

The Politics of Marriage in Carpaccio's St. Ursula Cycle

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The nine canvases depicting the life, martyrdom, and apotheosis of St. Ursula by Vittore Carpaccio (ca. 1455–ca. 1525) have been characterized in many ways, but most aptly as an epic romance in paint (figs. 1–9).¹ Produced in the 1490s for the Venetian Scuola di Sant'Orsola,² the cycle unfolds in familiar chivalric fashion, moving from an elaborate

¹ Françoise Bardon, "De la *Passio* à la peinture: analyse historique du récit verbal de la légende d'Ursule," *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire d'art* 52 (1983): 69–70; and Françoise Bardon, *La peinture narrative de Carpaccio dans le cycle de Ste. Ursule* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1985), 39, fasc. 4, 34–39. The paintings have also been interpreted as an authoritative historical narrative, as showy theatrical pieces, and as vehicles for understanding fifteenth-century spectacle and theater. See, respectively, Patricia Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 57; Michelangelo Muraro, "Vittore Carpaccio o il teatro in pittura," in *Studi sul teatro Veneto fra Rinascimento ed età barocca*, ed. Maria Teresa Muraro (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1971), 7–19; and Ludovico Zorzi, *Carpaccio e la rappresentazione di Sant'Orsola* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1988). As Muraro notes, Ursula was a frequent subject of contemporary religious dramas.

² The canvases are generally dated between 1490 and 1500. They remained in place until 1806, when the Scuola was disbanded, and since 1810 have hung in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice where there currently is a room dedicated to them. For complete cataloguing and a discussion of relevant written documents, see Brown, *Narrative*, 279–83. Key primary sources, including archival and comparative material, are reproduced in Ines Kehl, *Vittore Carpaccio's Ursulalegendszyklus der Scuola di Sant'Orsola in Venedig: Ein venezianische Illusion* (Worms: Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1992), 164–206. See Giovanna Nepi Scirè, *Carpaccio: Storie di Sant'Orsola* (Milan: Electa, 2004) for excellent reproductions.

courtship to a journey-quest and centering on a powerful, prophetic dream. It is a painted cornucopia, overflowing with costumes and banners, courtiers and musicians, colorful pavilions and crenellated cities, brightly feathered birds, sinuous hunting dogs, and caravans of ships — details that are at once suggestively exotic and distinctly local. Yet despite the delight these details engender, the festive mood does not seem suited to the story's ultimate themes of religious devotion and sacrifice. This typological complexity is redoubled by the iconographic density of the cycle. It is at once sacred and secular, cautionary and celebratory, a distant reverie and a deeply relevant Venetian morality play. Like a chivalric romance, Carpaccio's canvases envelop the most profound social concerns — those at the very core of Venetian identity and self-preservation — in a vestment of devotional propriety and worldly spectacle. Pilgrimage and martyrdom were important matters, but in the Sant'Orsola cycle, they support a more immediately pressing set of issues, including social hierarchy, political relationships, the stability of the Venetian state, and, at the vortex of it all, the critically important institution of marriage.

A key to this thematic complexity lies with the equally complex membership of the Scuola di Sant'Orsola, the lay confraternity that commissioned Carpaccio's cycle. Sant'Orsola was one of the *scuole piccole*, so called not because of their size or scale — that dedicated to St. Ursula was particularly large and prosperous — but in contrast to the six *scuole grandi*, which were overseen by the Council of Ten and had greater civic presence and responsibilities.³ One noteworthy but relatively under-examined element

³ The standard source for the history of the *scuole grandi* remains Brian Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: The Social Institutions of a Catholic State to 1620* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971). On confraternities in Italy, see Christopher F. Black, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and Nicholas Terpstra, ed., *The Politics of Ritual Kinship: Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On the Venetian *scuole piccole* in general, see Teresio Pignatti, ed., *Le scuole di Venezia* (Milan: Electa, 1981); Lia Sbriziolo, "Le confraternite veneziane di devozione: Saggio bibliografico e premesse storiografiche," *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia* 21.1 (Jan.-June 1967): 167–97; Lia Sbriziolo, "Per la storia delle confraternite veneziane: Dalle deliberazioni miste (1310–1476) del Consiglio dei Dieci: *Scolae communes*, artigiane e nazionali," *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, Classe di scienze morali, lettere ed arti* 126 (1967–68):

characterized the *scuole piccole*: they were, with occasional exceptions, open to all residents of Venice, including servants, artisans, patricians, and women.⁴ The Scuola di Sant'Orsola was particularly well established, drawing members from across the city⁵ and a broad social spectrum, individuals who came together in the important work of saving their own souls.⁶ Poor serving women gathered at the Scuola to pray; respected citizens served on its *banca* (governing board); and a few elite patrician members were buried within its walls. Most prominent among participating noblemen were members of the Loredan family, who seem to have been closely involved with Carpaccio's commission. The Scuola's *mariegola* (charter) indicates that noblewomen were also members, and at the time of the cycle's production

404–42. In the context of musical and artistic patronage, see Jonathan Glixon, *Honoring God and the City: Music at the Venetian Confraternities, 1260–1807* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl, eds., *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy: Ritual, Spectacle, Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴ Aside from occasional references in larger studies, the literature on women at the *scuole piccole* is relatively slim, although several recent studies add valuable understanding to the matter, most notably Francesca Ortalli, “Per salute delle anime e delli corpi”: *Scuole piccole a Venezia nel tardo medioevo* (Venice: Fondazione Cini, 2001); and Linda Guzzetti and Antje Ziemann, “Women in the Fourteenth-Century Venetian *Scuole*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 55.4 (Winter 2002): 1151–95. Giovanna Casagrande, “Women in Confraternities between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age: Research in Umbria,” *Confraternitas* 5 (1994): 3–8, presents a useful overview of the role of women in confraternities before focusing specifically on Umbria. Sbriziolo, “Saggio bibliografico,” 189–90, examines the Scuola di Mestre, founded in 1487, and focuses on its preoccupation with the marital status of its female members — a point that has interesting resonance with this study.

⁵ This geographic dispersion of members was rather unusual for a *scuola piccola* and indicates the broad appeal of the Scuola di Sant'Orsola.

⁶ This and charitable service for one's fellow members were the primary functions of the *scuole piccole*, which focused on attending to the ailing and dying within their own community. Some confraternities undertook broader charitable activities as well, such as raising dowry money for poor girls who would be socially vulnerable without some assistance in marrying; see Black, *Confraternities*, 178–81, and, with regard to the *scuole grandi*, Brian Pullan, “Natura e carattere delle Scuole,” in *Le Scuole di Venezia*, ed. Pignatti, 17–18. This may well have been among the charitable works of the members of the Scuola di Sant'Orsola, though I have found no direct evidence of such activity.

the Scuola had significant artisan membership as well.⁷ Relatively little is known about most of these members. Although particular names can be identified from the roles of the *banca*, they reveal little more than gender and, less rigorously, class,⁸ leaving individuals largely anonymous beyond these broad identifying markers. These should weigh heavily on a modern investigation of the Scuola, however, for they correspond to the principal categories by which its members referred to themselves in their charter.

At the nexus of gender and class stood the critical and highly complicated institution of marriage, an institution that provides the socio-historical lens for this investigation of Carpaccio's cycle. Attention to marriage here derives, first of all, from the observation of a persistent, forcefully articulated language of matrimony in the St. Ursula images. This is not a surprising theme, perhaps, given that the spur to the story is an offer of marriage, and yet it is one with implications that reach far beyond the relatively narrow scope of the saint's legend and expand the interpretation of these multivalent canvases. A second impetus to the present study lies in the recognition, well established in the scholarly literature, of the central role marriage played in the broader workings of Venetian society. Recent investigations have demonstrated that marriage was one of the principal ways in which the residents of Venice defined themselves and their relationships to one another; it carried with it the weight of tradition and bore the burden of a secure future.⁹ Carpaccio's insistence on the theme of

⁷ Brown, *Narrative*, 279. Serving women resident in distant parishes also joined in particularly high numbers. On the variable social make-up of the *scuole piccole*, as well as the difficulty in quantifying much of the related data, see Richard Mackenney, "Continuity and Change in the *Scuole Piccole* of Venice, c.1250–c.1600," *Renaissance Studies* 8.4 (1994): 388–403.

