THE WIFE OF THE VENETIAN GOVERNOR IN LATE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY VERONA: CHIARA CORNARO AND STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL SOCIABILITY

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When Chiara Dolfin Cornaro accompanied her husband Giovanni Cornaro to his posting as Capitano of Verona in the spring of 1594, she may not have known that she would give birth to a son while she lived with her husband in their official palace in Verona. She certainly did not know that she would be the recipient of the first published *Elogio* (oration) to a Venetian governor's wife written by a woman, and that the Verona City Council would commission a painting celebrating the baptism of her son in Verona. Nonetheless, her decision to go with her husband to live in this subject city three days' journey from home for a year and a half must have been based on certain expectations for herself, her family life, and her husband's career. Her time in Verona was marked not only by childbirth but also by a rather splendid series of entertainments sponsored by her and her husband, and by the formation of close friendships with women and men in the local nobility. This paper will examine

what we know about Chiara Cornaro's experience as the Capitania of Verona and locate her experience in the larger context of Venetian and Veronese understanding of the relationship that existed between the Venetian governors, their 'famiglia' or entourage, and leading members of the local political elite.

It will address challenges facing the Venetian governors in a world of elite sociability that was increasingly integrated across regional as well as political boundaries and explore ways in which this system of sociability could be use for politically strategic purposes.

Maintaining an effective relationship between governor and governed in the subject cities of the Venetian Republic required tact and diplomacy, and by the middle of the second century of their rule on the Terraferma the Venetian state had developed a long series of rules designed to regulate the lives of their representatives in these cities. The Podestà and Capitano were expected to be single male representatives of the male, republican, Venetian state, and their roles in the local system of political sociability were supposed to be symbolic, elevated, and separated as much as possible from local interests and corrupting influence. The laws promulgated by the Venetian Senate suggest that the governors were tempted to adopt many of the courtly strategies used so effectively by princes both large and small in the rest of Italy and Europe to buttress their positions: The governors were forbidden, therefore, to display their personal coats of arms, to arrive or depart from

the city with a large entourage, to do any lavish entertaining, and to exchange expensive or symbolically important gifts with local families. The rules focused rather obsessively on preventing the development of personal ties of friendship between the governors' families and the governed, and hence limited access to forms of sociability that would encourage the formation of such ties. The Podestà and Capitano and their wives were not allowed to entertain anyone but their own relatives in their houses. And they were prohibited from becoming godparents, exchanging gifts, or attending parties in the homes of the local nobility.[1]

A good example of the articulation of these rules can be found in the lengthy *Commissione* of Andrea Renier, Capitano of Verona in 1546, fifty years before the arrival of Chiara Cornaro and her husband. Renier was discouraged from bringing any female relatives with him, and if his wife did accompany him her social life, at least in theory, would have been severely restricted: the rules included specific limitations to the size and opulence of the governor's domestic establishment, and hence ensured that their style of life would be significantly less magnificent than that of

[1]G. Bistort, *Il Magistrato alle pompe nella Repubblica di Venezia*, Bologna, 1969, pp.280-281, 400. These regulations are discussed in more detail in A. Smith, *Women and Political Sociability in Late Renaissance Verona: Ersilia Spolverini's Elogio of Chiara Cornaro* to be published in *Donne di Potere: Atti del convegno*, ed. Letizia Arcangeli and Susanna Peyronel, Milano, Viella, 2008.

many of the wealthiest local noble families.[2] There is abundant evidence, however, that the wives of the governors regularly accompanied their husbands to Verona during the second half of the sixteenth century.[3] Although we do not know how the wives managed their households while in Verona, given the limitations on servants and luxurious display imposed upon them, we do know that their husbands must have generated constant pressure on the Venetian Senate to relax these limitations. The governors and their wives needed appropriately furnished spaces and the support of enough servants to permit them to maneuver effectively within the local social hierarchy. Finally, in 1595, the Venetian Senate revised upward the maximum number of servants allowed from four to ten as well as the amount and quality of luxurious

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[2] ASVR, *VIII vari*, reg. 3. See especially the summary of the relevant sumptuary legislation at cc. 137-140. See also in the same fondo, *VIII vari,* reg. 5, discussed in Giulio Sancassani, *Commissioni di Pietro Lando, Doge di Venezia, al nobile Ermolao Barbaro, inviato podestà a Verona (1545 marzo 17)*, in *Atti del convegno Venezia e la Terraferma attraverso le relazioni dei rettori veneti*, Trieste 23-24 October 1980, Milano, Giuffre, 1981, pp. 473-484.

