THE SOCIAL STATUS OF QUATTROCENTO FLORENTINE WOMEN AS REFLECTED BY DOMESTIC ART

by

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ABSTRACT

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The goal of this paper is to examine the social and cultural status of women through domestic art addressed to them. In evaluating the various arts, the extent to which the depictions of ideals in the behavior and attitudes of women were realities must be considered. By examining the messages that the narratives and allegories depicted on the domestic furniture and its proliferation during the 15th century, I seek to determine as much as is possible about the lives of Florentine women who left little record of their thoughts and their interaction in society.

There were three rites of passage for women in the 15th century: marriage, childbirth, and widowhood, and all had certain objects associated with them that carried social significance not only for the woman, but also for the family and the city itself. The domestic art examined in this study has to do with the first two rites of passage and

the objects associated with them. Marriage carried a great deal of significance for women; it defined their life and status and transplanted them completely into a new family group. Marriage chests used to transport the trousseau and other parts of the dowry from the bride's household to the groom's, now commonly called *cassoni*, were often painted with mythological narratives, allegories, and on occasion biblical stories. These subjects were often intended as moralizing messages for women, but today they can also be valued for what they reveal about the lives of women during this period. The painted scenes on these chests helped to enforce the qualities women were admonished to possess (chastity and virtue, among others). The narratives would have been extreme from a modern sensibility, depicting women dying for the sake of their chastity or civic virtue. Though vague at times, they may help us come to the bottom of what was implied for the women who were expected to have these messages carry through into their daily lives, and how the men around them helped to put their roles into effect.

Childbirth and motherhood was the next important role women were expected to fulfill. Much emphasis was placed on the continuation of the family, producing an heir, that to fail to do so was almost unthinkable. However, in a world of limited medical knowledge, childbirth was dangerous for both mother and child. The family and city put enormous pressure on women to bear children. Due to the fact that they were usually married in their teens they spent many of their childbearing years having children, a physical strain that heightened the danger of childbirth. The plague had dramatically reduced the population in the 14th century, and that coupled with recurring outbreaks

created a city that that had set repopulation as a high priority. The dangers and necessity of childbirth gave rise to many celebratory and intercessory objects relating to childbirth. Some of the most popular and common were childbirth trays, or *deschi da parto*. These were brought to the new mother during her confinement period after childbirth with sweetmeats or other food. They were painted in a similar fashion as the *cassoni,* having a similar repertoire of mythological stories, but they also had confinement scenes depicting the mother and child after birth. The beauty and harmony of the confinement scenes had a talismanic quality, insuring the same for the new mother, while the mythological narratives carried similar meanings as did the *cassoni*.

Together these two objects carried a huge significance for the lives of 15th century Florentine women, and their moralizing messages revealed, if not the truth behind the idealization, at least an idea of the social role and cultural function of women.

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INTRODUCTION

The fifteenth century saw the appearance and rise in popularity of painted birth trays and large marriage chests. These and other related objects came seemingly from nowhere and soon had an integral part in marriage and childbirth ritual of Tuscany, especially Florence. Many birth trays and marriage chests were specifically addressed to women concerning marriage and childbirth. Often the subjects painted on their surfaces carried important didactic and societal messages for women. Florentine women left little record of their thoughts and their interaction in society. By examining the numerous examples of narratives and allegories depicted on domestic art it is possible to discover some aspects of their lives. The subjects of these paintings and the messages that they carried were ideals for behavior and attitudes of women, but the extent to which these ideals were realized cannot be completely determined. Together these two forms of domestic art carried a huge significance for the lives of fifteenth-century Florentine women. Their moralizing messages revealed, if not the truth behind the idealization, at least an idea of the social role and cultural function of women.

Florence was a firmly established patriarchal society that greatly emphasized the role of procreation for women. At any given point in their lives women were characterized by their relationships with the men in their lives and their marital status. They were defined by their position as wives, mothers, and widows.[1] Initiation into these positions, especially through the events of marriage and childbirth, were important

rites of passage for Renaissance women. Certain objects were associated with marriage, childbirth, and widowhood that carried social significance not only for women, but also for the family and the city itself. The domestic art examined in this study, primarily the birth trays and marriage chests, has to do with these first two rites of passage.

A vast material culture developed around these rites of passage. In addition to the trays and chests, many other different objects came about during this period that carried great significance for marriage and childbirth. This included such items as articles of clothing, furniture, tableware, and even certain foods. By examining these objects, contemporary records, and historical information it is possible to shed some light on the lives of a facet of society where previously little was known.

The records left behind referencing these occasions are most often written by men and, as such, appear at least to a modern perspective not to value women as individuals. By examining these records, it is possible to fill in some blanks. Any attempts to understand the personal thoughts and reactions of women to the culture they lived in are limited. This is due to the fact that such conjectures are largely hypothetical.[2] Women left few records of their perceptions of the world that they lived in. Part of this is due to their identities within society. These identities were determined by their relationships with their fathers or husbands.[3] The range of women's roles was constricted when compared to the wider range of roles their husbands could fill. Men were not limited to a set of identities that would define them within the home. They had

many other potential roles outside the home as valuable members of the republic, their community, and as members of their occupation.[4]

In the Italian language of this region and time period, objects designated specifically for women had certain linguistic identifiers. These identifiers are words or phrases that classify these objects for specific purposes related to women. It was not necessary to use similar linguistic identifiers for objects for use by men because men already had technical ownership of the home and everything within it.[5] Labels attached to objects, with identifiers like *da donna novella* "for the bride", *da parto* "for the expectant or new mother", or *da vedova* "for the widow", demonstrate their importance for women when defining their domestic role in society.[6]

One of the most important roles for women was marriage, which carried a great deal of significance for women. It defined their life, their status, and transplanted them completely into a new family group. Marriage chests used to transport the trousseau and other parts of the dowry from the bride's household to the groom's, now commonly called *cassoni*, were frequently painted with mythological narratives, allegories, and on occasion biblical stories. The subjects of these paintings were often intended as instructive messages for women. Today, however, they can also be valued for what they reveal about the lives of women during this period. The painted scenes on these chests helped to reinforce the qualities women were admonished to possess, such as chastity and virtue. These narratives might seem harsh from a modern sensibility because they depict women dying for the sake of their chastity or for civic virtue.

Childbirth and motherhood were also important roles women were expected to fill. Due in part to the demographic devastation caused by the outbreak of the bubonic plague in the fourteenth century, much emphasis was placed on the continuation of the family by producing an heir. However, in a world of limited medical knowledge, childbirth was dangerous for both mother and child. Women were usually married in their teens. Since life expectancy was shorter than today, they spent a large portion of their life bearing children. This physical strain heightened the danger of childbirth. Since recurring outbreaks of the plague had dramatically reduced the population from the fourteenth- through the early fifteenth- centuries, the city of Florence saw repopulation as a high priority.

The dangers and necessity of childbirth gave rise to many celebratory and intercessory objects relating to childbirth. Some of the most popular and common were childbirth trays, or *deschi da parto*. These were brought to the new mother during her confinement period after childbirth with sweetmeats or other food. They were painted in a similar fashion as the *cassoni*, having a similar repertoire of mythological stories, but they also had confinement scenes depicting the mother and child after birth. The beauty and harmony of the confinement scenes had a talismanic quality, ensuring the same for the new mother, while the mythological narratives carried a similar didactic purpose as did the *cassoni*.

MARRIAGE

In fifteenth-century Florence the world of women revolved around the domestic sphere in which they were enclosed. Most women were confined to their homes except on certain occasions such as attending daily mass in their local church, feasts for festive occasions, or ceremonial events such as weddings or funerals.[7] The majority of their lives were spent within the walls of their family's home. Marriage was one of the biggest changes in a woman's life, marking effectively her transfer from one domestic sphere into another. A woman who remained unmarried was restricted to living within the family home, for without male supervision it was thought she would be morally corrupted due to her weak nature.[8] The only alternative to the honorable state of marriage was for women to be placed in a convent.[9]

For a woman, marriage marked the transition from girlhood to adulthood. It removed her from the life and people she knew and transplanted her into an unfamiliar family group.[10] The process was potentially frightening for many young girls. They were often married off in their teens to a man who could easily be twice their age.[11] Although they had little say in the outcome, the match made for them would shape the remainder of their lives. The fifteenth-century Franciscan preacher San Bernadino of Siena accused mothers of "displaying their daughters like wares on the market to prospective bidders."[12] Leon Battista Alberti, a leading humanist thinker during the middle of the Renaissance, wrote in his famous treatise *I libri della famiglia* that

recommended that men should look over prospective brides as if they were farms to purchase.[13] There was a great deal of importance placed on marrying girls off at a certain age, as unmarried girls in a household raised questions about the family's honor.[14] This does not necessarily mean that girls were passive victims of a marriage market, traded to the wealthiest candidate. Marrying below one's social status for money in Florence at this time period was practically unheard of. It was thought better to allow the girl to enter a convent instead.[15]

The social status of a woman was defined by marriage. The wedding and the children she would eventually bear to continue her husband's line were the fulfillment of the role for which her entire upbringing had been preparing her.[16] The manner in which a woman's transference into her husband's household was recorded in the *catasto* (record books of the city) bears resemblance to a transfer of property. Upon her marriage her father or other male relative would cancel her name from the records of the family of her birth with a note referencing who she married and how much dowry was paid.[17] This manner of record keeping could have occurred simply because of the importance of the occasion and because young women of marrying age were so essential to the family. Because Italian culture after the plague outbreaks put a great deal of importance on the continuation of the male line, a healthy, fertile, maternal, and sexually submissive wife was needed.[18]

The issue of women's sexuality was pulled in two directions. It was necessary for procreation and the rehabilitation of society, but Italian men wanted to ensure that a woman's procreative potential was within their control. They wanted to be certain that

the heir to their property and continuation of their name was truly an heir. Girolamo Savonarola, the influential Dominican friar and prior of San Marco, wrote a treatise on proper behavior of widows that was published in 1491. He stated that women should suppress their sexual desires because sexuality was not pleasing in the sight of God nor in the sight of man. [19] The carnality of the act was associated with the devil.

Facing the issue of feminine sexuality was inevitable, however, because of the plague and its drain on the population. The plague struck down thousands upon thousands within a relatively short time period. The remaining families that once had an extensive circle of relations with which to continue their line suddenly found themselves with only a few male descendants to continue the family. A large kinship group was a stepping stone to prominence among the merchant class in Florence. Alberti wrote, "The father of a family followed by many of his kinsmen will be more eminent than one who is alone and seems abandoned."[20] During this time, family power and political power were inextricably linked.[21] This, among other factors, prompted a huge emphasis on procreation. Because women were necessary for this, they became a valuable commodity.