⁸ The term *class* is used here to indicate position within the Venetian social structure, in particular, the distinctions between patricians and non-nobles, including the *cittadini* (non-nobles of a relatively elevated social rank) and the *popolani* (the larger non-noble populace).

⁹ Stanley Chojnacki's work, referred to throughout this essay, is particularly noteworthy and has generated considerable interest and scholarship on the topic of marriage in Venice. In addition to the works cited elsewhere, see his "In Search of the Venetian Patriciate: Families and Factions in the Fourteenth Century," in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J. R. Hale (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 47–90; "Nobility, Women, and the

matrimony links his cycle tightly to those concerns. His close attention to Venetian life suggests that the Ursula canvases actively participated in the complex social dialogue unfolding around them and that, alongside the documents of archives and libraries, they can illuminate — and complicate — our historical understanding.

The most prominent voice in this dialogue belonged to the Venetian patriciate, a group closely tied to Carpaccio's commission at the Scuola di Sant'Orsola. Carpaccio articulates this story of a young virgin (a typically silenced figure¹⁰) through the boisterous, public voice of the Venetian nobleman. Indeed, the very first figure in the cycle is a man dressed in a red toga, the festive garb of the male patrician (fig. 1, at far left). Michelangelo Muraro interprets him as the *nunzio*, the actor who opened staged performances by reading an introduction.¹¹ Surely the prologue he recites is addressed to his fellow noblemen and introduces a story that is presented from their point of view. Many other elements of the cycle reinforce this interpretation, including the emphasis on official ceremony and ritual (meaningful to patricians but not the non-noble *popolani*), the inclusion of male portraits in a sea of generic female faces (among these are surely the Loredan, whose family emblem is also represented¹²), and

State: Marriage Regulation in Venice, 1420–1535,” in *Marriage in Italy, 1300–1650*, ed. Trevor Dean and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 128–51; “Patrician Women in Early Renaissance Venice,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 21 (1974): 176–203; and “Social Identity in Renaissance Venice: The Second Serrata,” *Renaissance Studies* 8.4 (Dec. 1994): 341–58.

¹⁰ See for example Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 58, on the “patriarchal restrictions that confined Renaissance women to the private, domestic sphere and denied them the right to public speech.” The ornamental tassel on the pillow of the sleeping Ursula (fig. 5) confirms this condition: it is marked IN FAN NTIA, a reference not only to her youth but also to her quality as “(one) unable to speak,” the literal sense of *infans*; Zorzi, *Carpaccio*, 114.

¹¹ Muraro, “Carpaccio,” 9. There is some debate over the original arrangement of these canvases. See, for example, Zorzi, *Carpaccio*, 15–17, and Vittorio Sgarbi, *Carpaccio* (Bologna: Capitol, 1979), 28. But the presence of the *nunzio* is a convincing indication that the standard ordering, beginning with fig. 1, is correct.

¹² The emblem is prominently located on the pedestal of the column that divides the scene of Ursula's martyrdom from her funeral (fig. 8). Gustav Ludwig and Pompeo



Figure 1. Vittore Carpaccio, *Reception of the Ambassadors and Ursula Consulting with Her Father*, ca. 1494–99. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

a notable emphasis on masculine dress, ornament, and pose. Ursula and her companions are modest and unobtrusive against the proud posturing of the men, whose costumes have been compared to those worn by the *Compagnie delle Calze*, festive companies limited to patrician male members.¹³ Similarly, Ursula's story — of religious devotion and the sacrifice of martyrdom — is wrapped in the celebratory secular garb of the Venetian patriciate.

Marriage was very much on the minds of this group, and Carpaccio's opening canvases unfold like a wedding pageant, centered on a bride and groom of noble birth. Costumes, staging, and choreography strike a grandly celebratory note; they also emphasize protocol and hierarchy and so, by

Molmenti suggest the initials on the banner in fig. 4 stand for the phrase *Nicolaus Lauretanus donum dedit vivens Gloria vigini inclytæ*; see Vittore Carpaccio: *La vita e le opere* (Milan: U. Hoepli, 1906), 133. They also identify portraits of the Loredan family in several of the canvases (119–49), but Brown, *Narrative*, 223, n. 14, cautions that these identifications have not been substantiated.

¹³ See Maria Teresa Muraro, "La festa a Venezia e le sue manifestazioni rappresentative: Le Compagnie della Calza e le *momarie*," in *Storia della cultura veneta*, ed. Girolamo Arnaldi and Manlio Pastori Stocchi, 6 vols. (Vicenza: N. Pozza, 1981), vol. 3: 320; and Zorzi, *Carpaccio*, 94.

extension, the social stability established and maintained through marriage. But as one might anticipate in a tale that begins with a repugnant, rejected marriage proposal and ends with the bride's martyrdom, there are significant deviations from this storyline as well, narrative threads that lead away from a properly organized and fêted marriage to other, less socially celebrated outcomes: marriage deferred, marriage avoided, and marriage rejected. While the patrician *nunzio* may set Carpaccio's stage, many other actors have a voice in this pageant, which admits divergent, even contradictory, attitudes toward marriage. Perhaps this multiplicity suited the diverse audience found within the walls of the Scuola and the correspondingly broad set of relationships to and expectations for marriage they carried with them. Recognition of this breadth opens new windows not only onto the interpretation of Carpaccio's Ursula cycle but also onto the historical context in which it was produced.

Both a quick overview of this cycle and a closer study of its individual images reveal that, on one level, Carpaccio's paintings operate as maps of the ideal relationships between men and women in Venetian society and within the space of Venice itself. Persistent formal and narrative references to the theme of marriage reinforce this social topography. The first four canvases, nearly half the cycle, are devoted to the male world of politics and diplomacy, in which the personal, devotional elements of the tale very nearly disappear. Carpaccio begins with the arrival of a group of English ambassadors before King Nothus of Brittany (fig. 1). The ambassadors' mission is to request Ursula, the young daughter of the king, to become the bride of the pagan Prince Etherius, whose father threatens destruction of Nothus's kingdom should the petition be refused. The staging of this encounter, with its clear delineation of hierarchy and its ceremonial gestures, locates the story in an arena of courtly ritual. A similar sort of language characterizes the cycle's next three canvases. In the first of these (fig. 2),¹⁴ the ambassadors prepare to depart, taking with them formal

¹⁴ Zorzi, 20–23 and 38–40, argues that this is actually the first scene in the cycle, depicting the departure of the ambassadors from England. The order assumed in this study follows that used in the Accademia in Venice, which seems most consistent with the chronological unfolding of the legend and is supported by the identification of the



Figure 2. Vittore Carpaccio, *Departure of the Ambassadors*, 1494–1500. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

documents that detail the king's response to their request: Etherius may marry Ursula but only if, before the wedding, he converts to Christianity and permits his bride-to-be to go on an extended pilgrimage in the company of ten young women and thousands of female escorts, all of them virgins.¹⁵ The subsequent images portray the return of the diplomatic retinue to the pagan courts (fig. 3), and, in a complex, multi-episodic rep-

opening figure as a *nunzio* (see n. 11, above). For more on debates over the cycle's original arrangement, see Brown, *Narrative*, 279–82.