[3] Note that in nearly every year for which documents survive, the Accademia Filarmonica voted officially to extend a formal invitation to the Venetian governors and their wives to attend the annual public concert and banquet on May 1. There is, however, at least one example of a Capitano who spent his tour of duty in Verona alone, without his family: His correspondence with his mistress in Venice is published in *Lettere di Tommaso Contarini a Paolina Provesina Verona 1602-1604,* ed. G. Ellero, Verona, Accademia Filarmonica, 2003).

furnishings that the governor in subject cities on the Terraferma could bring to their posting.[4]

The presence of the wife of the Podestà or Capitano in Verona raised a complex set of issues for both the Venetian governors and the men and women of the local elite: What would her ceremonial or ritual identity in Verona be, and how would it be managed? Whereas the courtly model—which presumes the presence of both men and women in most 'political' spaces—prevailed in most Italian cities in the sixteenth century, Venice was acutely aware of the importance of protecting and promoting their different, republican, exclusively male model of political life in which the wives of political actors occupied a theoretically ambiguous and contested position. The only public ceremonial model available to the wife of a public official in Venice, however, was the princely or courtly model, and this was most prominently to honor the Doge's wife upon her husband's election to office. In her book on the Dogaressa, Holly Hurlburt explores the differences between the republican and courtly models of political sociability available to her and describes her deeply ambiguous position.[5] Women, in theory, did not have access to public life, but in the case of the Dogaressa or visiting female dignitaries, a temporary court of women would be created to accompany them during

[4] ASV *Magistrato alle Pompe*, b. 3, cc 79-82 and b. 7, at 1595.

[5] H. Hurlburt, *The Dogaressa of Venice, 1200-1500: wife and icon*, New York, Palgrave, 2006, esp. 185-187..

official ceremonies.[6] This courtly model of political sociability for the wives of public officials was also adopted in Verona by the wives of the Venetian Rettori. For example, when the Accademia Filarmonica invited the Rettori and their wives to their annual public banquet, the records of these events always refer to the governor's wife accompanied by "una compagnia di gentildonne veronesi."[7]

Chiara Cornaro's stay in Verona came early in her career as the wife of Giovanni Cornaro, an influential Venetian politician, who eventually served as Doge from 1625-1629.[8] Born into a distinguished Venetian noble family (she was the daughter of Lorenzo Dolfin), Chiara had spent her life at the apex of Venetian society and was thus accustomed to living at

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[6] See for example B. Wilson, *"Il bel sesso, e l'austero Senato" The Coronation of Dogaressa Morosina Morosini Grimani,* in "Renaissance Quarterly", LII (1999), pp. 73-139, esp. 76-78

[7] See for example, ASVR, *Fondo Dionise Piomarta* reg. A28 at 1573 and comments on the academy's official receptions of the Venetian governors by G. Turrini, *L'Accademia filarmonica di Verona alla fondazione (maggio 1543) al 1600 e il suo patrimonio musicale antico*, Verona, Tipografica Veronese, 1941, p. 152. The Venetian governor and his wife were also invited regularly to banquets in Treviso, by the Hospital of the Battuti, discussed in D. D'Andrea, *Civic Christianity in renaissance Italy: the Hospital of Treviso, 1400-1530*, Rochester, NY University of Rochester Press, 2007, pp. 34-35. D'Andrea does not mention whether the governor's wife was accompanied by a group of 'gentildonne.'

[8] On Giovanni Cornaro's career, see Claudio Povolo, *Giovanni Cornaro*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, XXIX, Rome, Treccani, 1983, pp. 229-233. Chiara died in 1609 so the issue of her coronation never came up.

a very high level of luxury and sophistication, probably higher than most Veronese noble families could afford.[9] The story of Chiara's stay in Verona raises interesting questions, therefore, not only about the personal relationships that she developed with men and women in the local elite, but also about the political meaning of those relationships. If, in the absence of any alternative model, the ceremonial role of the governor's wife in a subject city borrowed directly from courtly models, where and how was this role expressed? After all, there wasn't a court in Verona, and Venetian laws strenuously opposed the use of the Podestà or Capitano's palace as a stand-in for a princely court. Did the friendships that Chiara cultivated with Veronese noblewomen develop in a completely private context, and were they, therefore, explicitly apolitical? What were the reasons for her involvement in local forms of sociability?