As inheritance rights evolved during the early Renaissance, estates began to be passed strictly to men and the only "share" women received were their dowries.[22] The dowry was composed of money and property that left the family to aid another, so it was only logical that boys became even more the desired gender for children due to the fact that women could not inherit family property or carry on the lineage of their natal family. The childless Tuscan widow, Margherita Datini, who for years aided friends and

family by caring for their children, wrote, “Girls do not make families but rather unmake them,” a harsh but true observation.[23] This does not mean that a family would not welcome a baby girl into the family with celebration if they had male children already and could afford to dower her, since they did stand to gain connections with her future in-laws.[24] Nevertheless, this was not always the case, and the age gap between married couples together with dowry inflation were all connected to the effect that the bubonic plague had on Italian society.[25]

The census of 1427 shows the average age of around 18 for women and 30 for men at the time of marriage. Poorer girls figure into that account as marrying around 20 years of age while girls from wealthier families married when they were from 15 to 17 years old.[26] Possibly poorer women had more of a say in the way their lives were determined. When married they set up family groups independently more often than the upper classes with an average age difference between marriage partners of only eight years.[27]

Marriage may have been a socially indispensable state for women, but it did not often bring many advantages.[28] Although individual accounts surely had exceptions, the age gap of almost a full generation between married couples often encouraged a submissive role among women and fostered a lack of communication between husband and wife.[29] Added to this was the fact that when married, the couple might not set up a home of their own. Rather they would often return to the home of the husband’s family and live under the head of the household. Women were circulated from their natal kinship group to that of their husband’s. Thus, in a sense they were going to live not

strictly under their husband's authority only, but under the authority of his older male kin as well.[30] The kinship ties formed by this circulating "exchange" of women were not given prominence or importance a few generations later. This is evidenced in family record books, perhaps indicating that the individuals were seldom remembered down a family line.[31] Women moved from home to home, sometimes repeating the cycle if they were widowed and remarried. Their identity was defined by the men to whom they were connected.[32]

The rise of humanism in Italy also impacted the way society viewed women because they were subjected to being judged based on texts written in antiquity.[33] The philosophical writings of Aristotle, theological treatises by Tertullian and Aquinas, legal texts such as the *Digest*, among many others, all influenced humanist ideas concerning the role of women in society.[34] Among these ideas was the fact that the Romans had linked the strength or weakness of a state to the moral condition of its women. This was a train of thought that carried over into Italian theories about the female gender.[35] All of these numerous ideas contributed to the formation of a perception of women that mandated their social status and dictated proper behavior for them. Their relationship in the home with those around them was founded on the principle of docility, a central focus of their upbringing.[36] Alberti, in a particularly misogynistic passage of his treatise concerning the family, wrote in his dialogue of an elder male member of the household instructing the younger males that they should never confide in their wives saying, "I am greatly displeased with those husbands who take counsel with their wives and don't know how to confine any kind of secret to their own breast. They are madmen if they

think true prudence or good counsel lies in the female brain."[37] When a woman left her home to live under her husband's authority, the submissive attitude instilled in her and the dramatic age difference contributed to cultivating a perception of women as weaker than men in intelligence. When reflecting on Tuscan standards of behavior, Rudolph Bell wrote that an ideal Renaissance wife "ought to have no feelings of her own; instead, she should join with her husband in seriousness as in sport, in sobriety as in laughter."[38]

Women did circulate among different households and over time may have lost contact with maternal relatives. We cannot assume, however, that the obedience bred in them would always have made them inactive or helpless in deciding their fate. Some women may have had a hand in deciding the outcome of marriage negotiations. This simply cannot be determined today because the negotiations between families were performed by men and did not include the female in question.[39] A positive factor in evaluating women's social status was that her consent was required for a marriage.[40] Although church records indicate examples where girls were beaten or threatened in order to get their consent, churchmen from the pulpit sought to impress the importance of free will and mutual consent within marriages.[41] In Florence the exchange of consent was required for controlling contracts on both sides of the couple's families.[42]

In addition, the existence of clandestine marriage gives us a strong example of women active in their own fate, choosing their own marriage partners.[43] The view of society toward clandestine marriage can be seen in the legal arena, where it was often prosecuted as rape.[44] This makes the number of clandestine marriages difficult to

determine because the punishment for a rapist was lessened if he paid a fee and married the victim. It is also difficult to determine if this was actually the desired result in some cases and was in fact a planned clandestine marriage.[45] Rape and adultery were vague terms in law. In the Renaissance they were vague terms in general. The primary difference between the two was marital status, though each case could be classified differently.[46] The Latin word *raptus* simply meant "abduction" or "theft", so property could be raped and abductions could be categorized as rape.[47] This gives us a rather dramatic picture of a woman being seen as equivalent to property under law and the use of force on her as having little consequence. However, in the cases of clandestine marriage, we can see women using the misogynistic laws of the day in their favor to decide for themselves whom they would marry. Unfortunately we cannot always tell if this was the case or if in fact a woman was being handed over to her rapist to become his wife. Throughout prosecution of these crimes it was not abnormal for penalties to be different depending on social status. For example, such crimes among peasants were not penalized as severely because peasants were worth less to the state and required less protection.[48] These same peasants lacked control over their children's nuptiality because they had no property and their children left home when they were old enough to work as servants or apprentices.[49]

At the opposite end of the spectrum were marriages among the ruling classes. Made for political strategy, not dowries, the negotiations between lords or princes for their children could begin when the daughter was between 2 and 12 and were usually concluded by proxy, requiring no consent.[50] Although the girls in these high-profile

marriages would not have had much influence in the choosing of their marriage partner, many of them would have had more power in terms of making decisions about their lives, unlike the merchant class. The merchant class needed to have some laws about the consent of the couple to the marriage. Most cities in Italy had parental consent laws which required consent until the girl reached a certain age. This ranged from 15 to 25 years of age, depending on the city, except Florence.[51] In Florence this was assumed because parental consent was present in the consent contracts drawn up between both families at the time of marriage to record the dowry amount that the daughter's family agreed to pay.[52]

The dowry was established in Roman law and in legal doctrine to meet the costs of matrimony.[53] It was the deciding factor of the marriage and it had to be given as part of the betrothal, the promise required for a couple to marry.[54] In fact, the bride would not typically take up residence with her husband until at least a portion of the dowry had been paid.[55] The dowry began to be instated throughout Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to meet a growing demand to preserve family land holdings intact; thus the bride's portion of the inheritance was converted into cash and went with her into marriage.[56] The husband had control of the dowry once it was in his possession and could invest it, but the amount had to remain intact so that if in the event of his death his wife could use it for another marriage. This changed the economic situations of husbands dramatically, for they could afford to risk their own money in investment ventures with the dowry to fall back on.[57] The dowry practice grew in importance. As the Middle Ages drew to a close, the fundamental reasons that dowries had originally

been established became unclear. Complications arose, and the idea of the counter-dowry and other factors pushed dowry inflation to an extreme.[58]

The dowry became the guarantor of the honor of each individual involved. It insured women of a suitable marriage, protecting them from the moral degeneracy that singleness brought. Dowries were also the means of subtly announcing to society the social status of the girl's family. It allowed for an instant upgrade in the couple's social status by providing the cash with which the groom could begin to make his way up in society.[59] In this way the dowry became a central economic and social indicator of the time and was a determining force in society.[60] After 1430 it became even more the heartbeat of the economical situation in Florence when the *Monte delle Doti* was founded. This dowry insurance bank ensured an appropriate dowry to any bride whose father had made a contribution in her childhood to the bank.[61] The bank had a short life span, however; in the late fifteenth century the *Monte* could no longer keep up with payments as deposits slackened and in the early sixteenth century it no longer functioned.[62]

Under the new dowry system the rights that women had once held in the medieval ages shrank into distant history as the dowry system became firmly established in society. The fact that women could have inherited an estate and that men had brought as much to matrimony as their brides became nothing but a memory.[63] As the dowry system evolved the original function of a dowry as a woman's portion of her inheritance no longer held up. This was evidenced in Florence by the fact that a woman without brothers or nephews could inherit a fourth of her father's estate whether or not

she was previously dowered, evidently demonstrating that the inheritance principle of the dowry was lost.[64]

Everything about the giving of the dowry to the groom was very public; every payment was notarized.[65] It often took many years to complete all the payments on the amount specified in the original marriage contract.[66] Payments of the dowry were often spaced over a long period of time. This, coupled with the fact that husbands often invested these dowry payments, made it unlikely that much, if any, of the dowry money would be available to a widow upon the death of her husband.

If the couple had young children, which in all likelihood they would, the situation became complicated for a widow.[67] If she left her children, who belonged by right to her deceased husband's kin, she was accused of abandoning them.[68] Much of this had to do with the taking away of her dowry from her husband's heirs, and less to do with her physically abandoning them. The pressure, however, of her own natal family to remarry, had they decided that she would do so, would have been almost impossible for her to fight. This was especially true if she were still young enough to make an advantageous marriage.[69] Although the dowry had theoretically been set up to provide for a widow on such an occasion, it often proved difficult to reclaim it from her husband's heirs and left her labeled as a cruel mother for her financial and physical abandonment of her children.[70]

In the fifteenth century the demands for nuptial gifts and elaborate clothing for a wife grew. This forced the amount of dowry given to the husband to rise because the amount that the groom spent on the bride was gradually growing.[71] The amount that the

groom spent was usually one to two-thirds of the dowry.[72] Even when a dowry was received in a timely manner, men complained that it did them little good because so much of it would only be put towards the customary second trousseau a husband would provide for his wife and the bridal chamber which he was responsible for decorating, among other things.[73] The bride received gifts that had symbolic significance, such as items with her husband-to-be's coat of arms. This demonstrated that she was spoken for and commenced her induction into her husband's family.[74] The nuptial belt was one of the most important and erotic gifts because it represented the consummation of the marriage. It was decorated and given to the bride, who wore it until her new husband would remove it after the wedding. [75] Without this ritual the marriage was considered impure (*incesto*) and illegitimate.[76] The gift given the morning after the wedding symbolized the husband's claim to sexual rights over his wife.[77]

The husband retained technical ownership of everything he gave to his wife.[78] One of the more ironic elements of this situation was that men blamed women's vanity and greed for under-population problems. They complained that this kept men from marrying because of their financial upkeep.[79] The husbands preferred to have cash for investment measures. They would rather that the nuptial gifts and portion of the dowry that consisted of material things such as clothes, linens, *cassoni*, or other objects, be converted into cash. On the other hand, these things were necessary to establish prestige for the couple among society.[80]

It is possible that these gifts were also necessitated by an imbalance between the families of the marrying couple created by the giving of the dowry. Julius Kirschner

argues against this, saying that there was no need to right a balance and nuptial gifts were intended to be investments into the security of a marriage.[81] However, the potential for the need to reinstate an equilibrium between the two parties seems very likely. This is due to the fact that not only did the couple bring in equal amounts to a marriage in centuries previous, but also much of Tuscan and especially Florentine societal interactions were characterized by a debt system between groups that enforced social and political alliances.[82]

Regardless of the reasons, the rising affluence of Florence resulted in weddings becoming extravagant competitive displays of wealth between families. Since rank was shown by dress, fathers and husbands were expected to spend money to adorn daughters and wives appropriately.[83] The system men had set up for standards of dress contributed to the need to provide their new wives with a second trousseau. These were seen in the sociocultural logic of the day to be extensions of their husband, reflecting his honor and wealth.[84] Luxury and display were linked with honor and imbedded in the culture. Therefore, the sumptuary laws imposed by concerned moralists were doomed to failure. They eventually evolved into excise taxes or fees that the rich would pay in order to dress wives and daughters as their social station demanded.[85] Women, their voices not heard in the public realm, could communicate their individuality through their clothes. There is evidence that women in Florence resented the sumptuary laws of the time.[86] Nicolasa Sanuti and Battista Petrucci wrote treatises on the injustice of sumptuary legislations that were circulated among humanist circles and debated.[87] Regardless, it

remains difficult to determine much about the voices of these individual women in retrospect, even if we had a thorough knowledge of what they wore.