¹⁵ The number of pilgrims is typically put at 11,000, though this flock of followers did not enter the narrative tradition until sometime around the year 1100. Indeed, the Ursula legend has a long and complex history, with many variations in detail and even in the broader dimensions of the story. Carpaccio's principal source was probably the version presented in the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* by Jacobus Voragine; see *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton:



Figure 3. Vittore Carpaccio, *Return of the Ambassadors*, ca. 1494–99. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Credit: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY.

resentation (fig. 4), the departure of Etherius from home (left), his arrival before Ursula (right), and the leave-taking of the betrothed pair on their sacred journey (far right). Pomp and theatricality dominate these images; Carpaccio's presentation of the Ursula legend is an exercise in courtly protocol, conceived as a sequence of ritualized encounters.¹⁶

Similarly, the sacred story of Ursula's pilgrimage and martyrdom, deferred to the second half of the cycle, is largely subordinated to a narrative cast in the language of secular ceremony. Even the scenes of Ursula's reception by Pope Cyriacus in Rome (fig. 6), her arrival in Cologne (fig. 7), and her martyrdom there at the hands of the Hun army (fig. 8) subsume the theme of female devotion within a grandiose and worldly panorama. Only in the final canvas, the altarpiece dedicated to the moment of Ursula's apotheosis, does an iconography of devotion predominate (fig. 9). The cycle's emphasis on the pageantries of diplomacy and war speak in a rhetoric

Princeton University Press, 1993), vol. 2: 256–60. On the story's evolution, see Bardon, "Passio," 43–79.

¹⁶ Bardon, *Peinture narrative*, 71–83, discusses the cycle's ceremonial qualities and its connection to actual Venetian festivities; see also Brown, *Narrative*, 178–86.



Figure 4. Vittore Carpaccio, *Leavetaking of the Betrothed Pair*, 1495. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

more suited to tales of elite male ambition than to the stark sacrifices of a martyred girl, who at times nearly disappears from view. In the Cologne canvas (fig. 7), for example, an artfully posed group of soldiers dominates the picture, while we need to search for Ursula's tiny head, which peeks out discretely from one of the ships at left.¹⁷ The epic nature of Carpaccio's cycle is significantly reinforced by his settings: action unfolds in busy harbors and bustling piazzas and before sweeping panoramic vistas — that is, in the highly public, masculine realm of diplomacy and political theater.

Two episodes stand in marked contrast to these images, creating significant pauses in the unfolding story. In the right hand portion of the opening canvas (fig. 1), behind a richly decorated wall and up a small staircase from the principal scene of ambassadorial negotiations, King Nothus consults with his daughter on how to respond to the offer (or threat) of marriage that has just been made. Within the intimate space of a royal bedroom, the formalities and theatrical trappings of the court are left behind. The king relinquishes his authoritative role while Ursula, confident in pose and gesture, responds to the demands of the English in her own,

¹⁷ This image, signed and dated 1490, is the earliest in the cycle (Brown, *Narrative*, 194). It is stylistically distinct from the other canvases, and is the most dramatic example of how Carpaccio draws attention away from Ursula and toward a world of masculine concerns.



Figure 5. Vittore Carpaccio, *Dream of Saint Ursula*, ca. 1495. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Credit: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY.

unequivocal terms of conversion and pilgrimage. Although Carpaccio's scene builds on established hagiographic traditions, in which Ursula guides her father and sets the course of her own future, it is notable for the assertive posture assigned to the young princess, as well as for the transition from public reception hall to private bedroom. A similar transition marks the fifth canvas, in which Ursula dreams of her own martyrdom (fig. 5). As in the scene of acquiescence, there are no more bystanders crowding in to attend a courtly performance, and no more panoramic vistas. Instead, the feeling is one of enclosure: the doors to Ursula's room offer no view out, nor do the windows. Tight walls of latticework, shutters, and opaque rounds of glass turn the viewer's attention inward, on Ursula and the more personal elements of her story.

Carpaccio's pictorial staging, which situates male activity in the public arena and female activity in a more intimate space, echoes some of the conditions of life in Venice around the year 1500 as well as some of the idealized notions about the proper place of respectable women in



Figure 6. Vittore Carpaccio, *Arrival in Rome*, ca. 1494–95. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

an ordered society. Dennis Romano, in his work on the city's social geography, notes that virtually all female spaces in Venice were bordered and bounded, marked by protective walls, locked courtyards, and the canals and bridges that delineated local parishes.¹⁸ Early Venetian social tracts characterized the relatively confined arena of the home as a place where a woman might govern (though in theory always under the rule of her husband).¹⁹ In contrast, the spaces of maleness were open and expansive,

¹⁸ Dennis Romano, "Gender and the Urban Geography of Renaissance Venice," *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 339–63; see also Robert C. Davis, "The Geography of Gender in the Renaissance," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998): 19–38. Monika Chojnacka, *Working Women of Early Modern Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 103–4, rightfully cautions against oversimplifying what was actually a very complex network of social and topographical relationships.

¹⁹ These tracts include Francesco Barbaro, *De re uxoria* (*On Marriage*, 1416) and Giovanni Caldeira, *De veneta iconomia* (*On the Venetian Household*, 1463/64). For analyses that are particularly relevant to this essay, see Margaret L. King, "Caldeira and



Figure 7. Vittore Carpaccio, *Arrival in Cologne*, 1490. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Credit: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY.

including Piazza San Marco, the markets at Rialto, the city's extensive network of canals, and the surrounding lagoon. A similar gendering of the urban landscape, in which contained, focused images punctuate a series of broader, more scenographic views, characterizes Carpaccio's cycle. So too does his tendency to minimize Ursula's presence, tucking her discreetly in the crowds and refusing to make her the center of their visual attention, thus calling to mind the persistent observation, by contemporary visitors and modern scholars alike, that the Venetians imposed exceptionally strict

the Barbaros on Marriage and the Family: Humanist Reflections on Venetian Realities," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 19–50; and Margaret L. King, "Personal, Domestic, and Republican Values in the Moral Philosophy of Giovanni Caldeira," *Renaissance Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1975): 535–74.



Figure 8. Vittore Carpaccio, *Martyrdom of the Pilgrims and Funeral of Saint Ursula*, 1493. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Credit: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY.

control on the visibility and viewing of women, particularly those of the noble class.²⁰

It is tempting to construct tight analogies between the gendered topography of Venice and that of the Ursula cycle: in public spaces, Ursula is the passive object of others (the ambassadors of a foreign king, her father, her Hun murderer), while in domestic settings she exercises autonomy and control, dictating the terms of her betrothal or receiving a prophetic message from a heavenly visitor. But on closer examination, such correlations do not hold up. Even if Ursula is miniscule and tucked away in the scene of the arrival in Cologne (fig. 7), for example, she is certainly an actor here, guiding the ships and their human cargo to the place of martyrdom. By contrast, she is tightly confined in the critically important dream scene (fig. 5), fast asleep beneath bed linens that barely betray her physical

²⁰ The most famous contemporary example is the comment by Pietro Casola, the Milanese pilgrim of the 1490s, who wondered at the heavy veiling of respectable marriageable girls: “[they] go about so completely covered up, that I do not know how they can see to go along the streets”; *Canon Pietro Casola’s Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Year 1494*, ed. and trans. Mary Margaret Newett (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1907), 145. More contemporary studies of this matter include Romano, “Urban Geography.”

form. Rather than formulating neat equations between setting and story, Carpaccio used a local language of space and spatial politics to connect with his Venetian audiences and engage them with the Ursula cycle on familiar terms. Carpaccio's cityscapes are, among other things, stages for playing out gender relations; they are also places in which potentially overlapping arenas of obligation (to family, clan, state, or the divine) come into difficult, in this case fatal, conflict. At the heart of these conflicts is the institution of marriage, a theme that turns out to be omnipresent in Carpaccio's Ursula cycle, even in episodes centered on such profound matters of religious devotion as pilgrimage and martyrdom.

