

WOMEN IN THE RENAISSANCE

Following the Middle Ages in Europe, came the period known as the Renaissance. Renaissance means rebirth, and it meant the rebirth of ancient Greek and Roman culture for the elite class residing mainly in Italy circa 1350-1650, and peripherally in England in the late 16th century, and scarcely in France and Northern Europe. Famous from these years were many artisans like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, and writers like Machiavelli and Erasmus. Renaissance scholars think that modern political and economic practices originated in the Renaissance, while medievalists (scholars of the Middle Ages) think that the antecedents were already present in Medieval Society. Another equal point of contention was whether women themselves contributed to and benefitted from the Renaissance. As the noted historian Joan Kelly asked several decades ago, did women have a renaissance like the men did? These rhetorical questions will not be answered here, but women's role in society will be postulated, followed by some of their specific cultural and political contributions.

Because of the surviving sources, this chapter will focus on the elite women, but fully recognizing the great disparities between the life of a rich woman and a poor one, and between a rural and an urban one.

One of the main goals of elite males during the Renaissance was to become educated in the classical culture of the ancient Greeks and Romans, a culture they thought had been lost during the Middle Ages. These ancient ideas had not been lost, but utilized in ways compelling to the Christian Church. Now in the Renaissance period, education was seen as beneficial to an individual for his sake, not for God's. Humanism, as this education was called, became a major focus for the rest of Europe too, but with the Christian element added to the exclusion of the secular culture. As the Renaissance ideal of learning spread, girls and young women of the upper classes became recipients of this idea. The education females received was to teach them how to act as ladies of the courts and patronesses of arts, not for gainful employment in a profession. Their education was usually acquired from their fathers or from private tutors. What was unique for the first time in Western history was that men were stressing education for women. Some highly educated ladies came to exert immense influence over the arts, literature, and some even had significant political roles. Desiderus Erasmus of the Netherlands

and Thomas More of England felt that women of the middling classes should be educated too. All men thought that women should read specific books that would assist them in their roles. In Italy, Baldassare Castiglione in his ever-popular The Courtier, described the attributes Renaissance women needed to acquire to become a proper lady, but basic to this was the idea that in the Renaissance the lady's education was for the benefit of a man. Whereas in medieval courtly love tales, the man shaped his remarks and actions primarily to please the lady. Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, Thomas More was instrumental in spreading humanism education in England. We know that his eldest daughter Margaret was educated in Latin, Greek, logic, Philosophy, Theology, Mathematics and Astronomy. This encouraged other English nobility to education their daughters too.

However, domestic duties were never to be neglected for educational pursuits. Most male humanists preferred that learned women remain unwed, and metaphorically likened them to amazons and women warriors. Proper women were to be ornaments of their class, not significant contributors to scholarship. In his colloquy between the Abbot Antronius and the learned woman Magdala, the Dutch writer Erasmus portrayed in a humorous way the contrast between traditional and more progressive views on women's education.

Antronius: It isn't feminine to be intellectual; women are made for pleasure.

Magdala: Suppose now that I take more pleasure in reading a good author than you do in hunting, drinking or gaming. Won't you think I live pleasantly? **Antronius:** I would not live that sort of life... **Magdala:** But why does this household stuff [books] displease you?

Antronius: Because a spinning wheel is a woman's weapon.

Magdala: Is it not a woman's business to mind the affairs of her family and to instruct her children? **Antronius:** Yes, it is.

Magdala: And do you think so weighty an office can be performed without wisdom?

Andronius: I believe not.

Magdala: This wisdom I learn from books...

Antronius: I can tolerate books - but not Latin ones. **Magdala:** Why so?

Antronius: Because that tongue is not fit for a woman. **Magdala:** I want to know the reason.

Andronius: Because it contributes nothing towards the defense of their chastity...the common people think as I do, because it is such a rare and unusual thing for a woman to understand Latin...

Magdala: Why then is it not becoming for me to learn Latin, that I may be able daily to have conversation with so many eloquent, learned and wise authors and faithful counselors?

Antronius: Books destroy women's brains who have little enough of themselves...bookishness makes folk mad...by my faith, I would not have a learned

wife...I have often heard it said that a wise woman is twice a fool...

Magdala: a woman that is truly wise does not think herself so; but on the contrary, one that knows nothing thinks herself to be wise, and that is being twice a fool.

Antronius: I can't well tell how it is, that as packsaddles don't become an ass, so neither does learning become a woman.