Marriage was intended to be a public display of wealth, the extent of which was decided by the father of the bride. Technically such a show was unnecessary. The only requirements for a marriage to be legal were a dowry, a ring, and consent recorded by a notary on the part of the couple and their parents.[88] Though not required for the legality, the marriage ceremony was a social necessity, and the higher the status of the couple getting married the more extravagant was the wedding. Weddings required a huge show for a very limited time so second-hand dealers in Florence provided furnishing at short notice for festive events.[89] This developed as a means to lessen the cost of marriage ceremonies while still living up to the societal expectations of extravagance. The system, however, did have the potential to increase the excessive show at weddings by providing a means for the money saved to be spent in a still more lavish display.[90]

Wedding ceremonies, more than just celebrated occasions, served as opportunities to cement family ties and alliances.[91] Once the bride was welcomed into the household of her husband, his female kin customarily gave her gifts of rings that served to welcome her by those in whose footsteps she would follow as female members of the family.[92] These rings were purely symbolic, however, because they were expected to be returned to the descendants of the givers or other kin when they took a wife and men kept careful records of their exchange.[93] Filippo Strozzi mentions this ring-giving by including a list of people who "logically and to all reason ought to restore them [the rings] to the wife of Alfonso [my son]."[94] This cycle of exchange

enforced alliances between kin forged by marriages, and if it was neglected, family ties would slacken.[95]

There were four stages to marriage ceremonies: the *impalmamento*, the *sponsalia*, the *matrimonium*, and the *nozze*.[96] The *impalmamento* was the celebrated agreement between the two families to the terms of the marriage contract.[97] A notary would describe the dowry items for a contract to be drawn up.[98] The *sponsalia* consisted of a meeting between both families to discuss the dowry at the house of the bride, and the notary would ask the couple church-appointed questions.[99] The *matrimonium* was a statement of mutual marriage consent made by the couple and the exchanging of rings.[100] The *nozze* followed the *matrimonium* with a banquet celebrating the consummation of the marriage, and was followed by the procession where the bride was escorted to her new home with her dowry.[101] The *nozze* was sometimes delayed for long periods of time, up to a year, to give the family time to assemble the dowry.[102] The bride carried her dowry in her *cassoni* during the procession, making the journey to her new home with the chests whose paintings bore so much symbolic significance for the role that she as a new wife would play within it.

CASSONI

Cassoni figure prominently among the ranks of the decorated domestic furniture of the fifteenth century. This is partly because of their involvement with the marriage ritual, and partly because they reaffirmed the importance of the rituals and cultural beliefs of the period itself. These great chests, referred to in documents as *forzieri*, (*cassoni* is a more modern term) were popular from the fourteenth through the early sixteenth century.[103] They could cost as much as 75 florins, which amounted to a year's salary for a skilled laborer. For this reason they were only found in patrician's homes.

The custom of having containers for the bride to carry her possessions in as she went to the home of her husband dates back to ancient Rome, but the *cassoni* did not come to be used as those objects until the fourteenth century.[104] In the middle of the fifteenth century these chests lost their previous purpose as the containers that the dowry was transferred in. At this time the responsibility of commissioning the chests changed to being a part of decorating the nuptial chamber by the family of the groom. The bride transported her *donora*, or marriage gifts, in baskets.[105] In size *cassoni* range from about 38 by 130 cm to 43 by 175.8 cm, they were usually made of pine, fir, or larch, and were lined with linen or some other material to protect the goods within them.[106] Their original purpose was to be a sort of strongbox that doubled as a bench. As time went by, various examples show that a more decorative aesthetic purpose began to be desired by those who commissioned them.[107] The placement of the chests on the

floor and their use for seating often damaged the panels, even within their own time, so not many survive intact.[108] *Spalliere* are wall panels painted similarly to the *cassoni*. They were placed higher on the wall to fulfill perspectival issues better and they replaced or complemented *cassoni* during the sixteenth century.[109]

The decoration of these chests began in the fourteenth century as patterns of plants, animals, and geometric shapes that show oriental textile influences.[110] During the fifteenth century the chests' decorations became more narrative. In the sixteenth century, as their popularity was waning, they became more elaborate. They had extensive carving and gilding, and were decorated with paintings of animals and floral patterns.[111] But it was in the fifteenth century, during the period of narrative painting, that the chests were the most popular. For the purposes of this study, the chests made in this time frame are the most informative about the lives of contemporary women. The majority of the extant examples are classical in theme, originating in texts from antiquity. Following this are battle scenes, vernacular narratives and allegories from contemporary sources, and some biblical accounts. An examination of some examples from each group, focusing on the classical narratives that were the most prominent, offers insight into how women during this time period lived and were expected to behave. The sixteenth-century art historian Giorgio Vasari described *cassoni* in his account of the life of Dello Delli, saying,

> the citizens of those times used to have in their apartments great wooden chests in the form of a sarcophagus, with the covers shaped in various fashions, and there were none that did not have the said chests painted;

> and besides the stories that were wrought on the front and on the end, they use to have the arms, or rather, insignia of their houses painted on the corners, and sometimes elsewhere. And the stories that were wrought on the front were for the most part fables taken from Ovid and from other poets, or rather stories related by the Greek and Latin historians, and likewise chases, jousts, tales of love, and other similar subjects, according to each man's particular pleasure.[112]

Vasari wrote describing the narratives on the *cassoni* which would have been produced in the fifteenth century. The majority of the narratives painted on marriage chests were of a classical origin, coming from the writings of such classical or humanist authors as Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Plutarch, Boccaccio, and Petrarch.[113] Such important men as Lorenzo de'Medici appreciated domestic painting, and had himself *cassoni* that featured Petrachan triumphs as shown by inventories made upon his death. Still Vasari looks back from the sixteenth century in his writing and marvels how, "even the most excellent painters exercised themselves in such labors, without being ashamed, as many would be today, to paint and gild such things," demonstrating how no sixteenth century artist would stoop to painting these artisanal objects.[114]

The placement of *cassoni* in bedchambers gave them erotic association that is often reflected in the narratives painted on them, which are frequently sexual.[115] "Heroic" rape was an especially common theme, it was expected to excite emotion and establish an acceptance of sexual violence that would be in the undertones of the atmosphere of the bedroom; the submissive poses and helplessness of the distressed women in the scenes could be lessons for the bride to imitate in the bedroom.[116] "Heroic" rape was present in such narratives as those of Europa, Io, Proserpine, Leda, and especially that of the Sabine women.[117] These narratives reveal a great deal about

the gender formation of women and their societal roles due to their didactic intent.[118] They helped to enforce women's roles as wives, peacemakers, and mothers through their themes of marriage and Eros.[119] The *cassoni* give a remarkably unpretentious view of daily life for women and a good idea of the upbringing of young women as they emphasize women's purposes and not their individuality.[120] Chastity as a theme promoted ideal submissiveness and sacrifice for the husband's family and for the city. In Leon Battista Alberti's dialogue in his treatise about the family, the husband Gianozzo attempts to instruct his bride on how to behave:

> You should realize that in this regard nothing is so important for yourself, so acceptable to God, so pleasing to me, and precious in the sight of your children as your chastity. The woman's character is the jewel of her family; the mother's purity has always been a part of the dowry she passes on to her daughters; her purity has always far outweighed her beauty. A beautiful face is praised, but unchaste eyes make it ugly through men's scorn.[121]

For women, feminine virtue, as exemplified by her chastity, was her highest achievement.[122] The many depictions of a virgin or nymph fleeing from a pursuing male in these anecdotes could have represented the fear a virginal bride would feel about a future marriage, reinforcing the concept of marriage as a hunt with the woman as the prey.[123] A female heroine (unlike their male counterpart) was a woman who, under adverse circumstances and while being victimized, valued her virtue above all else, even her life.[124]

This was the basic structure of many narratives of famous females. The narratives of these *donni illustri*, illustrious or worthy women, comprise from one-third to one-half of all *cassoni* panels.[125] These narratives highlight many problems related to

female identity.

The rape of the Sabines was one of the most popular anecdotes that fell into the category of *donni illustri*. In Italy in the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries the general view of the narrative was that it was a heroic and patriotic act by the Romans, and the violence of the subject matter was frequently downplayed.[126] In the episode the Romans attempted to establish peaceful ties with the Sabines and requested their daughters in marriage. When this failed, they took matters into their own hands by tricking the Sabines into coming to a banquet in their honor. At this banquet, the men each grabbed one of the Sabine virgins and violently abducted them after a signal from Romulus.[127] Rape from a Roman perspective meant to carry something off by force, and sexual intercourse was not a necessary component of this. It did follow, however, when the Sabine women were forced to become the wives of the Romans who had abducted them.[128] The rape of the Sabines was regularly pictured on *cassoni* panels because, as Ernst Gombrich observed, it was, "represented on bridal chests as an auspicious topic for the foundation of a new line."[129]

Many contemporary writers discussed the rape of the Sabines from different viewpoints. Early Florentine humanists constructed Florentine genealogy so that the citizens were directly descended from the "race of Romulus" and the abducted Sabines. Another humanist, Lorenzo Valla, praised Romulus, for, "in seizing wives from nearby cities because he could not get them by entreaty, Romulus displayed not only fortitude but also prudence and justice."[130] Not all saw the story favorably. In the sixteenth century, Florentine moralist Peter Martyr Vermigli wrote, "Even if the Sabines were

unfair to refuse to give their daughters on request, it was surely much more unfair to take them by force after this refusal."[131] Regardless of which way the debate went, the rape of the Sabines was ever a popular theme in domestic art, in fact it had already assumed a conventional iconography long before this.[132]

In the fifteenth century, a new phase of the Sabine legend began to figure frequently in the depictions on *cassoni*.[133] This was the reconciliation of the Sabines, featuring them as public speakers and peacemakers seeking to stop the battle between their new husbands and their fathers and brothers that occurs when the Sabine men attempt to reclaim their kinswomen.[134] The Sabines respond to the conflict by rushing into the midst of the battle between their kinsmen and husbands carrying with them their small children, the outcome of their forced marriages.[135]

Many of the earliest examples of this subject painted on marriage chests were vague in their depiction of violence, and as a result were often misunderstood and not given correct titles by art historians examining these panels many hundreds of years later. For example, a *cassone* panel by the Master of Marradi of the *Rape of the Sabines* [Fig 1] does not have a composition dominated by the abduction of the women. In fact, most of the composition is devoted to portraying the banquet scene, and only a small section off to the left portrays a few struggling couples. The distress of the women is not an immediate focus. The only truly violent aspect of the abduction is the depiction of one pair of figures behind the others where the Roman appears to be choking a woman, and the battle between the two groups outside the city wall. Very little violence is shown in the taking of the women, and the sexual aspect of the kidnapping is barely

even hinted at. The conventional symbols of rape, torn clothing and loose hair, are not overtly present. The reality behind the event appears to have been, in a sense, glossed over by the artist.

