Women, Objects, and Exchange in Early Modern Florence

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When visiting Florence in the 1590s, the English traveller Robert Dallington observed that “the husband (for the most part) when he goeth abroad, locketh vp his wife (not because he is iealous, [he protests] but because it is the custome).” Dallington was repeating a common trope: in Italy, virtuous women stayed at home and attended to matters of the family, not to the market. The stereotype had numerous precedents, not least in treatises on household management where the domestic economy was given full attention. In one of the best-known examples of this genre, Leon Battista Alberti viewed not just the home but also urban spaces as highly gendered. The interlocutor in his famous Libri della famiglia explained that “it would hardly win us respect if our wife busied herself among the men in the marketplace, out in the public eye.” Alberti was drawing on a long tradition that imparted a decidedly lascivious connotation to women’s activities in the market. Earning money was the realm of men; honorable women were charged with merely conserving it.

These are ideals, of course, and taken alone they present us with a very particular picture, one which has dominated our ideas about women’s economic capacities and access to the market. According to this view, even in Florence, a city whose fortunes were built on mercantilism, women had extremely limited—if any—room to manoeuvre financially. Such limitations can also be found in documents like family memoranda (ricordanze), which privilege patriarchal ideals of family honor. However, using these ideals as indicators of all social practice both privileges elite preoccupations over ordinary women’s lived experiences and places more emphasis
on transactions that occurred in the public spaces of the market square or shop over ones of equal importance that occurred in more private spaces.5

My purpose here is to raise questions about the relationship between women, status, space, and the nature of exchange. The decorum expected of women—particularly elite women—might have discouraged them from trading more publicly, but it did not necessarily prevent them from engaging in commercial activities. By broadening the range of economic transactions worthy of study to include transactions based on objects, we find many more enterprising women engaged in the market through buying, selling, and pawning used goods.6 Whether the exchanges involved household furnishings, garments, or lengths of cloth, women’s commercial transactions played vital roles in maintaining the economic well-being of the household and in some cases may even have provided a degree of financial independence.7 Women’s association with the home, and their responsibility for managing and maintaining domestic possessions, gave them a high level of expertise in the objects that filled it and a knowledge of their value. Circulating objects between household and market was not only normal but also economically significant, since in a pre-industrial era objects, especially textiles, retained much of their worth, and their recirculation contributed to supply chains. What distinguishes the practices of women of higher status from those lower down the scale is the degree to which they circulated these goods publicly. This analysis focuses on women who participated in these activities via the guild, as well as those who pursued less formal routes.

The names of women appear in the earliest surviving membership records of the guild concerned with the trade in used goods beginning in 1407.8 By the early sixteenth century, their numbers increased significantly, and by mid-century, after the guild reorganized under the ducal government, they represented ten percent of the membership.9 They were a varied group, representing a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. As we might expect, some female members came from families within the trade, or from other families connected to the trade through existing commercial networks. Female dealers were occasionally related by birth or marriage to merchants of higher status than artisans, using titles such as “ser” or “messer.” After membership widened in the mid-sixteenth century, the guild also included Jewish as well as Christian traders.10 Although female
dealers represented only a fraction of the guild, many women who were not members of the guild exchanged used goods unofficially, working as street peddlers, buying, selling and trading within homes, or operating more discreetly through intermediaries. It is not always easy to gauge the status of these women, and it may be impossible to quantify them or the overall scale of their operations. However, evidence from household account books, shop ledgers, and brief notices recorded in guild minutes points to greater female involvement than we have previously assumed.

Numerous women worked the streets, buying and selling old clothes and fabrics as itinerant vendors (rivenditrici). Like all peddlers, they were considered a threat to the established guilds since their mobility made them harder to oversee, and some accused them of swindling their customers with fraudulent goods. However, there was diversity within this group of traders, too. They ranged from married women to poor widows living at the Orbatello (the asylum that provided free communal lodging for large numbers of older laywomen). It is difficult to imagine that all people viewed them with equal suspicion.

Evidence from household account books suggests that revenditrici not only were trusted, but also became valuable members of female supply networks that enabled elite women to buy and sell from home. Camilla Capponi, the widow of Filippo di Antonio Magalotti, turned to female second-hand dealers to sell off her garments in the years following her husband’s death. The silk gowns that had once lavishly adorned her became a new means to raise ready cash. Camilla engaged the services of at least five women who purchased old clothing belonging to her and her children, or supplied her with material and haberdashery; transactions went both ways. Camilla’s exchanges with the dealers were not chance encounters, because she transacted with them repeatedly. In one case, a trader named Bita was even hired to work temporarily as a servant in the family’s kitchen. Why was Camilla operating in this way? Elizabeth Currie, who has analyzed the family’s spending patterns on clothing, has observed that the sales of Camilla’s garments raised several hundred florins and suggests a desire to safeguard her inheritance. They also occurred within a period of shifting financial priorities, as she was spending money on the renovation of a chapel in the family’s palace. Camilla, not necessarily profiting from
the sales of these goods, was realizing assets that she preferred to redirect elsewhere.