More than thirty well-educated women humanists and patrons of the cultural arts have been identified during the Renaissance. Their contributions varied. Many were used as marriage pawns in the tumultuous political and military warring between the various Italian city-states. Isabella D'Este, 1474-1539, an Italian, was a true Renaissance woman comparable to Leonardo Da Vinci, who is considered the epitome of the universal Renaissance male. Isabella was multi-talented, knowing how to play a number of musical instruments, and one of the greatest patrons of Renaissance artisans and humanists. Isabella loved to collect rare books, keeping them in her library she called Paradise. Extant are not only her library of books, but hundreds of letters she wrote and received, chronicling events and interests of her day, including one from Cadiz, that remarked: "a sailor named Columbus has landed here..." Wed to Francesco Gonzaga, the Marquis of Mantua when she was sixteen, Isabella successfully ruled the Duchy when her husband was captured in war. When he returned he complained: "it is our fate to have as a wife a woman who is always ruled by her head."

Alessandra Scala of Florence had command of the Greek language equaled by few male scholars in Europe. Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Lorenzo de Medici's mother wrote religious hymns. Marguerite, elder sister to Francis I of France, but excluded from the ruling position because of her sex, was a successful statesman and writer. Her brother utilized her talents and humanist education for the benefit of state affairs of France. Married to the ruler of Navarre, Queen Marguerite wrote the book Heptameron, which described abuses of the Catholic Church and its monasteries in a ribald fashion, which was modeled after Boccaccio's more famous book Decameron. Louis Labe as the well-educated daughter of a merchant from Lyon, France, became known as the French Sappho because of her passionate love poems. One of the most gifted Renaissance women was Vittoria Colonna, related to a pope, thirty cardinals, and powerful Roman families. Married to a Spaniard, the Marchese of Pescara, for political reasons, after his early death, she wrote sonnets idealizing him as a saint, even though he was unfaithful to her. As she remarked "I wrote only to free myself from my inner pain." Michelangelo

was her best friend and kindred spirit. They corresponded extensively, and he painted at least three works for her. Probably the most ill-used educated Renaissance lady was Lucrezia Borgia. As the illegitimate daughter of Pope Alexander VI, she was used by her father in his political machinations. Betrothals and marriages for her were made and broken often at her father's whims as well as by her husbands' family. Rumors during her own lifetime had her the embodiment of the classic evil woman, who climbed up the ladder of success by resorting to the woman's method of murder, poison. Paradoxically, she was a loving wife to her third husband, the Duke of Ferrara, mother of many children and patron of artists, musicians, writers, and scholars.

Although relatively little is known about the women artists of the Renaissance, some did achieve both acceptance and fame. It is difficult to fully reconstruct their contributions as so many of their works were lost or destroyed. Artemisia Gentilisci was perhaps the most accomplished woman painter, and she was the heroine of a recent full-length featured film. Suffering sexual abuse by her father's friend, she utilized her rage to compose great works of art. Sofonisba Anguissola, circa 1535-1625, of Cremona, was a painter whom Michelangelo took special interest in. For nearly two decades Sofonisba painted at the court of King Philip II of Spain. Additionally, her five sisters were also painters, and the Renaissance art historian, Vasari, described each woman's works. Under Henry VIII's patronage, Levina Teerling was a manuscript illuminator, and Henry paid more for her work than he did for the painter Hans Holbein, who did a celebrated portrait of the king. Royal patronage was also bestowed on Catharina van Hemessen, 1528-1587 of the Netherlands. She enjoyed the support of Queen Mary of Hungary, painting introspective portraits. Probably the leading woman sculptor was Properzia Rossi of Bologna, circa 1490-1530.

The second half of the sixteenth century was a notable age of unusual political prominence for women in western Europe. Two women in particular dominated Western Europe - Catherine de Medici (1519-89) queen, queen mother and regent of France, and Elizabeth I (1553-1603), daughter of King Henry VIII and queen of England. Two Marys also ruled during the sixteenth century, one in England and one in Scotland. Although some Renaissance writers recognized women's ability to govern, most men were still quite reluctant to accept their authority. John Calvin, the Protestant whose views help spread the Reformation, vociferously rejected government by women as an "unnatural monstrosity and

such a government might be sometimes imposed on a nation by an angry God to punish the people for their sins, in which case it should be born with patience, like any tyranny." The more famous classic statement of this view was espoused by the Presbyterian Protestant Reformer in Scotland, John Knox, in his The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women, 1558, where he argued that female rule was contrary to divine and natural law. While women could rule they could not be admitted to deliberative assemblies like Parliament during this time.