Bartolommeo di Giovanni's *Rape of the Sabines* [Fig. 2] exemplifies an open societal acceptance of the event by showing, behind the struggling couples and fleeing women, two couples walking away hand in hand peacefully.[136] This implied the eventual acceptance by the abducted women of their new husbands, and is a feature often included in other depictions of the same event. This panel is perhaps more straightforward with the violence of the occasion than other earlier examples of the scene. The bright colors and tranquil ordering of compositions often made other fifteenth century depictions of the historic rape scene difficult to identify until close examination.[137]

Late fifteenth and early sixteenth century depictions became more direct in their depiction of violence.[138] In Bartolommeo's panel, the sexual aspect is blatantly present, unlike the example by the Master of Marradi. In the foreground there is a couple lying on the ground, the man with his knee between the woman's legs, on a horse an abductor grasps the breast of a woman he is carrying away, and in the stands behind them another Roman seems to force himself on a seated woman, whose leg is flung out in an understood symbol of sexual intercourse.[139] The women around in the composition have torn dresses, breasts exposed, and their hair loose in the iconographical inference of the rape victim.[140] There is a prominent didactic message for both genders in the Sabine account. The women were encouraged to be submissive to their husbands, sacrificing

for the state and family, and the men heroically went out into battle for the good of the city.[141] The contemporary dress of the characters in the paintings and the humanist connections would have brought the story closer to social reality.[142]

Though the scene had a moralizing message for both husband and wife, it also served to enforce the husband's rule over his wife and his right to use force if necessary for the sake of continuing his lineage.[143] During this time, husbands could legally use force against their wives if they refused to obey them.[144] On the other hand, for a bride removed from the only world she had ever known and placed possibly against her will in a new home with a husband she potentially hadn't wanted to marry, the scene served to represent the justification and outcome of the situation. The abducted Sabine women accept their husbands and bear them children. In the second panel of Bartolommeo di Giovanni's marriage chests [Fig. 3], the women rush into the battlefield, some handing their young children to the men on their horses. The background is filled with Roman monuments, as if to remind the viewer of why the act of abduction occurred: for the founding of Rome and the good of the country.[145]

It is interesting to note that this subject on marriage panels, while serving to reinforce female submissiveness and encourage women to be peacemakers, contains and advocates decisive reaction by the Sabine women interfering with the plans of the men who governed their lives.[146] This would have been contrary to the behavior expected of a proper wife, so one can only wonder what contemporary women made of it.[147] The sixteenth-century Roman humanist Marco Antonio Altieri found that "every nuptial act recalls the rape of the Sabines," as exemplified by such marriage traditions

as the groom carrying the bride over the threshold and the clasping of hands during the wedding ceremony.[148] Altieri was likely thinking of the ancient writer Plutarch, who noted that, "the bride shall not of herself cross the threshold into her new home, but be lifted up and carried in, because the Sabine women were carried in by force and did not go in on their own accord."[149]

In the mid fifteenth-century there was a shift from the majority of the narratives and scenes focusing on amatory narratives to them focusing on heroic depictions, constituting such examples as battle scenes from antiquity that reflected ancient concepts of honor and personal humility.[150] Battle scenes, especially the famous battles of antiquity, were very popular in the Renaissance and were frequently put on *cassoni* panels.[151] Brucia Witthoft argues that, "Marriage chests…often illustrated battles and triumphs because they were carried in a quasi-military triumphal wedding procession."[152] Whether or not that is true, the humanist appreciation for classical events as moralizing and containing attitudes to be mimicked surely played into the illustration of battles from antiquity. The *cassone* panel, the *Battle between the Athenians and the Persians* [Fig. 4], by Apollonio di Giovanni, a *cassone* specialist, depicts one such example of a battle from antiquity. The composition is energetic and cluttered and uses many bright and primary colors to distinguish the individual military men and their horses. What this kind of subject matter could have meant to a bride is difficult to imagine, perhaps it echoes the sentiment expressed in other works and sometimes on the *testate*, the side panels, of the *cassoni* for the desire for male children. In this context they would pursue honor for the family and state as the military men in

the panel are.

Giovanni Toscani's *Ginevra of Genoa* [Fig. 5] illustrates a narrative from Boccaccio's vernacular book the *Decameron* in which a group of friends, while away from home, are discussing the faithfulness of their wives. Bernabo boasts that his wife is so faithful and chaste that nothing could persuade her to sleep with another man, and in response Ambrogiuolo makes a wager with him that he can seduce his wife. *Cassoni* figure prominently in this narrative, for it is by hiding inside a *cassone* that Ambrogiuolo gains entry to the bedchamber of Ginevra, Bernabo's wife. He waited until she went in to bed and fell asleep, then got out of the chest and pulled back the bedclothes to search for a distinguishing mark on her that would prove that he had successfully seduced her. He returns to meet Bernabo and describes a birthmark on his wife, winning the bet. Bernabo orders his wife's death, but she escapes dressed as a man and travels with a faithful servant to the Near East where she eventually proves Ambroguiolo's guilt and is restored to her husband.[153] The panel painted by Giovanni Toscana in a sequential narrative shows the wager made and the trickery of Ambrogiuolo who is carried into the house in the *cassone* and emerges to pull back the bedclothes and scrutinize Ginevra. The injustice, cross-dressing, and transgressive sexuality make the anecdote seem an odd choice for a marriage chest, but could have been exemplary for brides to above all pursue chastity in marriage and be as virtuous as Ginevra.[154] As written by the governing group of Florence, the 1433 Signoria, "women were made to replenish this fine city and observe chastity in marriage…For did not God Himself, the master of nature, say this: 'Increase and multiply and replenish this earth

and conquer it.'"[155] The council draws a connection between the chastity of women and the replenishing of the earth and its conquest; in contemporary concerns this equaled out to repopulation after the devastation of the plague and the maintenance of good government. The moralizing intent of many of these *cassoni*, exemplified by much of their subject matter, would have profoundly impacted brides views of the societal expectations placed on them.

The Dominican friar Savonarola criticized the use of pagan instead of biblical scenes on *cassoni,* characterizing them as being strictly from Greek and Latin texts.[156] He might not have known about some *cassoni* examples with biblical imagery, such as panels with the narratives of Esther, Susanna, and the queen of Sheba, because it is possible that these examples went only to the prosperous Jewish population.[157] Interestingly the narratives always pictured the characters in contemporary dress, something Vasari seemed to think completely normal. In his discussion of the worth of these marriage chests he states that they are worth preserving to study the costume of the day, but appears not to care that the time period of the costume does not coincide with the time period of the stories.[158] Biblical anecdotes were only occasional subjects on *cassoni*; Vasari characterized the subject matter of *cassoni* as being from Greek and Roman texts.[159] Regardless, there are several extant examples of biblical narratives. The story of the queen of Sheba's pilgrimage to visit King Solomon because she heard of his wisdom was a popular example from the biblical narratives, one example painted in the latter half of the fifteenth century [Fig. 6] depicts her packing gifts for Solomon and traveling to the city to kneel before him in homage.[160] The scene was doubtless

appreciated by contemporaries as exemplary of the appropriate relationship between a woman of power and a man of wisdom; the queen kneels before Solomon in humility despite her great wealth and authority.[161]

The undersides of the lids of the *cassoni* were frequently painted with reclining nude figures, both male and female, often one of each due to the fact that *cassoni* came in pairs.[162] The reclining female figure on a *cassone* made in 1465 [Fig. 7] may seem to modern eyes to be far from a standard of beauty, but it was intended to be extremely erotic. These images only the husband and wife would have had access to, and would not have been seen by those watching the wedding procession because the lids would have been closed.[163] Unlike the scenes on the front panels of the chests, these, though sometimes labeled "Paris" and "Helen", were not painted to bear reference to antiquity but rather to inspire the conception of children and, as a form of sympathetic magic, ensure that the child would be formed beautifully.[164]

Leon Battista Alberti's influential treatise on the family impacted humanist circles widely with reference to the methods for achieving an ideal family. By writing so extensively about ideals for behavior, he proffers a window into the Italian, and specifically Tuscan, culture. In the third volume of his *Della Famiglia,* Alberti sets up a dialogue between a husband and his young wife where he teaches her the means of being a good household manager, and the model he offers us when correcting his bride is for him a summation of gender roles.[165] During the dialogue the husband, Giannozzo, pauses in his instruction to ask his wife how she would "go about things generally," and she replied "with a little blush of shyness in her cheeks. 'I would do well wouldn't I,'

she said, 'to keep everything locked up properly?'"[166] Giannozzo responds with his object lesson, saying, "No indeed…Dear wife, if you put into your marriage chest not only your silken gowns and gold and valuable jewelry, but also the flax to be spun and the little pot of oil, too, and finally the little chicks, and then locked the whole thing securely with your key, tell me would you think you had taken good care of everything because everything was locked up?"[167] Cristelle Baskins discusses Alberti's treatment of the *cassoni* as an analogy for the circulation for goods within the household. She extends his analogy to include the wife herself needing to be readily available sexually to her husband to keep the continuation of the family running as smoothly as a well managed household.[168] According to Baskins, Alberti used the *cassoni* as a "microcosm of the household…and a figure for the wife herself."[169] As it would be absurd to lock all the different items in with the gowns and valuables that could be damaged by them. The home works best when characterized by the open circulation in which Giannozzo's unnamed teenage bride is expected to prevent losses by carefully preserving perishables, keeping track of what was consumed, and guarding the goods of the household in their respective places.[170] She serves in a similar position as the household possessions, required not to withhold her body from her husband and to replenish the patriline with children to compensate for her own consumption.[171]

This principle of domestic circulation that applies within a private sphere for women stands in opposition to the role a man should play. In Alberti's words the man, "should guard woman, the house, and his family and country, but not by sitting still," as the woman does, because, "they are more useful when they sit still and watch over our

things. It is as though nature provided for our well being, arranging for men to bring things home and for women to guard them."[172] This viewpoint limiting women to remain within the home is reflected by much of Florentine society. Thus the majority of women lived out their lives enclosed within their husband's home.