The principal source of information that survives for Chiara's time in Verona is the collection of poems and speeches dedicated to her and her husband that were published in Verona at the end of their term of office in 1596.[10] This suggests that the governor's

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[9] Her will, dated 1609 when her husband occupied the office of Procuratore di San Marco, is written in her own extremely even and elegant hand, and is highly literate: ASV, *Notarile Testamenti* b. 902 (notary: Aurelio Stella). In it she declares that she brought a dowry of ducats. 20,000 to her marriage, and that she wishes to be buried with her husband, «acciò sicome siamo stati congionti vivendo, siamo ancora in morte.»

[10] *Varie compositioni scritte in lode de l'illustrissimo Sig. Giovanni Cornaro Capitanio di Verona & de l'illustrissima Sig. Chiara Delfina sua consorte*

wife and the local noblewomen were clearly not operating in a private, apolitical world. The collection praises them above all for their magnificent and extravagant hospitality, which clearly aspired to princely dimensions. Just one year earlier, in 1595, the Venetian senate had promulgated a new set of rules designed to set strict limits on the political sociability of their Rettori on the Terraferma, and Francesco Pola, in his *Elogio* of Giovanni Cornaro, may well have intended to parody Venice's stringent regulations in his description of the Cornaro term in Verona:[11]

> Chi vide mai, s'alcuno vide, maniera di vivere piu splendida, et piu magnifica di quella, che voi in questa Citta avete gloriosamente tenuta? Chi miro mai la piu nobile, la piu attilata, la piu numerosa, la piu regolata servitù domestica di cotesto vostra? Qual vostro predecessore fece calcare le nostre strade da piu generosi et leggiadri destrieri de vostri? Quando mai questi pareti, questa sala, questo palagio tutto fu secondo le varie stagioni dell'anno piu riccamente

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dedicate al molto illustre sig. Ferdinando Cornaro Cavaliero et commendatore di Malta, Verona: Discepolo, 1596. On the practice of giving speeches, or *Elogi,* to honor Venetian governors at the end of their terms of office in the subject cities, which began to develop in the latter half of the sixteenth century and reached its height during the seventeenth century, see D. Raines, *L'invention du mythe aristoratique: l'image de soi du patriciat venitien au temps de la Serenissime*, Memorie dell'Istituto Veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, Classe di scienze morali, lettere ed arti, CXII, Venice, 2006, pp. 228-239.

[11] *Varie Compositioni*, cit., 40-41. For the 1595 sumptuary legislation, see ASV, *Fondo Magistrato alle Pompe*, b. 1 cc. 79-82.

addobbato, con piu seta, et con piu oro fregiato; con le piu vive, et animate pitture distinto? Quali mense, quale tavole, trattene le vostre rilussero di tanto ariento, di tant'oro, se variamente, et ingegnosamente formato, et lavorato? Qual Preside mai con modi piu cortesi, con conviti piu lauti receve ne suoi palagi piu frequente numero di gran Signori ospiti, et non rare volte i primarii Cittadini, et ottimati suoi soggetti? Sono state splendidissime le spese, che voi, Magnificentissimo Signore, avete senz'alcun risparmio fatte ne gli apparati di varii spettacoli popolari, et di diversi tornei cavallereschi, et di molte delitiose feste, onde vi siete compiaciuto di rallegrare, et dilettare soavemente questa Citta' al vostro governo felicemente raccomandata.

Pola's decision to highlight Verona's admiration for the princely behavior of the Cornaro couple may also have been intended to signal to his readers that the Veronese elite retained their independence from Venice's efforts to control their relationships with the local governors.[12] A similar spirit of independence can be seen in the decision of Verona's City Council to commission an allegorical painting celebrating the baptism of Chiara and Giovanni Cornaro's newborn son, Lorenzo.[13] They hired Felice Brusasorzi the most

[12] The independent stance of the subject cities on the Terraferma is discussed in N. Davidson, *"As Much for Its Culture as for Its Arms": The Cultural Relations of Venice and Its Dependent Cities*, in ed by A. Cowan, *Mediterranean Urban Culture, 1400-1700*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2000, pp. 197-214.