Mary, queen of England from 1553-1558, reigned during a tumultuous time in English history. Under her father, Henry VIII, Catholicism with the Pope as leader was done away with in England, and Protestantism began with the ruler assuming the title of "Defender of the Faith." When Henry died, Mary as the eldest daughter did not succeed to the throne. Her younger brother did as Edward VI, and England became even more Protestant, but this was not to last long as he died only six years later. This brought the staunch Catholic Mary to the throne. All religious changes were eliminated and Catholicism was returned, reinforced by her marriage to Philip II of Catholic Spain. The marriage terms between Mary and Philip opened the debate on woman's rule. England's Parliament was able to thwart Philip's attempt to dilute Mary's national power. In the marriage arena Philip would rule and in the state area Mary would rule; a prescription and description that Queen Victoria will follow in the nineteenth century. Protestant martyrdom became popular during Mary's reign, and she gained the ugly epithet of "Bloody Mary." The number of people killed for their faith in her reign paled in comparison to Elizabeth's time and even during her father's rule. Mary did not rule long either, dying of a malignant tumor that she thought was a growing baby in her womb. Under Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603 reign), England began its four hundred year run as a great empirical power. During Elizabeth's reign when she defeated the Spanish Armada, she stopped Spain's dominance of America and established England's domination. England's economy prospered profoundly, even if part of that was Elizabeth's investment in piracy along with the establishment of trading companies. Patronage of Shakespeare and his plays had extraordinary long-term benefits. As Shakespeare himself said, "man was the measure of all things' and England was a mighty example. The English Renaissance did not fully flower until Elizabeth's time. An excerpt from her tutor's description of her as a sixteen year old student, demonstrates that she was the epitome of a well-educated Renaissance woman:

"The constitution of her mind is exempt from female weakness, and she is endowed with a masculine power of application. No apprehension can be quicker than hers, no memory more retentive. French and Italian she speaks like English; Latin with fluency, propriety, and judgment; she also spoke Greek with me, frequently, willingly, and moderately well. Nothing can be more elegant than her handwriting, whether in the Greek or Roman characters...the beginning of the day was always devoted by her to the New Testament in Greek, after which she read...tragedies of Sophocles, which I judge best adapted to supply her tongue with the purest diction, her mind with the most excellent precepts, and her exalted station with a defense against the utmost power of fortune..."

From the beginning she was determined to avoid the religious extremes of both her sibling's reigns. Perhaps Elizabeth's religious policies were her best ones. Her *modus operandi* was *via media*. As long as her subjects displayed outward conformity to the Protestant cause, she would not "open windows in men's souls." While Elizabeth enjoyed witty conversations with her courtiers, if anyone went too far the laughing countenance froze, and the regal Tudor sovereignty took over. She did love to dance, and the nursery rhyme "Hey Diddle, the Cat and the Fiddle," referred to her. Kat was her nickname and she played the violin. Elizabeth's learning, her appreciation of poetry, drama, painting and architecture, all reinforced the Renaissance in England, and was rightly called the Elizabethan Age. Mary, Queen of Scots, was descended from a sister of England's Henry VIII. Mary wanted to be Queen of England, but managed to be only Queen of France and Scotland. At a young age she was taken from her mother, and sent to France to be introduced into French Court life where she would later marry the heir to the French throne. Her husband died after serving as king only a short time, so Mary was sent back to Scotland. By this time Scotland was mostly Protestant, but Mary was a staunch Catholic. After engaging in numerous machinations and affairs of the heart, she married badly twice, and was ultimately removed from the throne in Scotland to be replaced by her infant son, James. For years she was the supposed victim of plots to unseat Elizabeth and place herself on England's throne. The nursery rhyme "Mary Quite Contrary" refers to Mary. Eventually Elizabeth was convinced to sign Mary's death warrant.

Another powerful queen in the sixteenth century was Catherine de Medici of France. She became the Queen of France by her marriage to Henry II, and then queen mother and regent for three of her sons who ruled France after their father's demise. Catherine was a niece of the Medici pope,

Clement VII, so her connections to powerful Italians, made her a matrimonial prize. She has not received positive marks from historians, and probably rightfully so as in France during her tutelage there were political and religious civil wars, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, and a decrease in international power. But France during these early modern centuries, was a factious nation, and any ruler whether king or queen regent would have had powerful enemies to ensure that their rule was not successful. One positive contribution Catherine made, she imported the perfume industry from Italy to France.