A *cassone* such as that which Giannozzo's object lesson was based around could have been found in many of the homes of upper class citizens. Due to their large size and the lack of other items of furniture in these homes, it would have dominated the interior space and had a profound impact on a young bride's view of her position.

CHILDBIRTH

Childbirth could be interpreted as being the single most important role a woman was expected to fulfill. Young girls were prepared for their future position as mothers from an early age.[173] In a society that placed incredible emphasis on procreation, the transition from girl to woman was dominated not only by marriage and the acquiring of a new kinship circle but also the ability to continue the family line.[174] The dowry system that had evolved in Italy made daughters a great expense at relatively little gain except the founding of social ties with in-laws. Girls were married young and left the natal family with a significant amount of money and valuables that went to her husband and away from the male heirs of her own family.[175] As the widow Margherita Datini wrote in a letter, daughters "do not make families but rather unmake them."[176]

Little girls were more likely to be abandoned than boys, and the birth of a daughter in some examples inspired condolences from relatives and friends. [177]A family could only be expanded through the paternal line, and for the merchant class and nobility the larger a paternal kinship was the more lineal and political connections it afforded. For a man to continue his family line he must utilize a woman, but if the woman he marries produces daughters it would be a financial loss. Daughters would be taken away from the male line along with their dowries, so ideally a family could hope for a minimal amount of daughters and many sons who would continue the patriline. In turn these sons would marry and bring in dowries from their brides to the benefit of

their relations and the detriment of the bride's. It was a continuous problematic cycle. The fifteenth-century preacher San Bernadino of Siena preached a series of sermons about the impact of luxuries on private life, and lamented that dowries prevented children from being born because of the expense of marriage.[178] The focus of marriage was seen by many in this time period to be procreation to produce an heir, and in the aftermath of the plague this emphasis grew all the more.[179] This was exemplified by the Florentine city statutes of 1433 where women were instructed to "replenish this free city" and were likened to "little sacks, to hold the natural seed in which their husbands implant in them so that children can be born."[180] Though we cannot say how this societal belief was carried out in the way individual family units interacted with the females in their group, it is evident that girls were raised in the knowledge of and in preparation for their future roles as mothers.

Trousseau *ricordanze* between 1450 and 1520 sometimes record small "holy dolls", models of saints or other Christian figures thought to aid women in religious contemplation. They were given to young brides or occasionally girls entering a convent and had the dual purpose of encouraging religious devotion and stirring maternal instincts.[181] Possibly there was a time during wedding celebrations where a bride would hold a baby and consider the future children that would come of her marriage.[182] Providing an heir was essential for a woman to establish herself within her husband's kinship circle. The ability to do so was rewarded in some patrician families by a small increase in authority or by gifts from her husband and relatives.[183]

The recurrent epidemics of the plague that began with the first great outbreak in 1348 were central to the forming of the concepts of childbirth that developed during this period.[184] After the first outbreak the plague returned on an average of every ten years, and though there was a reactionary leap in the number of marriages and the birthrate briefly afterwards, many of the babies born would fall to the next epidemic due to their vulnerable age.[185] In Florence the population before the plague was 120,000, and after the numerous outbreaks the population fell to only 37,000 in 1427. There had been an expansion of the city walls to accommodate the increasing population in the prosperity right before the plague hit, but the city did not expand to meet the walls until 600 years later.[186]

The difficulties faced by survivors that witnessed thousands fall to the plague cannot be comprehended. It can be imagined that as the population dwindled the importance of renewing the city's population and ensuring the continuation of families grew to the point of desperation.[187] It is no coincidence that the multitude of childbirth items that began being widely used from the beginning of the fifteenth century only lasted in their proliferation until the population had recovered; as the gaps made by generations being wiped out began to be filled again the emphasis on childbirth declined and the use of the objects waned.[188] The civic importance placed on childbirth was aimed at restoring the prosperity of the city. A city without inhabitants to work, buy, sell, and interact within a social and economic schema could not prosper. One example of the city taking a civic interest in promoting childbirth was seen in the attempt to control the expense of childbirth by specifying childbirth objects and customs

in Florentine sumptuary laws.[189] What was deemed excessive expenditure was thought to be connected with the shirking of the duties of motherhood. Jaqueline Musacchio observed that "By controlling expensive feminine display, and relegating women to the role of childbearing, the governing men hope these laws would help decrease expenses and increase the population."[190] Girls married young and spent many of their childbearing years pregnant, and although this was necessary to combat the increased mortality around them, it took a physical toll on their bodies.[191] Possibly the plague contributed to women's limitations in the ways in which they could interact in society as the desperate need to revive the population and the family prompted an increase in the importance of childbearing and relegated women to motherhood as their fundamental role in society.

Childbirth, being one of the most crucial and fundamental female roles for continuing life after the plague, was celebrated with many objects and customs. The confinement period of the mother directly following the birth of the child was a significant ritual within the event. The new mother was set up in a room to receive visitors, dressed sumptuously and surrounded by attendants and childbirth objects to commemorate the occasion.[192] Since there are few written records concerning the confinement time and the visiting of the new mother, the depictions in sacred and domestic art are often the best tools for understanding the ritual.[193] Confinement was a social event that was filled with visiting female friends, neighbors, and relatives bearing gifts.[194] A clarifying entry in the records of Lorenzo Morelli in 1478 exemplifies this custom, "I gave in the name of [my wife] Vaggia to Marietta her sister, the wife of

Lionardo Ridolfi who gave birth to a boy, golden damask for a tunic with dagged sleeves."[195] The typical gifts given were usually sweetmeats, goblets, sets of silver utensils, and fabric. Although the ritual was enacted by women, there was nevertheless a male political drive behind the gift-giving by the women.[196] This gift-giving became a cycle that could continue for years as the obligation felt by the receiving party would prompt a return gift later. It strengthened relationships as the feeling of debt passed from faction to faction.[197] As a result of the significance of the ties created during the confinement period, the mother and the room itself was set up to make a good impression and subtly show off the husband's status and wealth.[198] In examining the hypothetical woman's point of view, confinement visits with their gifts and the beautiful clothes the mother would wear were likely to be very happy times in a woman's life. The mother was celebrated, her new baby adored, the gifts probably passed around amongst the visiting women, and special treats of food and drink served only on such an occasion were brought out to the guests. The force behind the gifts and the food may have been men seeking to establish political and social connections, but that by no means dictated that the practice of calling on the confined mother would have been too formal for her to enjoy it as more than just a social chore. It is probable that many new mothers would have anticipated the event that celebrated her and her successful fulfillment of the goal she had been conditioned for since childhood.

Much of what we know today about confinement traditions comes, oddly enough, from religious art, such as scenes of the birth of John the Baptist or of the Virgin. These sacred scenes were not painted with historical accuracy in mind; instead

they were portrayed as contemporary childbirth scenes. Female minds were thought to need more visual stimulation for devotional contemplation. Thus, idealized confinement scenes served to remind a woman tangibly of her own personal experiences visiting other mothers and being visited herself after her pregnancies.[199] Religious instructional books for women of the time, such as the *Zardino de Oration* (1454) instructed women to imagine biblical accounts in settings and with people that were recognizable to them.[200] These scenes could have moralizing messages enforcing a woman's responsibility to bear children. At the same time they could serve to comfort and calm women fearful of the risks of childbirth, which claimed the lives of many young women with an agonizing death.[201]

Almost a fifth of recorded deaths of young, married women in Florence in the early Quattrocento were related in some way to childbirth.[202] There were many risks associated with childbearing, and m edical knowledge on the subject was limited.[203] To combat these dangers, husbands would often not spare any expense to ensure a safe delivery for the mother and child, though he was limited by the common lack of understanding about the workings of the female body.[204] For example, although most of the foods associated with childbirth and confinement were strictly celebratory, the consumption of poultry was thought to be especially nutritious for new mothers and was a staple provision for them during confinement.[205]

Male physicians were usually not very involved with the delivery of the baby. They only began to be involved in childbirth as the population was recovering towards the end of the sixteenth century. A few texts of educational purposes exist from this

period.[206] An illustration of a Caesarean section [Fig. 8] in the 1601 edition of Scipione Mercurio's *La commare o riccoglitrice* stands in sharp contrast with the childbirth scenes on domestic and sacred art as it would do little to reassure the expectant mother. Caesarean sections were generally a last resort, intended only to save the child and not the dying mother.[207] The illustration depicts four men holding down a woman who is mostly unclothed while a surgeon approaches brandishing a scalpel. His pose and fashionable attire single him out as the celebrated central figure in the event. Obviously the intended audience for such an illustration would have been male practitioners of obstetrics, not expecting women.[208]

Generally female midwives oversaw the birth, assisted by female attendants, relations, and friends.[209] These midwives were mostly trained by experience and a few vernacular texts, especially the treatises written in the eleventh century that were attributed to Trotula, a female doctor.[210] They were sufficient for normal births, but had no solution for serious problems.[211] Childbearing took many women, from the wealthiest to the poorest. Beatrice d'Este, Lucrezia Borgia, and the Grand Duchess Giovanna de'Medici were all famous women from powerful families that died due to childbirth complications. These were women whose families could have afforded to provide the best available in attendants and objects to protect them from the risks of labor and delivery.[212]

Women of lower social status were often worse off. In a letter to Francesco Datini in 1388 some such difficulties can be seen: "Since Tuesday evening your maid has been in labor and it is the most piteous thing one could ever see. Never has a

woman suffered so much and there is no heart so hard that it would not sob to see her. She much be held down or she would kill herself, and there are six women who watch her in turns. This morning they fear that the creature in her has died in her body."[213] This harrowing account is a tragic example of the possible complications pregnant women faced and the inability of the midwives and attendants to intercede in any way. Another heartrending account from Giovanni Tornabuoni, who built for his wife one of the few noteworthy tombs for a Renaissance woman, states in a letter to his nephew,

> My most dear Lorenzo. I am so oppressed by grief and pain for the most bitter and unforeseen accident of my most sweet wife that I myself to not know where I am. As you will have heard yesterday, as please God, at the 22nd hour she passed from this life in childbirth, and the infant, having cut her open, we extracted from the body dead, which to me was a double grief still… [214]

This letter serves as an opportunity to fill in the blanks left by the objective accounts in business logs of deaths in the family with the grief following a birthing tragedy, whether it concerned a mother or infant, or both.[215] Most newborns that died were premature, others died within a few days of birth. So little was known about the cause of death that the simple fact of the child being a baby was often explanation enough. The mystery surrounding these deaths could only have increased the sorrow felt by the family. [216]