One of Carpaccio's most novel contributions to the presentation of this tale and a key deviation from his principal source, the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Voragine, is the attention he gives to the conjugal unit — to Ursula and her betrothed, who are prominently paired at critical moments in the narrative.²¹ In Carpaccio's version, Prince Etherius joins Ursula on her pilgrimage. Kneeling side-by-side, the couple bids her father farewell (fig. 4) and greets Pope Cyriacus in Rome (fig. 6). Even Ursula's execution by the Hun prince (fig. 8) can be read in a marital context, given that the act was spurred by her rejection of his advances.²² She is at once a dutiful follower of Christ and a dutiful bride. Although there has been no formal marriage ceremony, Ursula is, according to con-

²¹ A comparison of this cycle with the other painted versions of Ursula's legend is beyond the scope of this essay, but it should be noted that Carpaccio's work stands out for its emphasis on secular matters and particularly on the process of courtship. Visual comparisons are greatly facilitated by the many illustrations in Guy de Tervarent, *Légende de Sainte Ursule dans la littérature et l'art du moyen âge*, 2 vols. (Paris: Les Éditions G. van Oest, 1931).

²² In several theatrical versions of the legend, all published in Tuscany, Etherius's father accompanies his son to meet Ursula, where he falls under her spell and decides to accompany her on her pilgrimage. This narrative twist is interesting because it directly links Ursula with her future household, underscoring her role as woman-to-be-married. See the widely published, early sixteenth-century version attributed to M. Castellano de' Castellani: "Rappresentazione di Sant'Orsola," in *Sacre Rappresentazioni dei secoli XIV, XV e XVI, raccolte e illustrate*, ed. Alessandro D'Ancona, 2 vols. (Florence: Successori Le Monnier, 1872), vol. 2: 412–43; and a contemporary anonymous adaptation in the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice (Rari 497.74).

temporary marriage practices, already part of a promised transaction. Her vow to her father and his letter to the English king serve as a contract for Ursula's intention to marry.²³ Until the Council of Trent (1563), legitimate marriage practice in Venice required only the couple's consent (though a priestly blessing was customary).²⁴ In a sense, then, Ursula's marriage to Etherius is sealed after Carpaccio's opening canvas, and the subsequent episodes situate Etherius in his anticipated role as Ursula's guide and protector. Through the presence of her future bridegroom, the institution of the family was evoked for Venetian viewers, even in the context of a story that could easily be construed as a firm if spiritually justified rebellion against matrimony.²⁵

²³ As Linda Seidel put it: "[for] the Church and the court, marriage vows could be made in the future as well as the present tense; the former, known as *verba de futuro*, correspond[s] to what we might term betrothal . . ."; see *Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait: Stories of an Icon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 57. In Ursula's case, the promise sent in writing to her future father-in-law is a diplomatic version of the dowry contracts that were often drafted long before a couple was ready to marry.

²⁴ Patricia H. Labalme and Laura Sanguineti White, "How to (and How Not to) Get Married in Sixteenth-Century Venice (Selections from the Diaries of Marino Sanudo)," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 43–72, esp. 55, n. 38. There is an extensive literature on the nature of marriage before and after Trent. Critical works, particularly regarding general legal and ritual definitions of marriage, include Gaetano Cozzi, *Il dibattito sui matrimoni clandestini. Vicende giuridiche, sociali, religiose dell'istituzione matrimoniale tra medioevo ed età moderna* (Venice: Dipartimento di studi storici, 1985–86); Dean and Lowe, eds., *Marriage in Italy*; Anthony F. D'Elia, *The Renaissance of Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and Michaela di Giorgio, *Storia del matrimonio* (Rome: Editori Laterza, 1996). Most recently, Cecilia Cristellon, "Marriage and Consent in Pre-Tridentine Venice: Between Lay Conception and Ecclesiastical Conception, 1420–1545," trans. Emlyn Eisenach, *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 369–418, has examined matrimonial trial records in Venice, confirming the reliance on consent but also custom as essential to pre-Tridentine conceptions of a valid marriage. Also of interest is Daniela Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage in Early Modern Venice* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004).

²⁵ On the family as the primary institution ordering the lives of Venetian women, see, for example, Stanley Chojnacki, "The Power of Love: Wives and Husbands in Late Medieval Venice," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Carpenter Epler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988): 126–48; Stanley

A wealth of pictorial details connotes a distinctly Venetian set of betrothal and marriage rituals, situating Carpaccio's Ursula squarely in this important transitional moment. Her changing hairstyle — pulled back as, in conversing with her father, she enters into an agreement of marriage (fig. 1), and loose in the subsequent images (figs. 4–8) — evokes local practices as they were recorded, a century later, in both Francesco Sansovino's written descriptions of life in Venice and in Cesare Vecellio's costume book, *Degli abiti antichi, et moderni di diverse parti del mondo* (1590).²⁶ Among the many images published by Vecellio, only one portrays a Venetian woman wearing her hair loose. This is the *sposa sposata* (new bride) who, in contrast to the veiled *sposa non sposata* (the as yet unmarried bride, or the betrothed), is a woman celebrating her marriage.²⁷ Sansovino describes the first encounter of bride and groom in terms that echo Vecellio: a dance-like ceremony took place, and the bride was led through it dressed in white, her loose hair woven with golden threads.²⁸ According to Sansovino, the

Chojnacki, "The Most Serious Duty': Motherhood, Gender, and Patrician Culture in Renaissance Venice," in *Refiguring Women: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 133–54; Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani: The Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 40–65; and the works of the Venetian writers Francesco Barbaro and Giovanni Caldeira (in King, "Marriage").

²⁶ The discrepancy in date between these sources and Carpaccio's canvases should be noted but with the observation that rituals such as these were remarkably stable. Indeed, Marino Sanudo's diary descriptions of wedding celebrations (see LaBalme and White), which are contemporary with the Ursula cycle, closely resemble these representations. Sanudo also underscores the importance of tradition and the risks (to appearance, but also to political significance) of deviations from it. Or, as summarized by Labalme and White, "How to," 60: "Ritual is best served by repetition; its variation was cause for comment."

²⁷ Cesare Vecellio, *Degli abiti antichi, et moderni di diverse parti del mondo* (Venice: Damian Zenaro, 1590), 124–51. Giulia Calvi notes that Venetian brides dressed this way for a year after their marriage, and comments on the extent to which Vecellio's ordering reflects the priorities of Venetian society (oral presentation, University of Chicago, 2001).

²⁸ ". . . chiome sparse giù per le spalle, conteste con fila d'oro" (loose locks below her shoulders, entwined with gold thread); Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia città nobiliss-*

audience for this event was exclusively male, a gendered division similar to that found in Carpaccio's canvases.

Following her initial meeting of the groom, the prospective Venetian bride travelled by open gondola to visit her female relatives in the city's convents. Along the way, crowds watched and greeted her, giving a public and ceremonial dimension to her shift in personal status. The sea journey that follows Ursula's promise of marriage and her meeting with Etherius is visually analogous to this local tradition. During wedding celebrations, patrician brides were customarily escorted by a group of unmarried women; an act of 1334 specified that these be limited to ten, the same number of maidens chosen by Ursula to accompany her on her pilgrimage.²⁹ Francesco Sansovino, in the late sixteenth century, indicated that this sort of display was critical, at least in perception, to the validity of a patrician marriage: the bride "shows herself in the household and throughout the city almost as if to so many witnesses to the contracted marriage," he wrote.³⁰ Patricia Fortini Brown has demonstrated how the many figures surrounding the action in Venetian narrative paintings like those by Carpaccio serve as validating witnesses to the stories presented. In the case of the Ursula cycle, they also remind viewers of the critically important role witnesses played in a legitimate marriage.³¹

sima, 1663, facsimile ed. (Westmead, England: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1968), 401. As Cristellon, "Consent"; Labalme and White, "How to"; and others confirm, marriage was a long process, one more ambiguous in its moment of completion than it is today. Carpaccio offers not a precise chronology of this transition but a general set of associations that evoke it.

²⁹ Åsa Boholm, *Venetian Worlds: Nobility and the Cultural Construction of Society* (Gothenberg: University of Gothenberg, 1993), 48–54. Boholm notes that the ongoing official efforts at controlling the scale of marriage ceremonies were usually in vain, since for wealthy families the prestige of a large wedding outweighed the penalty of a fine.