Women who preferred not to operate in the open market also engaged the services of male second-hand dealers to act as intermediaries. By selling off unwanted furnishings and clothing, they could raise large sums which were then redeployed. Funds were used to establish credit accounts with the dealer for new purchases, redirected to creditors, employed to refurbish rental properties, or even invested into savings accounts in their own names. When women opted for cash proceeds, they collected the money themselves, or a male relative or servant went on their behalf. Whoever signed for the cash, the records make clear exactly to whom it belonged, even if a woman’s husband also held an account with the same dealer. One dealer seems to have been particularly active as an intermediary, especially on behalf of women.17 For example, in 1511, a woman named Diamante di Giovanni da Castello Fiorentino sold over 200 lire of goods to a male used goods dealer. The objects included a large quantity of red fabric, a cloth tester, black velvet sleeves, brass candlesticks and basins, and a pair of silver knives with mother-of-pearl handles.18 She was paid installments, while, at the same time, the dealer assisted her in a legal dispute with another woman by assisting with a notary.19 For women like Diamante, an agent provided access to markets and services while allowing them to remain well within accepted norms of female decorum.

These are only a few examples from the archives in Florence, yet many more like them survive for this period. While the evidence is fragmentary, one thing is clear: women from across the social spectrum were active in the exchange of used goods, an activity that gave them greater economic opportunities than contemporary ideals lead us to believe. We may not know the overall impact of these exchanges, but they appear frequently enough to suggest that there were significant advantages to the women involved. Trading used goods not only allowed them to access cash and consumables directly, but also allowed them, by using objects of exchange, to reserve cash for other purposes, such as investment. Most importantly, the trade allowed women to transact more covertly, demonstrating how readily women could participate in the market for used goods without having to physically enter it. Women may not have been major players in
long-distance trade, but they were still active in the economy in important ways, performing roles closer to home that were far more subtle than preoccupations with major guilds and high finance reveal.

Notes

1. Robert Dallington, A Survey of the Great Dukes State of Tuscany, in the Year of Our Lord 1596 (London: Edward Blount, 1605), 64. I am grateful to Elizabeth Currie, Flora Dennis, and Sally McKee for their valuable comments on this topic.


5. Over twenty years ago, Judith Brown stressed the need to reassess the relationship between ideology and behavior in her study of female labor; see “A Woman’s Place Was in the Home: Women’s Work in Renaissance Tuscany,” in Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 206–24, esp. 207. For studies of working women, see also Samuel Cohn, Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), and especially his “Women and Work in Renaissance Italy,” in


8. Archivio di Stato, Florence (hereafter ASF), Arte dei Rigattieri, 10, fol. 136v onwards. These women are discussed at greater length in Matchette, “Unbound Possessions,” 114–22. More than twenty years ago, Merry Wiesner highlighted the importance of female second-hand dealers in Nuremberg where women dominated that sector of the market; see her “Paltry Peddlers or Essential Merchants? Women in the Distributive Trades in Early Modern Nuremberg,” The Sixteenth-Century Journal 12, no. 2 (1981): 3–13. Women dealers in Florence did not enjoy as much autonomy as those in northern Europe, but we know much less about their activities.

9. See the records of the reformed guild in ASF, Università dei Linaioli, 5.

10. For the range of women joining the guild, see Arte dei Rigattieri, 10 and Università dei Linaioli, 5.


12. See, for example, Linaioli, 7, entries on Mar. 23 and Apr. 8, 1553 (not foliated). Richard Trexler has listed two women living at the Orbatello in the early 1500s who were themselves adult daughters of second-hand dealers (rigattieri); see his “A Widows’ Asylum of the Renaissance: The Orbatello of Florence,” in his Dependence in Context in Renaissance Florence (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), 415–48, esp. 433.

13. ASF, Venturi Ginori Lisci, 341, fols. 35v, 36v, 53v, 138v, 141v. I am extremely
grateful to Elizabeth Currie for sharing her work on this source with me. She has studied the Magalotti at length in her dissertation “The Fashions of the Florentine Court: Wearing, Making and Buying Clothing, 1560–1620” (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2004).

14. See, for example, the entries for the dealer named Maria, in Venturi Ginori Lisci, 342, fol. 28.

15. Ibid., fol. 34v.