To prevent the dangers of delivery from getting to the point where an operation like a Caesarean section would have been performed, many objects and rituals began to be used as mediators to prevent the pregnancy from ending tragically.[217] This sense of control, though in many ways imaginary, served as necessary reassurance for a woman with child who was confronted by the high mortality rates of the post plague society.[218]

The objects that addressed the maternal imagination bridged the gap between real and ideal birth situations for frightened women.[219] Herbal remedies that were childbirth related were shrouded in mystery, containing strange ingredients such as snake skin, rabbit milk, and crayfish. Some amulets thought to have power were acetate stones, *brevi* (pouches of torn manuscript), and the relics of saints, among others.[220] These mediating devices came from a world dominated by females, but another form of sympathetic magic existed in the religious realm dominated by males.[221]Women would present ex-voto offerings (small representations in silver or wax of the request) or make vows to certain saints to do something in return for a safe delivery or for the masculinity of their child.[222] These ritualized objects served to reassure expectant mothers with the illusion of having some control over their pregnancy and delivery, but also helped to enforce the focus on the importance of their role as mother for the benefit of their family and the population-decimated city.[223]

While they were in use, childbirth items enjoyed immense popularity. Their use was not restricted to the upper classes but enjoyed by all members of society.[224] For the merchant classes, many ritual objects were popular, ranging from luxurious clothing and linens to certain foods and drink. For those who were too poor to afford them, there were various charities that would provide sweetmeats or candles, such as the Ceppo in Prato.[225] These items were evidently in high demand, they could be lent and resold when necessary, and they were often retained by families for generations.[226]There was a lot of variation among these objects as well. There were painted tables, birthing chairs, childbirth vests, elaborate nightshirts called *guardacuore,* various forms of amulets, and

ornamented sheets. These items were important to presenting the new mother to her guests.[227] As San Bernadino said, "How can one describe the luxuries which one may often find not only in the palaces of the great but in the houses of the common citizens?"[228] These birth objects added up to being a great expense for the men who purchased them, but they profited from the enhancement of their reputation. Childbirth, baptism and other such events were some of the few excuses to display the wealth and position of the family.[229] Men in this situation gained respect through the display of their homes. When their wives were visiting other women, they gained obligations by the gifts they gave.[230]

Childbirth objects served as a symbol of fertility and as a reward for procreation. One can imagine that receiving such objects could have been anticipated by women as an enjoyable and honorable occasion.[231] The painted childbirth trays, or *deschi da parto*, frequently depicted views of confinement that present a mother outfitted in the commemorative clothing, looking very important as her and her child were the central focus of the picture.[232] Expectant mothers received special attention from friends, relatives, and their family. It was a time when they and their soon-to-be-born child were celebrated.

DESCHI DA PARTO

Unlike *cassoni*, these *deschi da parto*, or childbirth trays, were not restricted to being owned by only the upper echelons of society. Inventories by Diane Cole Ahl suggest that at least half of the households in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had at least one childbirth tray in their possession.[233] These trays most fundamental function was to carry food and gifts to the confined mother and to hold items near her during this time.[234] There was special cloth or linen covers that were a standard accessory for the tray. This suggests that their purpose went beyond utilitarian and that they were important ritual objects for the tradition of confinement and in the culture of childbirth.[235]

The cost of these trays ranged dramatically because of the common practice of selling the trays secondhand; they have been recorded in the Pupilli inventories as being valued at anywhere from ten soldi to three florins.[236] When directly commissioned from prominent artists, for even Masaccio, Neri di Bicci, and Pontormo are known to have painted birth trays, they could have cost even more than three florins.[237] These custom made trays would usually be reserved for the wealthy. The middle class could obtain their trays through the market of *deschi da parto* mass-produced in workshops that were produced in multiples or had a standard of design. The trays would then be sold with a blank area for the heraldic device of the family to be painted in later.[238] They were given by relatives, friends, and often the husband to the new mother.[239] Exactly when

they were given varied. Some were given to a bride when she married, probably trays that were handed down from a previous generation. Others, new trays, were given during confinement or pregnancy, in honor of the occasion.[240] There is no evidence that the *deschi* were made for marriages, and they were frequently bought before the gender of the child would have been known, during the pregnancy. This proves that the gender of the baby did not affect the subject matter of the trays.[241] They were kept in the home for years. Records indicate that even childless couples had birth trays and many homes had more than one.[242] These trays came in a variety of shapes, from circular to twelve-sided. There was a visible standard applied to all the trays.[243] The trays were usually painted with tempera on both sides and framed with gilded molding, which seldom survived intact in any examples today.[244] There is physical evidence suggesting that they were hung on the wall after their initial use. This could have added to the detrimental condition of the reverse sides of the trays.[245]

It is a common misconception that there was only one type of childbirth tray because they have all been classified as *deschi da parto*. There are actually four distinct types. The painted trays were the most prolific type. They were longer lasting and thus have the greatest number of surviving examples.[246] The painted tray was the first to appear, and by no coincidence it began to show up in the first generation after the Black Death around 1370.[247] It continued in use until the third quarter of the sixteenth century, and serves to provide the best examples for this study. The remaining three types of childbirth tray were relatively minor and in most cases short lived. The second type, the inlaid tray, did not appear until the end of the fifteenth century.[248] It was made up of

strips of multicolored wood to form a picture and only lasted until the first quarter of the sixteenth century.[249] The third type was just a simple, basic wooden tray. It was used from the early sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries.[250] The fourth type, *tafferie da parto*, was a hybrid form that was more in the shape of a shallow bowl than a tray, probably in imitation of the newly popular imported maiolica birth wares that eventually replaced birth trays.[251] Of the various types, none survive of the inlaid trays or of the plain wooden trays, we know of them only from inventories.[252] The shallow bowls were most popular in the 1530's, and all known examples are painted with scenes from sacred history.[253] There was an occasional overlap of subject matter with the *cassoni* and the birth trays, except that while the *cassoni* focused on marriage and future children the *deschi da parto's* subject matter was generally more narrowly centered around pregnancy and childbirth.[254]

The subject matter of these trays can be broken down into four basic categories. These are confinement scenes, classical narratives, literary themes, and biblical stories.[255] Likewise, the subject matter on the backs of the trays, also painted, can be put into four groups: naked baby boys, heraldic symbols, allegorical figures, and game boards to amuse the mother and her company during confinement [Fig 9].[256] The repetition of such narrow groups of subject matter must have indicated the importance of these particular scenes to the contemporary viewers of these trays.[257] By looking at specific examples and evaluating them based on what is known about Florentine culture during this period, it is possible to determine the intended meanings of these particular scenes for a mother and her new child.

Due to the lack of medical knowledge about female anatomy concerning pregnancy and childbirth, superstitions arose to fill in many of the blanks.[258] Conception itself was a mystery, and common belief held that images seen during conception or pregnancy would affect the unborn child.[259] Marsilio Ficino in his *Liber de vita* (1489), an astrological treatise, wrote that, "People who are making babies imprint on their faces not only their own actions but even what they were imagining."[260]

The existence of sympathetic magic is essential to the study of painted birth trays because many of the same ideas carried over into the depictions on the trays. The cavorting naked boys pictured on many of the reverse sides of *deschi da parto* have a talismanic resonance. These fat, healthy baby boys are the desired outcome for the pregnancy.[261] The confinement scenes shown on many of the front sides of the trays are pointedly exaggerated, mediating between the real event and the ideal. The babies are impossibly large and robust. The room is crowded with childbirth objects. The mother is resigned and calm, showing no signs of the ordeal of labor and delivery she just endured.[262] These scenes show the much-hoped for outcome of the pregnancy. They could almost be seen as tools to achieve it as the mother reflects on the joy of the occasion and focuses less on the risks and potential for death for herself and her child. The process of childbirth itself was such a mystery in contemporary Renaissance understanding that it stands to reason that a picture of the desired result could seem to aid its fulfillment.

An example of this concept can be seen on the reverse side of a birth tray [Fig. 10], where a robust naked infant is urinating. He looks similar to other naked male

children commonly depicted on the side panels of *cassoni* and in small household figures.[263] These depictions of naked boys were common on the seldom seen reverse side of *deschi da parto* from about the 1420's to the 1580's. They are shown playing with toys, carrying laurel branches or garlands as symbols of future fame for the newborn, or represent Cupid with a bow and arrow.[264] These children often wear coral jewelry, thought to protect newborns, have or are playing with poppy seed capsules, which are symbols of fertility, or are shown with a marten, a childbirth talisman because these animals were thought to either conceive or give birth through the ear.[265] The evident popularity of this subject matter suggests that these figures were fertility symbols. They appeared frequently in domestic art and would have served in the contemporary views of sympathetic magic to remind the soon-to-be mother of the child to be born, a healthy, male child.[266] The naked child on the back of the confinement scene *desco* is shown beating a drum with his cloak blowing out behind him, and an inscription around the outside of the tray reads, "May God grant health to every woman who gives birth and to their father…may [the child] be born without fatigue or peril. I am an infant who lives on a [rock?] and I make urine of silver and gold." [267]The reference to gold and silver urine most likely was intended to symbolize future prosperity for the child. The streams of gold and silver urine can still be vaguely seen in the panel.[268] Though the means of how the message is portrayed to a modern audience might seem unusual, it fit with the contemporary Renaissance childbirth culture that had developed after the plague.