³⁰ As translated in Labalme and White, "How to," 45.

³¹ Because before the Council of Trent marriages could be conducted clandestinely and still be valid, the presence of witnesses was desirable for those who sought open, public confirmation of a union — such as the nobility, for whom marriage played a key political role; see Emlyn Eisenach, "Marriage," in *Europe 1450–1750: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World*, ed. Jonathan Dewald, 6 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004), vol. 4: 40–42.

The persuasive suggestion that Carpaccio's visual language responds to the theatrical culture of mumming (*momarie*), with its elaborate costumes and processional format, is an attractive gloss on the marital theme because of the close association between this performative genre, the celebration of patrician weddings, and the festive *compagnie delle calze*, so-called for their colorfully embroidered leggings. Indeed, the Venetian mumming tradition seems to have originated with fifteenth-century noble marriage celebrations, and in certain cases members of the *compagnie* were actually obligated to throw each other wedding parties.³² Significantly, the *compagnie* were more than mere festive clubs but reinforced class distinctions by restricting membership to patricians (some *popolani* responded, predictably, by forming their own festive companies). They also received and fêted illustrious visitors from the mainland in an effort to associate themselves with the landed aristocracy of the *terrafirma*.³³ It is likely that some patrician families associated with the Scuola di Sant'Orsola also belonged to these companies, including the Zardinieri, whose ornate emblem has been identified on the embroidered sleeve of the man seated in the center foreground of Carpaccio's *Departure* (fig. 4), and the Modesti, who listed members of the Loredan family among their founders.³⁴

³² On the cycle's pictorial references to mumming, see Zorzi, *Carpaccio*, 64–71. The connection between mumming, the patriciate, the *compagnie delle calze*, and wedding celebrations is explicated in Labalme and White, "How to," 46; see also Maria Teresa Muraro, "Le lieu des spectacles (publics ou privés) à Venise au XVe et au XVIe siècles," in *Le lieu théâtral à la Renaissance*, ed. Jean Jacquot (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1964), 85–93; and M. T. Muraro, "La festa," 336–37. Lionello Venturi notes that the founding statutes of the company known as the Modesti made it mandatory to throw wedding feasts; "Le Compagnie della Calza (sec. XV-XVI)," *Nuovo Archivio Veneto*, Nuova Serie, 16: 2 (Venice: Filippi Editore, 1983), 123.

³³ On matters of class anxiety and the *compagnie* see M. T. Muraro, "Festa," 318; and Zorzi, *Carpaccio*, 101–4, who also links the *compagnie* to a northern, cavalaesque tradition.

³⁴ Scirè, *Carpaccio*, 132, explains the embroidered initials F.Z. ("Fratres Zardinieri") in the same way, though Venturi, "Compagnie," 83 — who cautions about being too specific in the identification of particular companies — indicates that the first known written notice of the Zardinieri dates to 1512. The 1487 membership roles of the Modesti appear in *ibid.*, 135.

Carpaccio's references to the *compagnie delle calze* thus return us not only to the institution of marriage but to matters of social concern that were closely felt by the patrician membership of the Scuola.

One other set of marital associations and ceremonial practices emerges from an examination of the Ursula cycle, namely those tied to the historic Festival of the Marys. This festival, which was celebrated in Venice until it was abolished in 1379 but which lingered on in chronicles and local memory well into the sixteenth century, commemorated a legendary rescue of Venetian brides.³⁵ It was rich in references to marriage, including the ritual solemnization of all the previous year's betrothals, the distribution of gifts and charitable contributions to the dowries of poor girls, and the performance of an Annunciation play. The festival's symbolic emphasis on the Virgin, as the supreme model of motherhood, underscored the end to which marriage was directed. Ultimately, these rituals aimed at reiterating important political themes of community and a protective Venetian state, though in the specific context of guarding local women and their reproductive capacities. Edward Muir's scholarly account of the festival reads like an ekphrastic description of Carpaccio's canvases. Muir tells of the boats that carried twelve beautiful Marys sculpted of wood, along with their living female attendants, bands of soldiers, priests, ecclesiastics, and young men from several designated neighborhoods, from the cathedral of Venice along the Grand Canal to Santa Maria Formosa.

It is tempting to connect the wooden Marys to the reliquary busts associated with St. Ursula, which also resembled attractive young women

³⁵ My familiarity with this festival is based on Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 135–56. Muir indicates, that “[a]lthough [the festival] was abrogated long before the sixteenth century, . . . it was kept alive in folklore and in a vestigial ducal ceremony” (140). Labalme and White, “How to,” 56, n. 39, connect a wedding of 1525 with this festival, noting that it was “still alluded to in contemporary rituals.” Muir, 152–54, posits that the Senate abolished the festival for two principal reasons beyond the immediate financial pressures caused by the War of Chioggia: concerns over the social chaos that increasingly surrounded it (the celebration coincided with the Carnival season), and rivalries among participating *contrade* (neighborhoods) that were potentially destabilizing to the centralized patrician order. He also acknowledges the possibility of other explanations yet to be explored, including a subtle alteration in the status of women in the late fourteenth century.



Figure 9. Vittore Carpaccio, *Apotheosis of Saint Ursula and Her Companions*, 1491. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Credit: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY.

and were intended to hold the remains of her followers. These containers became popular in the later Middle Ages when a mass grave was discovered outside the walls of Cologne and quickly linked to the legendary martyrdom.³⁶ Such a reliquary found its way briefly into the Scuola di Sant'Orsola where, for a few years between 1509 and 1521, it was periodically displayed on the confraternity's altar, in front of the scene of Ursula's *Apotheosis* (fig. 9) and its

³⁶ Joan Holladay connects the rising popularity of female reliquary busts in Cologne with the local proliferation of Beguines, unaffiliated religious women whose wanderings threatened the ideal of female enclosure; see "Relics, Reliquaries, and Religious Women: Visualizing the Holy Virgins of Cologne," *Studies in Iconography* 18 (1997): 1–39.

flock of analogous, generically beautiful young virgins.³⁷ Another point of resonance with the Festival of the Marys and the veneration of the Virgin lies in Carpaccio's representation of Ursula's dream with its unmistakable visual references to scenes of the Annunciation (fig. 5). By recognizing the secular, even political nature of the Ursula cycle and its concern with matters of matrimony, one can interpret this image in a similar vein, not just as saintly mimicry of the Virgin, but as a reminder, along the lines of those found in the Festival of the Marys, of the ultimate objectives of matrimony and of its value to the Venetian state, namely, reproduction, the continuity of lineage, and social stability.

The number of public Venetian ceremonies dedicated to themes of matrimony — not only the abrogated Festival of the Marys but also the Marriage of the Sea, which couched Venetian power in a symbolic union between the doge and the surrounding lagoon³⁸ — was a natural extension of the importance this institution played in the life of the city. Venetians believed that their very survival as a state depended on it, for it was through marriage that the privileges of nobility and the related power of political leadership were transmitted.³⁹ Patrician marriage, however, was

³⁷ Various documents in the Venetian state archives attest to this story, including disputes with the friars at SS. Giovanni e Paolo over control and display of the relics and their eventual return to Fiume, the Adriatic city (today Rijeka) from which they had been removed; see, for example, SS. Giovanni e Paolo, b. 0, fasc. 1, nos. 3, 5; and Scuole Piccole e Suffragi, b. 597, fols. 25^v–26^r, ASV (Archivio di Stato di Venezia). Marino Sanudo, in his extensive diaries, includes a report on the relics that were removed from the “Domo di Madonna Santa Maria” in Fiume, including “[u]na testa de una compagna de Santa Orsola, coverta d'ariento, indorada de mezo busto in zoso” (a head of one of St. Ursula's companions, covered in a bust of gilded silver); Marino Sanudo, *I Diarii*, ed. Rinaldo Furlin et al., 58 vols. (Venice: Federico Editore, 1879–1903; reprinted Bologna: Forni Editore, 1969–70), vol. 9: 364, 431, 562.