[13] ASVR, *Atti del Consiglio,* reg 96 c. 105r (5 May 1595). The painting is discussed by S. Marinelli, *Il giovane Turchi: la nobiltà del*

distinguished local painter in Verona, to execute the commission, which portrayed the baby in the arms of a woman symbolizing Verona, holding the child at the font for baptism by the bishop with the waters of the Adige River.[14] This highly public gesture implicated Verona in the dynastic ambitions of the Cornaro family, which was precisely what the Venetian Senate feared and tried to legislate against. Wealthy Venetian governors from powerful Venetian families must have been tempted to adopt distinctly non-Venetian patterns of behavior when they arrived in a subject city, and adopt the trappings and prerogatives of status customary among high nobility in princely states throughout Europe. Members of the local Veronese nobility may well have encouraged the Venetian governors to do so, because they perceived the possibility of greater autonomy and control for themselves, working within more informal, locally-based power structures.

These power structures were necessarily informal because they developed outside of the official public, political spaces in Verona, such as the lawcourts and the meeting rooms of the City Council. In the

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pittore, in ed by D. Scaglietti Kelescian, *Alessandro Turchi: detto l'Orbetto, 1578-1649*, Milano, Electa, 1999, pp. 11-20. The painting is reproduced on p. 12.

[14] This was the second of three such baptismal paintings officially commissioned by Verona's City Council to celebrate the birth of the child of a Venetian governor. The first was by Paolo Farinati in 1558 (see ed by G. Marini, et al., *Paolo Farinati 1524-1606*, Venice, Marsilio, 2005, p. 176. The last, by Alessandro Turchi, in 1610 (see *Alessandro Turchi*, cit., p 92).

absence of a court, Venetian governors and their families interacted with key members of the local elite in the private spaces of palaces. Chiara Cornaro, the "Capitania," presided with her husband over their extravagant festivities in the Palazzo del Capitano facing the Piazza dei Signori in the administrative center of Verona. Many of the writers who contributed to the collection of poems and speeches in their honor were members of the the Accademia Filarmonica, a principal focus of local cultural and political power, which in those years met in rented space in the somewhat dilapidated palace of the Boldieri family in the contrada of S. Fermo.[15] Even though no written evidence of this survives, Chiara and her husband probably attended academy gatherings frequently. Their eldest son, Federico, was invited to join the Filarmonica during the family's stay in Verona even though he must have been slightly younger than eighteeen, the minimum age required for membership.[16] Most significantly, local noble families must have invited Chiara and her family to attend social gatherings in their private palaces, thereby

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[15] D. Zumiani, *Le abitazioni dei Boldieri a Verona: scelte modelli residenziali della borghesia emergente el periodo della dominazione veneziana*, in *Atti e memorie dell'Accademia di Agricoltura Scienze e Lettere di Verona*, CLXIV (1987-88), pp. 217-239.

[16] See poem by Alessandro Fileremo dedicated to him *Nell'ingresso Dell'Illustriss. Sig. Federico Cornaro Cavagliero & Commendator di Malta, nell'Academia Filarmonica Alludendo alla sua impresa…* in *Varie Compositioni*, cit., 10-11. If his parents were married on 10 Feb. (1598 see Povolo, *Cornaro*, p. 229), Federico could not have been born before the end of 1598.

initiating a complex network of reciprocity and inflence peddling that the Venetian sumptuary regulations tried so desperately to control.[17]

Networks of friendships and alliances linking elite families in different northern Italian cities became more common during the sixteenth century as they developed a shared understanding of noble behavior based on manners, education and lifestyle as well as genealogy. Alexander Cowan has explored the relationships between Venetian patricians and noble families in subject cities on the Terraferma in his study of applications to the Avogadori di Comun from outsider brides to marry Venetian noblemen, beginning in 1589.[18] He concludes from the language of these applications that by the end of the sixteenth century Venetian patricians considered themselves part of a larger world of gentility and regularly intermarried with wealthy families, frequently from the Terraferma, that adopted the manners and other markers of the *vita civile*. It is this system of sociability within which Chiara Cornaro and her husband developed their relationships with members of the Veronese nobility. Perhaps the most influential guide for upwardly mobile northern Italian elites pursuing

[17] For example, members of the governors' family and staff could not be named as godparents to a local family, and members of the local nobility were forbidden to accompany them as part of their entourage when they returned to Venice. See ASV, *Magistrato alle Pompe*, b. 1, 79-81.