The confinement scenes so commonly depicted on birth trays are invaluable today as so much of the ritual of confinement is revealed by these idealized representations.[269] In a childbirth tray by Masaccio [Fig. 11], much of the custom and ritual of the confinement period is exemplified. The status and wealth of the entering visitors can be determined by the clothes they wear. The tray depicts nuns and lavishly dressed matrons being announced by trumpeters in the outside corridor of the interior in a well-to-do Florentine home. The trumpets are draped with banners depicting the Florentine lily, a reminder of the importance that the city placed on births such as these. Directly behind the trumpeters are attendants. The first carries a childbirth tray, the other a box of sweetmeats. The exaggeratedly large infant is wearing a necklace of what is most likely coral.[270]

The set-up of the confinement room with the new mother in her fine clothing and confinement linens exemplifies the display portion of the social ritual. The mother and her child were a means to show off the wealth and status of the husband.[271] Often representations of confinement room visits such as these would be cluttered with objects and the infant would be larger than physically possible.[272] These views of confinement and childbirth would have been reassuring to a pregnant woman, soon to face the dangerous ordeal of childbirth. The Renaissance views of women's appropriate roles are evidenced in these confinement scenes on trays. The woman is exalted before her visitors for fulfilling her purpose of extending the lineage of her husband's family.[273]

The meaning of a confinement scene for a new mother and child is more self-evident perhaps than the significance for the family of a biblical narrative. A wider

understanding of other social or political factors within Tuscany is needed to examine the motivation behind the selection of certain subjects. For example, the story of David and Goliath was commonly associated in Florence with the ruling powers as a symbol of triumph over insurmountable odds.[274] Several well-known artists such as Donatello, Verocchio, and Michelangelo all were commissioned to sculpt a David, which was used as civic propaganda to glorify the current government.[275] Civic propaganda hardly seems appropriate for a birth tray, yet this story was not an uncommon find on birth trays. An example from 1470 [Fig.11], depicts the narrative in continuous narrative format that advances from the background to the foreground culminating with David decapitating the slain Goliath with the giant's own sword. The connection to the anecdote with the birth of a child was most likely related to the parent's desire to associate the heroic deeds of David with the future actions of (what they hoped would be) their son.[276]

The allegorical figures from literary sources shown on birth trays are portrayed rather remarkably due to the placing of female figures in positions of power. They may have disturbing connotations about the consequences of the threat and judgment of the male gaze.[277] Contemporary humanist texts often described allegorical triumphs, such as Apollonio di Giovanni's *The Triumph of Chastity* [Fig. 13]. The female figure of Chastity rides in an elaborate chariot drawn by unicorns, above every other figure in the composition, while Cupid is bound at her feet. Chastity enters as though returning from a victorious military conquest. The contemporary female viewer would have understood that this celebration of Chastity's glory was a message for her to preserve her own

chastity, for this was her form of achieving glory. Alberti laid these gendered expectations out for us when, at the end of Gianozzo's lecture to his bride, they pray together that God would grant: "to me riches, friendship, and honor, and to her, integrity, purity, and the character of a perfect mistress of the household."[278]

The best preserved birth tray to survive and the most famous of the genre is the Medici-Tornabuoni *desco da parto* [Fig. 14], given by Piero di Cosimo de'Medici to his wife Lucrezia di Giovanni Tornabuoni in 1449.[279] Painted by the well known brother of Masaccio, Giovanni di Ser Giovanni (known as Lo Scheggia), it was evidently a special case among these objects due to the basic fact that there were descriptions of the tray in inventories, a rare occurrence.[280] If they were described at all the descriptions would be very general, such as *all'antica*, having a classical subject.[281] This tray was about 30 centimeters wider than the average birth tray. It utilized bright colors and heraldic symbols of the Medici family.[282] The subject matter, the Triumph of Fame, was previously unknown in birth trays, but Piero de'Medici was known for his fondness for triumphal imagery. He commissioned a pair of *cassoni* with triumphal imagery on them for his wedding as well.[283] The particular subject originated in Boccaccio's *Amorosa visione* (1342) and Petrarch's *Triomphi* (1354-74), both popular humanist texts that inspired similar scenes as moral examples for the viewer on other domestic furniture as well.[284] This particular example is unusual because the Triumph of Fame was not normally depicted alone but in a series of triumphs.[285] The tray depicts Fame standing atop a globular shape with trumpets emerging from holes in its sides [Fig. 15], men on horseback crowd around her, some reaching out as if to gain part of her legacy.[286] The

figure of Fame dominates the composition, high above the landscape in the background, and those on the ground, who were virtuous enough to stand near her.[287]

Piero de'Medici's distinctive heraldic device [Fig. 16], a modified Medici symbol that appears in every known example of art he patronized, dominates the rear of the tray with its huge multicolored feathers.[288] The diamond ring and feather motif had been used by Cosimo de'Medici, Piero's father, but Piero added a few elements to make it his own, such as making the feathers the red, green, and white, the colors of the Theological virtues, and adding his motto on a painted scroll that read "Semper."[289] On the top of the tray on either side of the device there can be seen the coat of arms of both families, the eight red *palle* (balls) of the Medici and the lion of the Tornabuoni.[290] The dynastic message put forward by the tray is far from subtle, and though the Triumph of Fame was an unusual subject to stand alone, perhaps it was suited for the heir of Piero de'Medici, the eventual ruler of Florence.[291] The importance of this extraordinary *desco* for the tradition of painted birth trays as a whole is how it demonstrates by the records kept how these trays remained in and helped to define the identity of a family lineage.[292] The tray was hanging in the bedroom of Lorenzo de'Medici upon his death, demonstrating its continuing importance for his lineage, and is easily tracked by description through several generations of a family it was sold to at the Medici auction.[293] Trays that did not stand out as dramatically were preserved from generation to generation in a similar manner, but are not as easy to track as this dramatic and expensive example.[294]

The Judgment of Paris was a commonly seen classical theme for birth trays. Two particular trays with this scene [Fig. 17 and 18] depict the same amatory subject but are at opposite ends of the timeline with respect to painted birth trays.[295] The earlier example by the Master of the Judgment of Paris is the first known circular birth tray. It has static, anecdotal figures in a continuous narrative not unlike the David and Goliath tray.

In the narrative, Paris the shepherd was chosen to be the judge of a contest to determine which of the most powerful female gods (Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera) was the most beautiful. The goddess he deemed to be the loveliest would receive the apple of the Hesperites, which is depicted in the birth tray as a golden orb. The story is laid out clearly and easily readable for those who would have known it, and stands in sharp contrast to the later tray. This sixteenth-century tray was actually the last known example of a painted birth tray, and is separated from the first example by more than a hundred years.[296] The figures are more dynamically posed, the composition is more energetic and less contained, and it gives an overall sense of immediacy to the myth.[297] Even the frame is dramatically different. The later tray has a thick and very ornamental frame, unlike earlier examples.[298] The unnatural stiff figures of the earlier example have a certain charisma that the later, less anecdotal figures lack; the earlier tray seems to have a more storytelling quality. The goddesses are all completely clothed and covered, and have slight variations in costume to distinguish them. The latter tray depicts a nude Aphrodite, flanked by Athena in a war helmet and Hera in a loose fitting dress. Both Athena and Hera are not modestly covered, but both have exposed legs and arms. This,

in combination with the air of enhanced drama and immediate moment that the later tray exemplifies, might have made this later tray less pleasing to the general public. The evolution of style might have been one of the means for an end to these trays, as evidenced by the fact that this tray was the last of its kind. Newly painted trays had become rarer by the time of the Medici auction in 1495, though earlier trays were reused and they were produced for three quarters of the sixteenth century.[299] The later trays became larger and more ostentatious to compete with the more elaborate domestic furnishings that were coming in style.[300] The subject matter overall became more complex, and different concepts in depiction can be seen. The earlier trays have static anecdotal figures, the later trays have more dynamic and less organized compositions.[301] Most likely the dramatic changes seen in trays such as the sixteenth-century example of the *Judgment of Paris* were not as popular with the public as the earlier, simpler scenes and they fell out of favor.[302]

CONCLUSION

The *cassoni* and *deschi da parto* had functions that were buried deep in the heart of the Renaissance notions of female purpose and rites of passage. They revealed much about the cultural attitudes towards the events that they both celebrated and occasionally depicted in their subject matter. Marriage and childbirth encompassed the most fundamental responsibilities of women during the post-plague period in Italy, most especially Tuscany, and these transition periods were marked by these objects that helped the change to run more smoothly psychologically for the woman and politically for the families involved.[303] By examining what is known today about these prominent events in a woman's life as background for the painted scenes on the *cassoni* and birth trays we can garner a little more of an idea as to what the painted objects meant. In turn, the depictions on these domestic objects serve as important ritual objects relating to these periods within the lives of Quattrocento Florentines. Looking at what they might have meant can aid us today in understanding what marriage and childbirth meant for those involved.

What these objects reveal to us about the expectations placed on women often seems severe and sometimes conflicting, especially in the mythological subject matter as seen on the *cassoni*. Where the line is drawn between how the fictional narratives related to actual events in women's lives is difficult to know in retrospect due to the lack of records left by contemporary females. However, the messages addressed to

women in the scenes on the marriage chests and birth trays were not necessarily always about keeping women in their place. Some popular examples, such as confinement scenes, did not translate into a moralizing message for women but instead into a reassuring and calming image. The birth trays as a whole often had more positive messages about what it meant to be a wife and mother. Some of were solely focused on health and prosperity for the future child. Likewise, some of the marriage chests were focused on celebrating the marriage itself rather than as instructive for the new bride.

These domestic objects so closely related to the world of women owe much of their existence to the devastating outbreaks of the plague. The rise and decline of their popularity coincides with population figures. In 1362, the chronicler Matteo Villani described the plague as an extermination.[304] This attitude inspired a fervent interest in not only expanding the population but preventing it from dying out. This was a fear that must have hit the survivors hard as they watched their city's population continue to dwindle as tens of thousands died in the recurring outbreaks. The urgent necessity of repopulating prompted the cultural shift towards placing more importance on marriage and childbirth. As a result it would seem from contemporary records, practices, and laws that women gradually became very valuable commodities and their individuality was less recognized. The importance of the continuation of the lineage of the husband and the expansion of the city can be seen in civic laws that protected newlyweds from injury, controlled the size of dowries, wedding gifts and banquets, and punished with increasing severity crimes like adultery, bigamy, fornication/abduction, and clandestine marriage.[305] Even the selection of a wife was important, as many contemporaries

believed that she must have in Alberti's words, "the strength and shapeliness apt to carry and give birth to many beautiful children."[306] Women were encouraged to act very submissively to their husbands. This expectation carried over into all of Tuscan society, but that does not mean that they were not valued. Individual cases of husbands mourning their wives who died in childbirth demonstrate that they were attached to them as more than just a commodity and means to ensure the continuation of their family line. Giovanni Giraldi in 1468 described himself as "the most disconsolate man in Florence" upon the death of his wife in childbirth, doubtless many other husbands found themselves in similar situations as the process of labor and delivery suddenly went wrong.[307]

Symbolic marriage during the Renaissance, both religious, such as a pastor to his flock, and political, such as a ruler to his people, was founded on principles of domination.[308] This carries over from the ideal of a Renaissance marriage model as established by humanist thinkers such as Leon Battista Alberti, amongst others, who strongly advocated the concept that: "Men are by nature of a more elevated mind than women…The character of men is stronger than that of women."[309] This does not necessarily capture the entirety of Renaissance society into a specific train of thought towards marriage and husbands towards their wives. It merely implies that many of the leading thinkers of the time that wrote about marriage viewed it as an establishment based on domination and inequality, and that governing counsels that wrote about women in relation to sumptuary law sometimes wrote disparagingly of them. A more

positive attitude towards women and their roles can be seen in San Bernadino's sermon where he spoke of women saying:

> When she is pregnant, she has toil in her pregnancy, she has toil in giving birth to the children, she has toil in governing them, in rearing them, and also she has toil in governing the husband, when he is in need and ill; she endures toil in governing all the house. And therefore, as you see that in every way she endures toil. So you, husband…make sure that you help her bear her toil. When she is pregnant or in childbirth, help her in whatever way you can, since that is your child…All this toil you see is only the woman's, and the man goes about singing.[310]