³⁸ This annual celebration culminated with the doge tossing his gold ring into the lagoon and pronouncing the words, “We espouse thee, O sea, as a sign of true and perpetual dominion”; see Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 122. Ibid., 127, notes that the metaphor of matrimony was used to describe other ducal privileges, for example, the doge's role as “groom” to each newly appointed abbess of Santa Maria Nuova in Gerusalemme.

³⁹ Or as Jutta Gisela Sperling puts it, “for a hereditary ruling class, marriage was an issue of prime political, even constitutional significance”; *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 22.

under continual pressure, and this pressure helps explain why the topic was of interest to Carpaccio and his patrons at the Scuola di Sant'Orsola. The source of the problem lay in the peculiar history of the Venetian nobility that, unlike the aristocracies of other Italian cities, was rooted in a rather arbitrary freezing of entry into the patrician class. The so-called Serrata of 1297 reserved noble standing for those Venetians whose families were serving or had recently served on the Great Council and defined that status as hereditary.⁴⁰ With a few, rare exceptions that were limited to the fourteenth century, membership in the patriciate was fixed in this brief historical moment, and subsequent shifts in wealth had no bearing on an individual family's standing (this rigid framework contrasts with other aristocratic systems, in which noble status could be conferred to an individual in recognition of loyal service, growing influence, or political necessity). Consequently, there were some complicated social dynamics at work, wherein noble families became impoverished but remained a part of the patriciate while commoners who had made fortunes in the expanding Venetian economy were excluded from noble rank.⁴¹

Marriage was one solution to these challenges, but it was not fully satisfactory. It placed particular weight on the marital fate of young noblewomen, whose status within the class hierarchy was unstable because nobility was passed down exclusively through the male line. When a commoner married his daughter to a patrician, she and her offspring joined

⁴⁰ Among many discussions of this critical moment, particularly useful is the summary of its impact offered by Romano, *Patricians*, 28; and Alexander Cowan, *Marriage, Manners and Mobility in Early Modern Venice* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 5. Most recent studies call into question the fixity of this event, suggesting that the closure of the noble class was an ongoing process occurring over the course of several decades and through a range of social and legislative mechanisms; see, for example, Gerhard Rösch, "The Serrata of the Great Council and Venetian Society, 1286–1323," in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797*, ed. John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 67–88.

⁴¹ See Alexander Cowan, "Rich and Poor among the Patriciate in Early Modern Venice," *Studi veneziani* n.s. 6 (1982): 147–60. The extension of this phenomenon into later centuries is investigated in James Cushman Davis, *The Decline of the Venetian Nobility as a Ruling Class* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962).

the ranks of the aristocracy. These sorts of marriages were quite frequent, as newly wealthy citizens took advantage of an impoverished nobility and skyrocketing dowry inflation to move up the social ladder. Weddings of noblewomen to non-nobles were less fortunate occasions for the family of the bride and were generally arranged because the patrician father was unable to compete in the dowry wars. The children of these unions, both male and female, did not belong to the noble class. These conditions of heredity — as well as the significant threat posed by bastards who were entering the Great Council despite a tainted lineage — made proper patrician marriages particularly important: a securely defined nobility and the stability of the Republic were at stake.⁴²

Although properly calibrated marriages were an ongoing concern in Venice and were addressed by various governmental initiatives at various moments, the issue was once again reaching a head around the time that Carpaccio was working on the Ursula cycle and culminated in several new pieces of legislation enacted in the early years of the sixteenth century.⁴³ These laws attest to the perceived severity of the threats posed by intermarriage, mixed parentage, and illegitimacy. Most important is the law of 1506, in which the Council of Ten dictated that all noble births be officially registered with the Avogaria de Comun, a listing codified as the Libro d'Oro. Although noble paternity was paramount to this list, the social status of the mother was nearly as important, as was the validity of the parents' union.⁴⁴ These concerns represent a significant shift from earlier

⁴² In fact, as Sperling shows, the result was eventually destabilizing as more and more noble women — by 1581 over fifty percent, she argues — were taken out of the marriage market and placed in convents, creating long-term social imbalances that in 1646 forced another reopening of the noble class; see *Convents and the Body Politic*, 1–17.

⁴³ Stanley Chojnacki traces the evolution of such regulations across the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, indicating the continual preoccupation with marriage and lineage in the definition of nobility, and the ever more critical role the status of women played in determining noble standing; see “Nobility, Women, and the State: Marriage Regulation in Venice, 1420–1535,” in Dean and Lowe, eds., *Marriage in Italy*, 128–51. The events of the period around 1500 were so critical to the definition of the nobility that Chojnacki dubs them the “third Serrata”; see “Identity and Ideology in Renaissance Venice: The Third Serrata,” in Martin and Romano, eds., *Venice Reconsidered*, 266.

⁴⁴ Chojnacki, “Identify and Ideology,” 274.

efforts to define the patriciate, which were centered on political activity and specifically membership in the Great Council. As Stanley Chojnacki puts it, “the nature of the social and political challenge to which [this legislation] responded instigated governmental intrusions into the most intimate area of private life, making marriage, birth, and wifehood the pivotal element in the new patrician order.”⁴⁵

Situated in relation to the uneasy but critically important position of young noblewomen in Venice, Carpaccio’s St. Ursula cycle takes on a new set of meanings. Ursula was a princess, and according to tradition her followers were also noble — the sisters, daughters, and nieces of kings, counts, and bishops.⁴⁶ Carpaccio cued a Venetian audience to this status with his attention to richness of dress and architecture as well as through references to the structure of the patrician family and its ceremonial traditions. For example, he reminds viewers of Ursula’s position as a vulnerable girl and daughter by including an attending woman who waits for Ursula outside her door, suggesting both class standing and the fact that, with regard to her father’s household, Ursula is a nubile young woman in need of supervision (fig. 1, lower right).⁴⁷ At the same time, Carpaccio places considerable weight on her new position as woman-to-be-married. The presence of

⁴⁵ Concerns over potential illegitimacy of those registered in the Libro d’Oro continued to preoccupy officials, who recognized that “the crux was supervision over marriage”; *idem.*, 274. A generation later, in 1526, modifications to the Libro d’Oro and new legislation requiring the registration of noble marriages addressed these concerns; *ibid.*, 267–76.

⁴⁶ The early twelfth-century visionary Elisabeth of Schönau, in her elaboration of the Ursula legend (which in turn influenced Voragine), makes clear the noble standing of Ursula’s followers; see Marcelle Thiébaux, ed., *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland Pub., 1994), 349–56 and 366–82. The names and genealogies of Ursula’s noble followers were detailed in the seventeenth-century martyrology by Hermann Crombach, *Vita et martyrium S. Ursulae et Sociarum undecim millum Virginum: Vindiciae Ursulanae* (Cologne, 1647).

⁴⁷ Zorzi, *Carpaccio*, 32–33, notes that patrician girls, even those from families of considerable means, were cared for by a governess rather than by an extensive group of servants. On the servant class more generally, see Dennis Romano, *Housecraft and Statecraft: Domestic Service in Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

Etherius among the travelers to Rome has already been noted here as one of Carpaccio's unique additions to this legend. Accompanied first by her father and then by her future husband, Ursula never appears outside the proper confines of the patriarchal family. Despite the fact that her story is one of marriage deferred, Carpaccio's presentation speaks firmly of aristocratic marriage appropriately sanctioned and properly managed.

