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Article:
Shaw, J.E. (2022) Sara Delmedico, Opposing Patriarchy: Women and the Law in Action in Pre-Unification Italy (1815–1865) (London: Institute of Modern Languages Research, 2021), p. 282. ISBN 978–0854572786. Gender & History, 34 (2). pp. 556-557. ISSN: 0953-5233

https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12623

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: SHAW, J.E. (2022), Delmedico, Sara, Opposing Patriarchy: Women and the Law in Action in Pre-Unification Italy (1815–1865) (London: Institute of Modern Languages Research, 2021), p. 282. ISBN 978–0854572786.. Gender & History, 34: 556-557., which has been published in final form at https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12623. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions. This article may not be enhanced, enriched or otherwise transformed into a derivative work, without express permission from Wiley or by statutory rights under applicable legislation. Copyright notices must not be removed, obscured or modified. The article must be linked to Wiley's version of record on Wiley Online Library and any embedding, framing or otherwise making available the article or pages thereof by third parties from platforms, services and websites other than Wiley Online Library must be prohibited.

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Sara Delmedico, *Opposing Patriarchy: Women and the Law in Action in Pre-Unification Italy (1815-1865)*, (London: Institute of Modern Languages Research, 2021)

In this study of women and the law in pre-unification Italy, Sara Delmedico complicates the narrative of modernization by emphasizing the continuity with pre-nineteenth century institutions. Legal reforms were introduced, but much of the practice of litigation remained the same. Nor was the direction of travel always progressive - with national unification, patriarchal rules were implemented in regions like Lombardy-Venetia, where women's rights had traditionally been more advanced.

The picture of continuity is established in the first half of the book, where Delmedico considers the nineteenth-century situation in the broader context of developments from the medieval period to national unification. After establishing the social and political context in chapter one, she covers gender norms in chapter two and changes to the legal framework in chapter three. Primarily a synthesis of secondary scholarship, this half of the book provides a valuable introduction to the subject across a long period of time.

The second half of the book contains the bulk of the primary source research, focusing on selected case studies from the Kingdoms of Sardinia and Venetia-Lombardy in the early nineteenth century. These regions were chosen with the aim of comparing women's position in two different legal systems (the former being markedly more patriarchal). Here a thematic structure is adopted: chapter four covers seductions, extramarital sex and marriage promises; chapter five covers dowries, wills and inheritance; chapter six covers widowhood and requests for separation.

In this half of the book, the emphasis is placed on exploring the practices of litigation, from the perspective of those involved. The material will seem familiar to scholars of litigation in earlier periods, for what emerges most strongly is a prevailing family logic. To some extent this complicates the aim of highlighting women's agency, since marriage disputes were not just a matter for individual litigants but usually involved broader family interests too. In the case of Luigia (pp. 132-4), for example, it is difficult to know to what extent her choice of marriage partner was conditioned by her uncle and aunt.

Delmedico relies heavily on jurisprudence, with detailed discussion of individual cases enabling her to explore how the law was applied in practice. These cases underline the uncertainty, flexibility and expense of the legal process - 'judgements were often completely reversed by other courts and judges did not even feel morally bound to the judicial precedent' (p.179). Along with a range of competing sources of law (new legal codes, roman law, canon law, local statutes, local customs, private acts), there was a continuing tradition of equity - that is, that the law should be interpreted in relation to specific circumstances and broader moral notions of fairness. As argued in the *Annali di giurisprudenza*, 'there were always solid reasons which permitted an exception' (p.158). These cases reveal much about the practice of litigation, but it is difficult to discern clear patterns from them, and this contributes to the overall impression of continuity in legal and gender norms.

Most of the disputes covered in chapters five and six involved elite families, sometimes litigating over huge sums of money. Given the time and expense of going to law, and the uncertainty of outcomes, it would be difficult for women lower down the social scale to

pursue these sorts of claims. Although Delmedico makes some effort to include discussion of women of lower social level in these chapters (e.g. p.196, n.22), I feel that the focus on elite families might have been better acknowledged and incorporated into the argument.

A lot of work has gone into providing full translations of the Italian sources along with the original transcriptions. A useful glossary covers legal terms such as ‘hotchpot’, ‘quarta’ etc. However, I did note a few errors in the text, such as ‘1976’ (p.9), ‘hearth’ (p.52), p. 203 ‘may wives’. There are also issues with some of the translations: *pupilli* (p.114) should be ‘wards’; ‘la tua’ (p.133) should be ‘yours’; ‘office case’ (p.148) should be ‘*ex officio*’; ‘means of rigour’ (p.173) mistranslates the original.

Overall this well-written book makes a valuable contribution to scholarship - it provides an important overview of women and the law in Italy from the medieval period to unification, combined with interesting micro cases illustrating how the law worked in practice, the difficulties that women confronted and the successes that might be achieved. At the same time, it highlights the ongoing importance of the family in the nineteenth century, and shows how legal rules might be applied flexibly in practice, with cases being contested by elites for as long as their resources permitted.

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