[18] A. Cowan, *Marriage, Manners and Mobility in Early Modern Venice*, Aldershot, England Ashgate, 2007

the ideal of the vita civile was Stefano Guazzo's treatise, *La Civil Conversatione*, first published in Brescia in 1574 and in Venice in 1575. Guazzo, a minor nobleman from Casale Monferrato in Piemonte who spent much of his life serving the Gonzaga, examined the system of political sociability that he was familiar with in the lesser courts and provincial cities of northern Italy. In his discussion of the appropriate ways to educate and train girls, he posits a continuum between three available outcomes for a daughter when she grows up—she can become a nun, a 'donna di casa,' or a 'donna di palazzo.' The 'donna di casa,' or housewife, needs to learn skills that will promote her willingness to look after the domestic needs of her family, whereas the 'donna di palazzo' needs to learn to sing, to write poetry and to converse wittily because she will be admitted into the wider world of political sociability and not confined to her home. Guazzo places these options on a continuum from lesser to greater liberty.[19]

During her stay in Verona, Chiara Cornaro was clearly not confined to the private, domestic world of a 'donna di casa' as she may have been in Venice, but neither was she permitted or expected to preside over a formal court. In public, ceremonial moments Chiara would be accompanied by a group of Veronese noblewomen, and this group may have coalesced around the figure of the governor's wife in an

[19] S. Guazzo, *La Civil Conversazione*, ed. by A. Quondam, I, Testo e Appendice, Modena, Panini, 1993, pp. 234-237.

informal courtly structure. Yet notwithstanding the courtly or princely aspects of her and her husband's behavior, the language in the collection of writings dedicated to them by Veronese intellectuals was drawn from the world of academies, exalting above all the theme of friendship and the values embodied in Guazzo's "conversazione civile." The local writers who wrote poems in her honor remarked on her reputation for erudition and conversational wit (attributes of a 'donna di palazzo'), as well as her maternal and wifely virtues. Policarpo Palermo's dedication of the collection to Federico, Chiara's son, calls Chiara a heroine of the modern age.[20] Most significantly, in an examination of the political strategies presented by this system of elite sociability, the principal *Elogio*, or speech, in honor of Chiara was written by Ersilia Spolverini, a Veronese noblewoman.[21] Spolverini presumably delivered this speech in public, probably at the Accademia Filarmonica.[22] Her wide-ranging praises locate Chiara at the center of her father's and her husband's lineages, claiming that she shares these strengths and transmits them to her children. In her speech Spolverini praises Chiara's erudition and literary

[20] *Varie Compositioni,* cit., n.p.: «fra le principali Matrone, & Heroesse (mi sia lecito dire) de l'età nostra, merita per le rare, & nobilissime sue qualità.»

[21] On E. Spolverini see A. Smith, *Women and Political Sociability* and V. Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy 1400-1650*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, pp. 144-45, 240.

[22] D. Raines, *L'invention du mythe aristocratique*, cit., pp. 220-223

brilliance, and exhibits her own. She took on some of the prerogatives of masculinity by speaking publicly and politically and then publishing the speech, and she conferred public status on Chiara Cornaro, the "capitania," by doing so.

Venetian legislation regulating the behavior of their governors in subject cities reveals the political power women had in domestic or non-political spaces and the threat they posed to the Venetian system of governing their subject cities. This attempt to reconstruct Chiara's stay in Verona also suggests that the women she associated with there could manipulate this system for their own purposes. The world of sociability, the "conversazione civile" described by Guazzo, facilitated the cultivation of valuable family ties and friendships across political boundaries as well as within the local elite. It also created opportunities for self-expression (and publication, in the case of Ersilia Spolverini) and public recognition. Chiara Cornaro may have decided to accompany her husband on his tour of duty in Verona because she looked forward to enjoying the courtly attentions of the "compagnia di gentildonne veronesi" and to playing a more public role there than she could in Venice. Notwithstanding Venetian regulations limiting her sphere of action and her influence in Verona, she proved to be a valuable asset to her husband in developing a remarkably successful relationship with the local nobility.