With this broad interpretative framework in mind, the question of what marriage meant in the specific context of the Scuola di Sant'Orsola remains, including how it resonated for the patrons of Carpaccio's cycle and for the broader confraternity membership. Documents that might illuminate these matters are scarce, but several promising avenues of investigation exist. One of these points to the sponsors of the pictures. Officially, the direction of Carpaccio's commission was the task of the administrative *banca*, a rotating body that ran the Scuola but was closed to members who entered as nobles — perhaps to disperse authority but more practically, it turns out, as a way to spare those members this apparently tedious obligation. It is quite clear, however, that patricians were closely involved with Carpaccio's work, as indicated, for example, by the inclusion of Loredan family emblems in the scene of martyrdom (fig. 8). It has been suggested that fees from nobles newly installed as members were important in financing the cycle,⁴⁸ and that its visual language would have had the greatest relevance to these viewers.

While this seems straightforward, it is actually quite complex, even more than the lack of documentation would suggest. For at the Scuola, noble status was not necessarily what it appeared to be, and there was a certain degree of slipperiness surrounding its definition.⁴⁹ Traces of this

⁴⁸ Brown, *Narrative*, 56–59, explores the issue of patronage and the relative role of the Scuola's noble members in detail; see also J. M. Fletcher, review of *La peinture narrative de Carpaccio dans le cycle de Ste. Ursule* by Françoise Bardou, *Burlington Magazine* 128 (June 1986): 427–28. The high number of nobles at the Scuola di Sant'Orsola was one of several features that distinguished it from the other *scuole piccole*, including its size, the fact that it had its own building, and its prominence in artistic patronage; see Glixon, *Music*, 195–96; Ortalli, "Per salute," 160.

⁴⁹ Guzzetti and Ziemann, "Scuole," 1173, n. 103, appropriately distinguish between "confraternal nobility" and "nobility" within a larger Venetian context, indicating that one

circumstance survive in the written historical record, where the membership status of those who entered the Scuola as nobles is specifically addressed. The *mariegola* of Sant'Orsola, as it was transcribed and updated in 1488, retains several pre-existing entries dealing with this matter. From about a century earlier, considerable attention had been directed at the initiation fees required of those entering as nobles (both men and women), the privileges accorded them, and even the question of who could actually enter with noble status.⁵⁰ Rule 35 is the most revealing. It raised the fee for noble membership, explaining that many individuals had been enrolling at an inflated rank in order to receive noble privileges, and in particular the benefits of belonging to the Scuola while remaining exempt from certain duties and the holding of office — including the dubious honor, considering the efforts made to avoid it, of serving on the *banca*.⁵¹ The result was a shortage of good men “da far officiali” (to hold office). While practical interests may have guided this policy, it also expresses a certain malleability — what Richard Mackenney refers to as the “sponginess” of social relationships at the *scuole piccole* — in the membership of the Scuola that may have been unsettling to the patrician class.⁵² As the *mariegola* makes

does not equal the other. To have noble status at the Scuola was not to be a noble of the Great Council, but, rather, to have an elevated status and related privileges within the context of the Scuola alone. Black, *Confraternities*, 32–49, discusses at some length the complex relationship between groups and class relations inside and outside the context of the *scuole*, noting the role they played in social control.

⁵⁰ For the manuscript of the *mariegola* of 1488, see Scuole Piccole e Suffragi, b. 597, fols. 1^r–12^r, ASV (a facsimile can be found in Kehl, *Vittore Carpaccios*, 166–73). On the matter of noble status, see rules 20, 31, and 35–36. Rule 20 distinguishes the general entry fees for women from those for women who “vora intrar per noblele” (want to enter as nobles) and states that the latter “sia clamade exente da ogni fation dela scuola” (will be considered exempt from every duty of the Scuola).

⁵¹ For an extended discussion of similar problems at the *scuole grandi*, see Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, 72–83. He argues that, over the course of the fifteenth century, the idea of the *scuola grande* as a brotherhood of equals was increasingly an illusion. Instead, a growing division according to class and wealth meant that, by the sixteenth century, “the name of brother concealed a sharp division of functions” (*ibid.*, 83).

⁵² Mackenney, “Continuity,” 400–3, discusses this “sponginess” in relationship to the practice of buying noble status at the *scuole piccole* and in contrast to a rigid frame of social relationships that the Venetian political system sought (not always successfully) to

clear, it was possible for non-nobles to buy themselves noble status within the framework of the Scuola di Sant'Orsola. Although confraternal nobility did not transfer beyond the Scuola walls, it nevertheless represents a social category at odds with the uniquely closed character of the Venetian patriciate and an imposition on traditional societal boundaries that may well have made the ruling class uneasy.

This particular problem and the effort to control it were first voiced in an addition to the *mariegola* made in 1370; rule 35, as it appears in the 1488 version, is a transcription of this earlier amendment. This fact does not diminish the importance of the rule nor of the concerns it voiced in the late fifteenth century, when class tensions in Venice were on the rise.⁵³ Indeed, the Scuola's demographics had shifted somewhat, and its non-noble membership had grown.⁵⁴ These members appear to have been gaining in self-confidence, and several are named in the opening passage of the revised charter. Others may have been seeking a more elevated status. In 1488, the *gastaldo* (warden) of Sant'Orsola was Antonio de Filippo, and Patricia Fortini Brown observes that, although his is not among the aristocratic surnames gathered together by the contemporary diarist Marino Sanudo, he is called a nobleman in the Scuola records.⁵⁵ Certainly

impose. These variable, alternative notions of nobility, within the *scuole* and outside them, have been virtually unexamined and deserve greater scholarly attention.

⁵³ A close reading of the *mariegola*, its various restatements, and the surviving records of the Scuola generally makes it clear that the charter and its rules were not just transcribed as a rote exercise. Rather, the *mariegola* was routinely read aloud and its rules often cited and restated, indicating that it was a living document and that various transcriptions and amendments must not "break from nor alter" the original ("derogar ni alterar," as it is phrased in a 1501 amendment to some regulations of 1428); Scuole Piccole e Suffragi, b. 599, n. 2, ASV.

⁵⁴ Brown, *Narrative*, 279, notes that "[a]lthough some have suggested that the confraternity was a society of nobles there is evidence that this was not the case *during the period in which it employed Carpaccio*" (my italics), indicating a shift in the demographics of the Scuola that may have rendered class distinctions particularly important at this moment.

⁵⁵ Scuole Piccole e Suffragi, b. 597, fol. 11', ASV, and Brown, *Narrative*, 57 and 247, n. 46. *Gastaldo* and *gastoldo* are used interchangeably in the *mariegola* and other related documents.

in a society as stratified as that of Venice labels like these mattered, and a confusion of terms was troubling in that it hinted at a potential muddling of the underlying structure.

From the perspective of the present study, slippery class distinctions have several implications. First, they make it more difficult to identify those who commissioned and supported Carpaccio's work. It is unclear whether those who entered as confraternal nobles and whose elevated fees paid for the cycle were in fact members of the patrician class or whether their numbers included non-nobles who were buying that status within the confines of the confraternity. Similarly, the officials on the *banca* might have been exclusively *popolani* serving their obligatory turn in office but might also have included some patricians who could not afford the elevated fee for noble membership. This lack of transparency complicates the effort to isolate a single, influential caste of patrons and attach Carpaccio's cycle to any one set of social concerns. More importantly, it suggests that the negotiation of class relationships, whether through actual policy or tacit acknowledgement, was a powerful operative force at the Scuola. The "Myth of Venice"—the theory that the Republic's political structures and a selfless patriciate supported centuries of equanimity and stability—would suggest that the *scuole piccole* were part of the city's careful balance of powers. But the *mariegola* of Sant'Orsola indicates there were significant cracks in that façade.⁵⁶ Recognizing marriage as a lynchpin in those complex but delicate social structures and acknowledging it as a key theme in Carpaccio's cycle invites reconsideration of the Ursula paintings within a framework that pinned class negotiation tightly to matrimony, properly managed and properly controlled.