Family and marriage customs during the Italian Renaissance era underwent some significant changes. Because of the Black Death and the subsequent severe population losses in the late fourteenth into the sixteenth centuries, civic humanists came to stress the importance of marriage. The strong celibacy medieval mantle of the church was not as honored. Even love in marriage was now deemed to be important, and a wife could offer companionship, although the medieval marriage-age differences continued. Marriages for the elite classes were still arranged, with partners in business or political considerations impacting the outcome. Dowries were a necessary part of marriage, and it was disgraceful for even a poor girl not to bring a dowry to the marriage. Prenuptial agreements were part of the marriage contract. St. Nicholas (our original Santa Claus) during this time was portrayed coming down chimneys bringing sacks of gold to provide dowries. As his appearance could not always be counted on, wealthy citizens sometimes formed St. Nicholas Societies to provide dowries for these girls. Florence's Dowry Fund (Monte Delle Doti) was especially well financed. Fathers could enroll their daughters when they were born by paying a small fee, and when the young maiden was married, the Fund paid the husband her dowry. Florence even borrowed from the vast dowry funds.

Urban women were to be virgins when married, and the cities closely chaperoned the girls to keep them pure for marriage. In Perugia a ca.1400 statue forbade men between the ages of fifteen and forty to stand around churches in order to admire women attending services. Heavy fines were leveled for non conformance. Other towns made statues disallowing men from following or touching women. In return women were to not look men in the eyes. As young girls were closely supervised until marriage, once wedded they might spend hours unsupervised for the first time in their lives. Husbands then worried about their wives' indiscretions. Apparently if wives did commit adultery, informed

neighbors placed horns on the doorways of the cuckolded husband. A great many municipalities enacted criminal statues against adultery, although male adulterers were heavily fined, while female adulteresses were liable to physical punishment, consisting of the most common form, whipping.

Didactic literature was still being written and distributed to keep wives submissive to the patriarchal structure of society. Mythology presented Grieselda as the patient ideal wife, and admonishing husbands to properly rule their wives or risk creating a shrew. Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew is a wonderful example of these prescriptions. Leon Alberti, the famous Renaissance writer wrote voluminously on the proper procedure for breaking in a new wife: "...I often used to express my disapproval of bold and forward females who try too hard to know about things outside the house...husbands who take counsel with their wives...are madmen if they think true prudence or good counsel lies in the female brain...dear wife, listen to me. I shall be most pleased if you do just three things: First, see that you never want another man to share this bed but me. Second...take care of the household...Third...see that nothing comes wrong in the house...then she and I knelt down and prayed to God... that he might grant us the grace to live together in peace and harmony for many happy years and with many male children."

While the Catholic Church was against any use of contraception, we know that some form of birth control was used for the proverb "If you can't be good, be careful" dates from this time. The Act of Onan or coitus interruptus probably was the favorite choice together with arduous exercises and some forms of herbs. Infanticide was still practiced. Foundling hospitals were established to alleviate the willful killing of unwanted infants and as homes for unwanted children and orphans. The first building to use the revitalized Roman classic design that characterizes Renaissance architecture was a foundling home. Brunelleschi, the architect, who had just completed the Dome over the Cathedral of Florence was its designer, and Della Robbia's terra cotta plaques were used as decorative items. Abortion was still practiced and authorities tried various diabolical punishments as deterrents: buried alive, drowning, and being burned at the stake.

Hiring wet nurses was popular with urban families. It was important to choose a woman of good moral character because children were assumed to take in a woman's characteristics along with her milk. Michelangelo was placed to be wet nursed in a family of stone cutters, and popular opinion

including his own father, felt that was where Michelangelo imbibed the lower- status stone cutting desires. For some women, wet nursing was a regular employment. When an ancient Roman law was discovered in the late middle ages, Renaissance society adopted it which meant the father's authority over his children lasted until he either died or emancipated them. The father had to formally appear before a judge if he was to free them from his control.

Women were still active in their parish church, whether as laity or cloistered, but it was the mystical experiences of holy women during this time that were impressive to contemporaries. Holy women even inspired learned men to write about their heroic asceticism, fasting to extreme, their unselfish service, their otherworldly visions, and their inner strength, leading to unparalleled stature. It appears there was a definite increase in female sanctity in the Renaissance. Maybe some of this increase was just a better-documented continuation of late Italian medieval mysticism. St. Catherine of Sienna, who died in her early thirties from ill health due to continual fasting, was a great role model from late medieval society, who granted female saints a high status that mothers, wives, or daughters. St. Teresa of Avila, whom the Baroque sculpture Bernini immortalized in marble at the exact moment of her ecstasy when God's spirit entered her, was a Spanish Renaissance mystic. Records show that sainthood for women greatly expanded in the Renaissance. During most of the Christian centuries there were five male saints for each female saints, but after the mid fourteenth century there was one female saint to just two and one-half male saints. In no other period of history were there so many female saints, yet the requirements for canonization were even more rigorous.