doubt that most female activity in the street was dynamic – servants going shopping or on errands, respectable women going to church, or visiting friends and family. Male activity, on the other hand, was both static and dynamic. This can be seen in the behaviour of merchants and shopkeepers, both of whom engaged in gossip as part of their everyday activities. There was little distinction between conversations about buying and selling, and other subjects. Rather than stand inside their shops, many merchants stood or sat outside to discuss business, demonstrating here, at least, that the congruence between inside and outside and private and public was quite blurred. Selling involved talking up one's merchandise. Santo Petrobelli, for instance, who sold oils and other distillations for medicinal purposes in a shop in one of the arcades that bordered the Piazza San Marco, «sat in a chair and discoursed on the quality of his goods to those who came to buy. He showed them the certificates from the Health Office so that they could believe that his goods were perfect, wholesome, unique and rare».[23] Many merchants owned several shops as well as storage facilities on the Rialto.[24] This meant that they were frequently on the move

[23] *AdC* 209/24.
[24] *AdC* 222/48.

during the day, checking, acquiring information and supervising their employees.[25] Merchants moved around the streets with purpose.

The evidence which we have of men meeting to talk in the streets of many things including gossip about women, their own and others, suggests that there were indeed two worlds, the domestic and the public and many men relied on gossip for information because they did not enter houses where they could be given direct personal knowledge. For example, the magistrates who interviewed Daniel Bertolotti in 1645 were frustrated when he was unable to identify any of the female members of the Marcello household. As he said, «I do not visit there» («Non ho prattica»). Bertolotti was a minor official at the Health Office. Marcello, a patrician, had been elected to a position in the same magistracy. They did not mix socially.[26] For them, as for many men, there was no practical purpose in bringing business associates and others with whom they had a day-to-day working relationship into their houses. This would have represented more intimacy than their relationship warranted. Consequently, they exchanged gossip in the open as part of conversations encompassing other business matters.[27]

Female gossip, on the other hand, represented an important transition between the household and the street. Our cases before the Avogaria di Comun contain some

[25] *AdC* 214/26; 220/37.
[26] *AdC* 209/27.
[27] J. Lee, *Prologue: Talking organisation* in ed. by G. Button – J. Lee, *Talk and Social Organisation*, Clevedon, Pa., 1987, pp. 35-36.

stereotypical gossip among female servants, but while the gossip may have begun inside the house, it did not remain there. This was documented in considerable detail in the case of Leonora Cesana, whose father, a wealthy lawyer, gave shelter to a semi-destitute young member of the patrician Grimani family, intending to marry him to his daughter. When a close neighbour, Sebastian Bensi, was called before the magistrates to discuss the impending marriage, they asked him whether any words had been exchanged by the couple before the parish priest, an essential element in the post-Tridentine marriage ritual. He replied that he did not know, but that it was generally said in public («per pubblica voce et fama») that she had been either promised or married to the said Gentleman, and that he believed the latter was living in her house. This information emanated directly from the Cesana household. According to another close male neighbour, it was being said in public, and «in particular by the women of the Cesana household», that the previous Carnival, Signor Cesana had married one of his daughters to a Gentleman from Ca' Grimani, who was also living in his house.[28]

In Venice, the evidence suggests, male and female gossip had their habitual spaces. It seems that men exchanged

[28] *AdC* 304. As a footnote to this story, in spite of the clear proof to the contrary that the couple had not married, the magistrates were uneasy about their close proximity in the same house. A midwife was called in to test Leonora's virginity. The marriage was only allowed to go ahead when she confirmed that Leonora was still a virgin. For other cases in which midwives were brought in as expert witnesses, see J. Ferraro, *Marriage Wars in Renaissance Venice*, Oxford, 2001, pp. 91-96.

gossip outside the house in the open, largely because many of their social interactions took place there, while women exchanged gossip within the house because they met indoors. On the other hand, the movement of information out of the house carried by men and women may have differed in the way in which it was disseminated. The testimony of male witnesses suggests that the information was often, but not always, kept to themselves. They learned some information about someone else without feeling the necessity to speak of it to others. References to information emanating from «the women of the house», as in the Cesana case suggest a more active local female gossip network. The magistrates' choice to call in witnesses from the immediate locality in which their subjects lived placed a particular emphasis on the circulation of gossip in the parish, square or courtyard that may have given more prominence than necessary to local gossip. On the other hand, this choice was based on long experience of the geographical limits to social relationships within Venice.

Subjects of gossip and its purposes

What did people gossip about in seventeenth-century Venice and what was its significance? They passed on information about their neighbours, particularly newly arrived neighbours. They wanted to know if a man and a woman who were living together were married or not. If

they were married, they wanted to know something about the wife's place of origin and social background. If she was a widow, they wanted to know to whom she had been married and whether she had any children. If young girls were in the household, there would be speculation after a certain age about marriage plans. If, on the other hand, a girl moved away to a convent for her education, this was also a subject of discussion.