⁵⁶ These cracks should lead us to examine claims that the *scuole* "dispel[led] differences of wealth, kinship, and power" and "allowed early Renaissance Venetians to set aside their differences and come together in a spirit of sacred community" (Romano, *Patricians*, 112). The success and popularity of the *scuole* confirms a positive social role, but the squabbles at Sant'Orsola reveal that their social dynamics were at times out of balance. On the "Myth of Venice," see the summary in Martin and Romano, eds., *Venice Reconsidered*, 3–9, and the discussion and bibliography in James S. Grubb, "When Myths Lose Power: Four Decades of Venetian Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 58, no. 1 (Jan. 1986): 43–94.

By now it is clear the significance marriage held for the Venetian nobility and families such as the Loredan, who were among the earliest and most devoted members of the Scuola di Sant'Orsola. Another important affiliated patrician family, the Barbaro, left some more definite clues in that direction, clues that may help explain one of the cycle's lingering puzzles, namely the prominent figure of the humanist Ermolao Barbaro (1454–93), who stands behind Pope Cyriacus, dressed in a red toga (fig. 6).⁵⁷ Ermolao had no documented relationship with the Scuola, and his prominent representation by Carpaccio begs interpretation. Ermolao Barbaro is best known as the author of *De coelibatu* (*On Celibacy*), a treatise written in the early 1470s when he was still in his teens and addressed to his father. In it, he expresses his desire to be free of the duties of a patrician nobleman — of politics, but above all of the distractions provoked by the civic obligation to marry and produce children — and his longing to be able to dedicate himself to a life of celibacy focused on scholarly pursuits. Barbaro does not dismiss the importance of patrician duty. Indeed, he repeats the conviction of his own grandfather, Francesco Barbaro (ca. 1398–1454), whose famous tract *De re uxoria* (*On Marriage*, 1416) lays out the importance of marriage and children to the stability of the Venetian state and makes an essential analogy between the structure of the family unit and that of the Republic.⁵⁸ For Ermolao Barbaro, the challenge was a personal one: the days of a Venetian nobleman, filled with responsibilities to domestic and civic institutions, conflicted with his deep longing for a life of undisturbed contemplation.

⁵⁷ This identification, by Vittore Branca and Roberto Weiss, has been widely accepted though never successfully explained; see “Carpaccio e l'iconografia del più grande umanista veneziano (Ermolao Barbaro),” *Arte Veneta* 17 (1963): 35–40. In addition to being among the patrician members of the Scuola (Zorzi, *Carpaccio*, 112), the Barbaro were related by marriage to the Loredan: Francesco, author of *De re uxoria* and Ermolao's grandfather, married Maria, daughter of the procurator Pietro Loredan, in 1419; see Michela Marangoni and Manlio Pastore Stocchi, eds., *Una famiglia veneziana nella storia: I Barbaro* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1996), 95.

⁵⁸ Francesco Barbaro, “De re uxoria,” in *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, ed. and trans. Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 192–228. See also King, “Marriage,” 31–35.

Ermolao Barbaro was a controversial figure in the early 1490s, a period in which, against the demands of the Senate and the wishes of his father, he left behind an ambassadorial post in Rome to become Patriarch of Aquileia, a position much better suited to his temperament and scholarly leanings. He died in 1493 of the plague, and one scholarly debate has centered on the dating of Carpaccio's picture in relationship to these events: a post-1493 date might explain why it was possible to give a figure who had been in a state of civic disgrace such prominence in the Scuola's cycle. Another question addresses the meaning of Barbaro's presence, and in particular his clear pairing — triangulated with the pope — with Ursula, who kneels beside Prince Etherius as Barbaro turns his head away. There are many intriguing details to pursue, including Barbaro's hand gesture and the decision to place him in Rome, but the larger context of marriage pushes particular themes to the fore. Although their motives and means were different, Ursula and Barbaro both rebelled against the demands of traditional aristocratic marriage. Her objectives were spiritual, his intellectual; she worked within the familial system that he rejected; and she gave in to her marital duties (and so is shown here with Etherius) while he never did. Perhaps the two figures are paired here as contrasting models of behavior, or perhaps as two sides of the same coin. No fixed interpretation emerges, but the theme of marriage, in particular the terms of proper marriage organized according to the needs and demands of the larger community, is again in play. The figure of Ermolao Barbaro, dressed in red patrician robes (and indirectly linked, through his family, to the Scuola di Sant'Orsola), situates these matters squarely within a local framework and may even serve to legitimate alternatives to traditional noble marriage at a time when this institution was coming under increasingly intense social pressures.⁵⁹ Iconographic specifics notwithstanding, Ermolao's presence is notable and powerful; it surely drew attention, invited speculation, and gave prominence, in one form or another, to matters of patrician obligation and civic duty.

⁵⁹ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article for helping me to reinforce this observation.

Circling back to an examination of Carpaccio's work, this investigation productively comes to rest on an image already touched on but not fully explored, namely, the scene of negotiation between Ursula and her father, a scene on which the scholarly literature has been remarkably thin (fig. 1, far right). Ludovico Zorzi's notes on this work are helpful and to the point: the single bed contrasts with the matrimonial one in the *Dream* scene (fig. 5), and Ursula's gesture suggests a ring, though none is pictured.⁶⁰ But Zorzi does not consider the most remarkable aspect of the painting, namely the young woman's authoritative posture. In a composition unique to Carpaccio, Ursula stands tall and appears to lay out the conditions for marriage as the king sits, shoulders curved and head resting on his hand in a gesture of contemplation or even resignation.⁶¹ Ursula's modest but forceful posture matches her characterization in at least one contemporary staging of the legend, in which she appears before her father and the English ambassadors to announce, firmly but with eyes politely lowered, the terms by which she will marry (the text compares Ursula to the Virgin Annunciate, evoking the same formula used in Carpaccio's *Dream*).⁶² Set against the scenes of formal diplomacy that frame it, the intimate episode painted by Carpaccio offers viewers another distinct perspective on marriage negotiation and the politics of nuptial unions. It presents an alternative to official, negotiated contracts — not as their negation but as a sign of the varied obligations, both personal and communal, that pressed up against the institution of marriage.

Through such juxtapositions and layerings, Carpaccio's canvases meaningfully addressed the socially diverse audience that populated the

⁶⁰ Zorzi, *Carpaccio*, 22.

⁶¹ The compendium of Ursula cycles reproduced in de Tervarent, *Sainte Ursule*, vol. 2, reveals no image analogous to this one. The closest, by the mid-fifteenth-century German painters Gürgen and Jan van Scheiven (*ibid.*, p. 29), shows Ursula in consultation with both parents, but here pose and gesture suggest a moment of balanced dialogue rather than of filial assertion.

⁶² See the anonymous, early sixteenth-century version in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice (Rari 497.74), *La Storia di Santo Orsola con le undicimila Vergini, quali tutte da lei furono convertite insieme con alcuni santi homini, e poi gloriosamente martirizzati* (Florence, n.d.).

hall of the Scuola di Sant'Orsola. His cycle does not present marriage as a neat, one-way negotiation in which hierarchies are always respected and lines of power closely followed. Rather, it reveals the complexity of this institution, the many actors involved, and the many ways their stories can unfold. Ultimately, order is upheld: Ursula is betrothed, and technically she even marries; at the same time, she maintains her vows to chastity and to Christ. But she does so in a way that permits some latitude for men and women and for those who might not find themselves advantageously positioned in the social order. The implication of the cycle is that marriage is both malleable and sacred, that it is a duty that must be faced with respect for the prevailing system but that also allows for some creative manipulation. Carpaccio's variegated pageant thus resonated with the full spectrum of viewers at the Scuola — not only the patrician elite but also the many men and women who aspired, through the offices of politics, religion, or matrimony, to a comfortable place within the formal structures of Venetian society.⁶³

⁶³ I am grateful to many people for their assistance with this study over the long course of its evolution, including Stanley Chojnacki, Rafaele Dessi, Emlyn Eisenach, Marya Flanagan, Joan Holladay, Nicole Lassahn, Scott Montgomery, Harriet Pattison (and her island in a lagoon), Linda Seidel, Susan Weiss and her students at Johns Hopkins University, and Rebecca Zorach, as well as to the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation for research support.