

BOOK REVIEWS



Francesco Barbaro. *The Wealth of Wives: A Fifteenth-Century Marriage Manual*. Edited and Translated by Margaret L. King. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series, 42. Toronto, Tempe, AZ: Iter Academic Press, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015. Pp. 146. ISBN: 978-0866985406 (hardcover).

Venice, 1415. Francesco Barbaro, aged twenty-five, bachelor scion of an elite Venetian family, authored a Latin treatise entitled *De re uxoria* (The Wealth of Wives). Barbaro had already completed an eclectic education in the humanities and law, inspired by the humanist and diplomat Zaccaria Trevisan, whom he praised in his treatise's "Dedicatory Letter." Introduced to humanistic studies by Giovanni Conversini da Ravenna and influenced by Gasparino Barzizza, who acquainted him with the didactic-pedagogical works of Pier Paolo Vergerio the Elder, Barbaro also learned Greek from Guarino Veronese, renowned translator of Plutarch and Strabo.

At the University of Padua, Barbaro studied the ancient Roman juridical apparatus and familiarized himself with the *Corpus Juris Civilis* (Body of Civil Law) assembled under the Emperor Justinian I between 529 and 534 CE. Margaret L. King speculates in her introduction (16) that the title of Barbaro's treatise might have been suggested by the second-century CE Roman law teacher Gaius's disquisition *De re uxoria* (On Marriage Matters) and/or the fifth book of Justinian's laws. Barbaro's marriage to Maria Loredan, daughter of the powerful Venetian statesman Pietro, opened the doors to a long and successful political and diplomatic career.

Barbaro dedicated *De re uxoria* to Lorenzo de' Medici the Elder (ca. 1395–1440), whom he had met in Florence in 1415. The treatise was a wedding token

offered to Lorenzo and his wife-to-be, Ginevra Cavalcanti. In Barbaro's view, Lorenzo and Ginevra embodied the perfect marital union in which the qualities of masculine wealth and strength would harmoniously blend with the feminine attributes of nobility, fertility, and devotion to family. The Medici-Cavalcanti couple were a paradigmatic example of Barbaro's argument that patrician wives played a pivotal role as mothers responsible for rearing their offspring as well as crucial contributors to the dignity, stability, and social prestige of their families.

Commended by leading humanists such as Ambrogio Traversari, Poggio Bracciolini, and Pier Paolo Vergerio the Elder, *De re uxoria* soon garnered broad recognition in learned Italian circles, spread through "over 100 manuscript copies" (43), of which the most important are the first, dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici in 1416; a copy "commissioned" (44) by Cosimo the Elder, also completed in 1416; a third and fourth copy made around 1434; and a fifth copied in 1428 in Guarino Veronese's studio, "which was likely the basis" for the treatise's *editio princeps* (first published edition), issued in Paris in 1513 (45).

The diffusion of *De re uxoria* equaled the success of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (On Famous Women) and indeed surpassed the popularity of Lorenzo Valla's *De donatione Constantini* (On the Donation of Constantine). The treatise's anecdotes became embedded in the collective cultural imagination of the Italian *intelligentsia* and were cited—directly or indirectly—in the works of Pietro Bembo, Baldesar Castiglione, and Ludovico Ariosto. The fame of *De re uxoria* soon extended to several European countries. Arguably its popularity resides in Barbaro's syncretic intertwining of historical, theological, juridical, philosophical, and medical elements, drawn from Greek, Roman, and Christian cultures and elegantly woven into its textual fabric. Similarly, the printed versions circulated widely; the first edition was followed by others published in Hagenau, Antwerp, Strasbourg, and Amsterdam between 1533 and 1639.

De re uxoria was translated into German (1536), Italian (1548), French (1667), and English (1677). The 1548 Italian translation, printed in Venice as *La elettion della moglie* (Choosing a Wife), was reprinted—slightly modified—in 1778, 1785, and 1806. Interest then faded until the first half of the twentieth century when it was revived by Attilio Gnesotto who assembled a critical edition between 1915 and 1916. The philologist Percy Gothein provided a new German translation in 1933. Excerpts of *De re uxoria* were included in anthologies of Renaissance texts assembled by Eugenio Garin (1952) and by Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt (1978). The present critical edition and English translation by Margaret L. King, an assiduous reader of Barbaro's work and a pioneer in the field of Venetian Humanism, further enhances the series "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe" originated by King and Albert Rabil, Jr., in 1995.

Examining the distinctive features that, according to Barbaro, the ideal wife should possess, King remarks that he would consider neither dowry (41) nor beauty as the “preeminent” characteristics for the bride-to-be. Instead, the indispensable prerequisites were nobility, virtue, frugality, moderation, and a predisposition for a loving spousal companionship and partnership (71–81). These mental and moral gifts provided by the mothers would produce healthy, intelligent children, since such traits would be instilled at conception, develop further during “gestation and lactation” (1), and be completed by the mothers’ nurture, instrumental to their children’s balanced growth. From this perspective—as King remarks—*De re uxoria* appears to be a “revolutionary treatise [...] because it identifies the mother—a woman, not a man; an interloper in the household, not its patriarch—as the critical figure for the rearing of the young and consequently, for the social and cultural reproduction of the noble family” (1). Barbaro identifies the wealth of wives with their intellectual and ethical endowments, not with their material possessions. These qualities would enable “the nurture of [their] husband[s]’ children by means bodily, mental, and spiritual, thus achieving the successful reproduction, cultural as well as biological, of [their] family and [their] class” (41). King provides both a contextualization of Barbaro’s work and a sophisticated gender interpretation focused on the innovative elements that made *De re uxoria* inspirational for women writers of the later Renaissance, including, among others, Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella. It also shows, in an elegant diachronic synopsis, that *De re uxoria* is a hypotext underlying the reflections of major pedagogical theorists from Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) to Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), who dealt with a wide “array of Barbaronian themes” (55).

King demonstrates that Barbaro, albeit holding biases typical of his epoch (feminine submission and female virginity as essential requirements for marriage) praises, nonetheless, female intellect over wealth and gives centrality and dignity to feminine corporeality. He becomes “the first champion of maternal capacity” by recognizing females’ role in the reproductive process (2); moreover, he does so in a way that excludes both Aristotelian and Galenic physiology, “for in his view of conception, and the transmission of nobility [...] to new generations, there is no role for the male at all” (26). A mother is a perfect mechanism able not only “to conceive, carry, bear, and nourish the child” (39), but first and foremost to provide a female, loving and nurturing mind that gives its offspring food for their souls, thus becoming the essential “key agent of the enculturation of the young” (62).

That is, in a nutshell, Barbaro’s message, which King superbly extrapolates

from his text, a message which makes him a surprising precursor of our current vision of motherhood. King's critical exploration, along with the fluid and elegant clarity of her translation, returns to the Anglophone world a work that was for decades overshadowed by the greater attachment that English-speaking scholars showed toward Leon Battista Alberti's later *Della famiglia* (On the Family) (47). Margaret L. King has rescued a text that sheds new light on social and ideological customs of the Italian Renaissance from undeserved oblivion, and Barbaro's authorial presence will undoubtedly be of tremendous help to new generations of postmodern scholars who aim to delve into the complex and fascinating world of the *studia humanitatis*.

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