Gossip is frequently characterized as the circulation of confidences, where information to be kept within a restricted group escapes into broader circulation, and is often embellished and sometimes damaging. Some gossip, however, could be instrumental. It was often fed by information that individuals wished known about themselves, not for underhand reasons, but simply because the release of such information about themselves to those around them permitted them to be more easily integrated within society and conveyed positive messages about them and their families.

The deliberate circulation of information about impending marriages, for example, had identifiable objectives. The post-Tridentine emphasis on the presence of witnesses at the engagement and the benediction of a marriage belonged to a much older tradition by which promises were frequently exchanged before witnesses to ensure that in future, neither participant could deny their existence.[29] By releasing information about an impending

[29] S. Chojnacki, *Nobility, women and the state: marriage regulation in Venice 1420-1535*, in ed. by T. Dean – K. Lowe, *Marriage in Italy 1300-1650*,

marriage to servants, kin and family in the expectation that the news would spread, proud Venetian fathers or mothers intended to signal a change in their daughter's status. Such an important life-cycle event was something for public knowledge; a subject for congratulation, but also a signal that a family was about to take a step intended to enhance its future social status. Nothing could be clearer from the cases on which this article is based. Each one involved a planned marriage between a Venetian patrician groom and a non-patrician bride. These marriages had important social benefits. Patrician status in Venice still had a certain aura, whether or not its holder was immensely rich, held major political office and lived in a palace on the Grand Canal.[30] Links with a network of patrician relatives through marriage carried with them considerable cachet and influence. When attempts were made to blacken the reputation of certain families in order to prevent such marriages, the protagonists overtly referred to the kind of influence that could flow from access to a patrician network. Official government approval for a marriage between a patrician and a non-patrician bride brought with it even more tangible benefits. These women were intended to become the mothers of future patricians, future members of the Great Council and

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Cambridge, 1998, 128; C. Cristellon, *La sposa in convento (Padova e Venezia 1455-1458)*, in ed. by S. Seidel-Menchi - D. Quaglioni, *Matrimonio in Dubbio*, pp. 129-33.

[30] Some marriages with outsider brides involved patricians on the edge of penury. For poor patricians, see L. Megna, *Grandezza e miseria della nobiltà veneziana*, in ed. by G. Benzoni – G. Cozzi, *Storia di Venezia*, VII, *La Venezia barocca*, Rome, 1997, pp. 161-200.

potential office-holders within the Venetian Republic. No wonder that the name of a future patrician son-in-law was deliberately released into public circulation. Information out on the street among males enabled the symbolic power of upward social mobility through marriage along the female line to resonate more widely from a very early stage.

Conclusion

The centrality of the making of marriages as a subject for discussion in the wider community and the power of hearsay to disseminate information through gossip networks of varying kinds was an important element of street culture in early modern Venice. The trajectory of gossip is far from easy to trace. Unless pressed by the magistrates, the witnesses whose testimonies lie in the archives of the Avogaria di Comun did not specify the sources of their information. Nor did they often locate where the gossip had taken place. Certain patterns do emerge. Gossip about forthcoming marriages often took place between men rather than women, although the latter were not excluded, particularly female servants. The subject was of great potential importance and represented not only a major life cycle event for the bride's family, but, in the case of a marital link with a member of the hereditary ruling patriciate, a matter of considerable social importance as well. All links between patricians and those circles

immediately below them in Venetian society, from which many of these outsider brides came, had a wider social significance.[31] As for the physical location of the gossip, we can be more certain about the external boundaries of the area in which it circulated. Venetian parishes were small, yet often witnesses referred to information being 'generally known in the parish'. This may have reflected the intensity of relationships between people who literally lived on top of one another, or it may have been a convention representing the immediate locality. Contiguous parishes were also 'gossip spaces'. Sometimes the information circulated within an even smaller area, as we have seen in the case of the Campo San Barnaba.

These gossip networks could be taken as evidence of an important aspect of the culture of the street, yet in many ways, and particularly if the importance of visual observation as a basis for gossip is taken into account, the dividing lines between the public and the private become much more blurred. Venetians observed each other in the streets and squares but they also looked into each other's windows from outside, or from one balcony to another. Equally important, the street could be observed from within. Even the close physical proximity required by verbal gossip could take place between houses above ground level, or through doors and windows at the level of the street or the canal. While much of the culture of the street took place

[31] See Cowan, *Marriage, Manners*, cit., chapter III, *Outsider brides and their families.*

in the street, this was not always so. In order to better understand this phenomenon, we would be well advised to raise our heads above street level and eavesdrop on the conversations which took place on the edges of the street as well as in the centre.