This statement, remarkable in its realistic perception of the roles of women, goes a step further in empathizing with them in the difficulties they face when trying to live up to the expectations of family and society that place so much value on their ability to procreate.[311]

Assuming that the women subjected to this patriarchal society would have found their lives entirely meaningless and miserable would be to place the assumptions of our modern cultural background into theirs. This would give an inaccurate model of life for this previous society. Our perceptions about the indignity forced upon these women when they were culturally believed to be subordinate and in many ways inferior to men does not necessarily apply to the point of view of the Tuscan Renaissance civilization. It also presupposes that women were entirely inactive in their fate and never valued for their individuality by their spouse and family. This would be an over generalization of the situation based on our limited information. Even in the many examples on *cassoni* of the rape of the Sabines, the women once subjected to kidnapping, rape, and forced marriages act on their own behalf by defying the men that dominated their lives and rushing into the midst of the battle between them. The domestic art examined

demonstrates that there were also many occasions where women were celebrated and given honor, such as *cassoni* with the Queen of Sheba traveling to visit King Solomon. Though they were often very limited as to the role they could play within society, they could be respected by those around them as exemplarily of the virtues that women were heralded for. Baldassar Castiglione, an Italian diplomat, wrote *The Book of the Courtier* in 1516 while he was attached to the court of the Duke of Urbino. In this he extolled the virtues of the honorable women of the court, saying:

> Fortune…chose to reveal through many adversities and sting of calamity, in order to prove that in the tender breast of a woman, there many dwell prudence and strength of spirit, and all those virtues which are very rare even in austere men.[312]

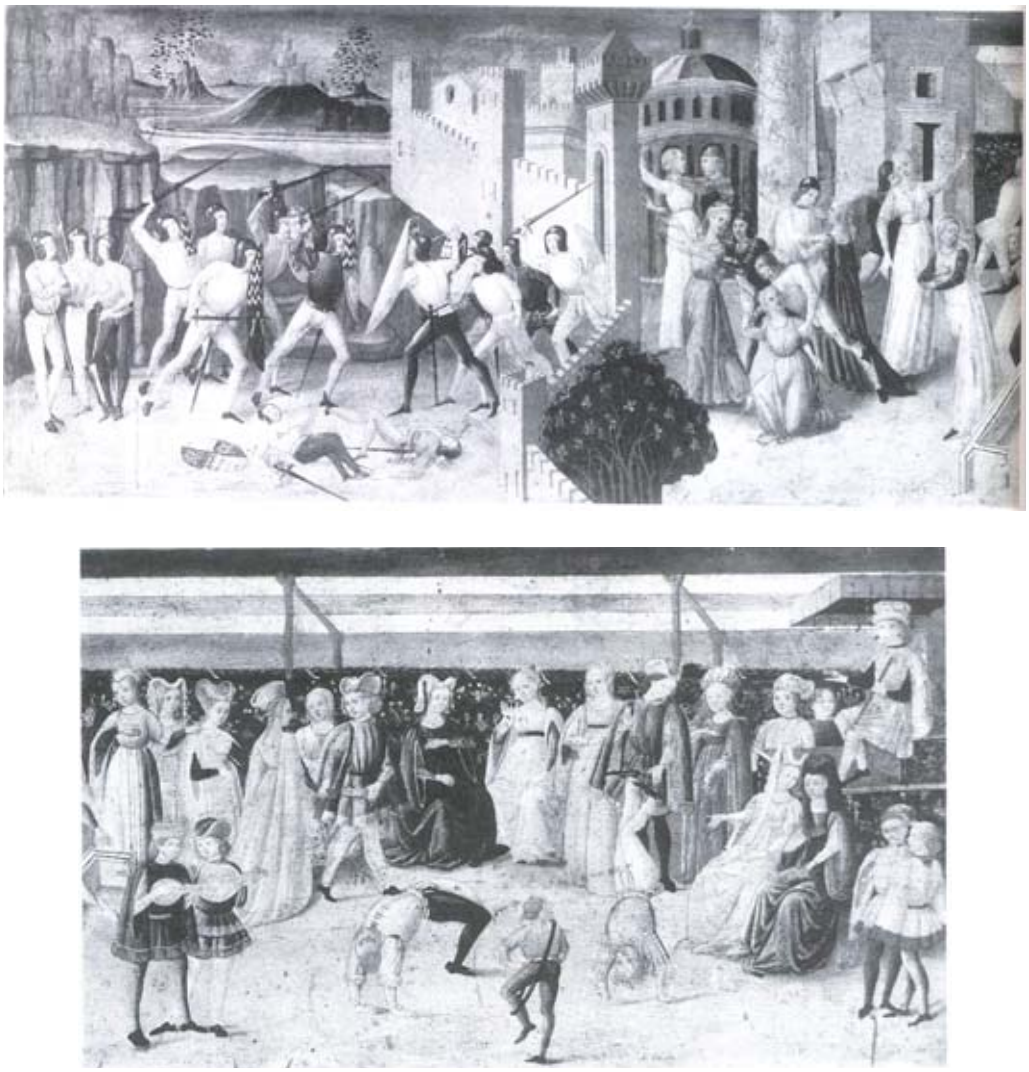
Women were given glory and credit when they met and exceeded expectations, as shown by such examples as *The Triumph of Chastity*. Chastity as a figure of a woman stands above all others in the composition of the childbirth tray, a promise of great honor for the woman who follows in her footsteps.

In summation, women could receive respect and honor but were limited to certain gendered roles within society. The *cassoni* and *deschi da parto* illustrate for a modern audience these expectations women were to fulfill as well as the respect they could receive for fulfilling them. Much of the life of a fifteenth-century Florentine woman would have been decided for her, and the extent to which her voice was heard in influencing some of these decisions, such as whom she would marry, is not usually known today due to the fact that the records of these transitions were written by men. Although there is little information recording the personal reactions of women to the patriarchal society in which they lived, the domestic art imbedded in the rituals of

marriage and childbirth reveal an overall sense of what society would have expected from Tuscan women and when they would have been celebrated and honored.

FIGURES

FIGURE 1



The Master of Marrida, *The Rape of the Sabines, cassone* panel, Leeds: Harewood House, Alinari/Art Resource NY (Source: Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy,* page 113).

FIGURE 2

Bartolommeo di Giovanni, *Rape of the Sabines*, 1488, *cassone* panel, tempera on wood, Galeria Colonna, Rome (Source: Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The "Heroic" Tradition and Its Alternatives*, page 11).

FIGURE 3

Bartolommeo di Giovanni, *Reconciliation of the Sabines*, 1488, *cassone* panel, tempera on wood, Galeria Colonna, Rome (Source: Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The "Heroic" Tradition and Its Alternatives*, page 12).

FIGURE 4

Apollonio di Giovanni, *Battle between the Athenians and the Persians,* 1463, *cassone* panel. Tempera and oil with gold and silver leaf on wood, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio (Source: <http//:www.oberlin.edu/amam>).

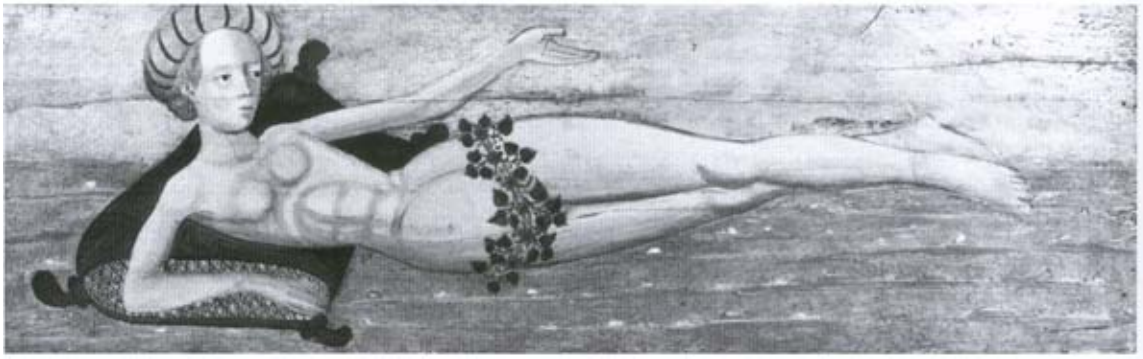
FIGURE 5

Giovanni Toscani, *Ginevra of Genoa, Decameron II.9, cassone* panel. Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland (Source: Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy,* page 23).

FIGURE 6

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, ca. 1475. *Cassone* panel. Tempera on wood, embossed and gilt ornament. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York (Source: Pope-Hennessy, John, Keith Christiansen, "Secular Painting in 15th century Tuscany: birth trays, *cassone* panels, and portraits." page 43).

FIGURE 7



Reclining Female Figure, 1465, *cassone* lid (interior), tempera on panel, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. (Source: Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy*, page 39).

FIGURE 8

Gerome Scipione Mercurio, *La commare oriccoglitrice. Diuisa in tre libri ristampata correta et accresciuta dall'istesso autore*. 1615. Al Clarmo, Sr. Ottauian Malipiero. Venetia (Source: <http://clendening.kumc.edu/dc/rti/reproduction_1621_mercurio.html>).

FIGURE 9

Back of a wooden childbirth tray. c. 1370. Musee de la Chartreuse, Douia (Source: Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy,* pg. 65.)

FIGURE 10

Bartolomeo di Fruosino, versa of *Confinement Room Scene*, 1428, childbirth tray. Tempera, gilt, and silver on panel. Private collection, on loan to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York (Source: author photograph).

FIGURE 11

Masaccio, front of a wooden childbirth tray with a confinement room scene. c. 1427. Germaldegarlerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Source: Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy,* pg. 34).

FIGURE 12

Florentine, Front of a wooden childbirth tray. c. 1470. Martin D'Arcy Galler, Loyola University, Chicago (Source: Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, pg. 69).

FIGURE 13

Workshop of Apollonio di Giovanni, *The Triumph of Chastity*, ca.1450-60, childbirth tray. Tempera and gold leaf on panel, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina (Source: <http://www.ncartmuseum.org>).

FIGURE 14

Giovanni di Ser Giovanni, *The Triumph of Fame,* ca. 1448, childbirth tray. Tempera, silver, and gold on wood, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York (Source: Musacchio, "The Medici-Tornabuoni *Desco da Parto* in Context." Page 138).

FIGURE 15

Detail of Fig. 14 (Source: author photograph).

FIGURE 16

Versa of Fig. 14 (Source: author photograph).

FIGURE 17

Master of the Judgment of Paris, front of a wooden childbirth tray with *The Judgment of Paris*. c. 1430. Bargello, Florence, Alinari/Art Resource. New York (Source: Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, pg. 65).

FIGURE 18

Sienese, front of a wooden childbirth tray with *The Judgment of Paris*. 1550's. Monte dei Paschi, Chigi-Sarachini collection, Siena. (Source: Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, pg. 79).

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