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Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy

Edited by
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Introduction

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Modern conceptions of the Renaissance begin with the 1860 publication of Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. For Burckhardt, Italians were the 'first-born among the sons of Europe'.[1] Breaking the veil of faith and illusion under which Europeans had slumbered half awake for more than a millennium, they emerged as self-conscious individuals – they were the first modern people. Despite the gendered metaphor used by Burckhardt, in this process of self-discovery, as in other aspects of Renaissance life, 'women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men'.[2] The discovery of 'man' also meant the discovery of 'woman'.

Just over a century after Burckhardt developed this conception of the Renaissance, Joan Kelly fired the opening salvo of the critiques mounted by women's history.[3] 'One of the tasks of women's history', she argued, 'is to call into question accepted schemes of periodization. . . . The Renaissance is a good case in point.' The economic and political developments 'that reorganized Italian society along modern lines and opened the possibilities for the social and cultural expression for which the age is known . . . affected women adversely, so much so that there was no renaissance for women – at least not during the Renaissance'.[4] For Kelly, the two

1. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London, 1990; orig. 1860), p. 98.
2. Ibid., p. 250.
3. Joan Kelly, 'Did women have a Renaissance?', in Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston, 1977), pp. 137–64; reprinted in *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago, 1984; hereafter the edition cited), pp. 19–50. Burckhardt's thesis had been criticized before from other points of view by medievalists, economic historians, historians of science and historians of religion, to name a few. For a useful summary, see, Gene A. Brucker, *Renaissance Italy: Was It the Birthplace of the Modern World?* (New York, 1965).
4. Kelly, 'Did women have a Renaissance?', p. 19.

sides of the Renaissance, male and female, were causally connected. The development of the modern state and the emergence of capitalism, which were essential for the creation of a larger range of opportunities for men, necessarily had a negative effect on women.

In the twenty years since Kelly's challenge to reconceptualize the way we organize history and evaluate historical periods, historians have confirmed, refuted, and modified different aspects of her thesis. In a powerful series of essays, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has painted a bleak picture of the restrictions imposed on patrician women in Florence by a patriarchal system intent on the preservation of male lineage.[5] To the contrary, Stanley Chojnacki has observed that some of the same phenomena that appear to have had a negative impact on the lives of Florentine women, such as the increasing importance of ever-larger dowries, gave Venetian women power they had not had before the Renaissance.[6] Similarly, while David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber have argued that in Renaissance Italy there was a progressive exclusion of women from the labour force, Isabel Chabot, Samuel Kline Cohn, and others have shown that women participated in the economy in larger numbers and more diverse ways than had been previously thought.[7] In an interesting and probably unintended 'synthesis', one historian has claimed, in keeping with Kelly, that the deteriorating social and economic conditions faced by upper-class women in sixteenth-century Italy, led, in keeping with Burckhardt, to the emergence of the first modern, self-conscious women. According to this view, Lucrezia Marinella and Modesta Pozzo wrote the first truly feminist tracts in European history as a reaction against the narrowing of options available to women in the sixteenth century. The former, sounding curiously Burckhardtian, argued that 'if women, as I hope, will wake themselves from the long slumber that has oppressed them, their ungrateful and proud oppressors will be

5. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, 1985).

6. Stanley Chojnacki, 'Dowries and kinsmen in early Renaissance Venice', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5, 1975 (571–600); and 'The power of love: wives and husbands in late medieval Venice', in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens, GA, 1988).

7. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Les toscans et leurs familles: une étude du catasto florentin de 1427* (Paris, 1978), pp. 582–83. Isabel Chabot, 'La reconnaissance du travail des femmes dans la Florence du bas Moyen Age: contexte idéologique et realité', in S. Cavaciocchi, ed., *La donna nelleconomia sec. XIII–XVIII* (Florence, 1990), pp. 563–76; Samuel Kline Cohn in his chapter in this volume.

humbled and tamed'.[8] Being realistic, and not wanting to rely only on moral persuasion, however, Lucrezia also counselled women to arm themselves like the Amazons of antiquity and to battle men in order to achieve the degree of economic and political independence they needed and wanted.

At first, the implicit or explicit dialogue with Kelly's work proceeded along the lines of women's history, whose goal was to restore women to historical accounts. In a sense, this was an archeological approach – to uncover from the rubble of history the lives of women who had been buried or consigned to the margins by historians of earlier generations. At its simplest, this meant uncovering the lives of a small number of famous women – Caterina Sforza, Isabella d'Este, St Catherine of Siena, Vittoria Colonna and others – who, by virtue of their role in political circles, as patrons of the arts, or as well-known religious figures, were able to influence society. Extending outward from this small circle, the project required finding worthy women writers or artists who might be brought into the illustrious company of great men. Finally, it required combing the historical documents – tax records, notarial contracts, family diaries, etc. – for the telltale signs of the activities of everyday women – the bakers, seamstresses, innkeepers, and others whose work and social contributions enabled ordinary people to survive.

On the heels of these efforts to discover the range of women's activities and influence, historians also began to concern themselves with the more complicated issue of the legal, political, economic, and social conditions that governed the lives of the vast majority of women. If most of the wealth, for example, was in the hands of men, what legal restrictions on inheritance or property ownership contributed to this unequal distribution? If there were few women artists, what barriers kept women from receiving professional training and status? What educational opportunities were available to women? Did guild regulations limit the range of occupational choices available to them? If so, how did these vary from one Renaissance city to another and from one century to the next?

In the course of finding the answers to such questions, it became clear that historians needed new theoretical categories to approach the issue of the relation between the sexes and new conceptions of the self. Women's history at its best could help us discover aspects

8. Virginia Cox, 'The single self: feminist thought and the marriage market in early modern Venice', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 48:3 (Autumn 1995), p. 521.

of women's lives that were hidden from history. But if not handled well, it could also isolate the history of women in an anachronistic separate sphere. It could dehistoricize women's past, turning it into an unchanging landscape of victimization. 'Woman', timeless and classless, could thus become the object of history rather than its subject.

Historians instead wanted to examine the ways in which women and men interpreted the meaning of being male and female, of what characteristics men and women in the past attached to what they considered 'feminine', and 'masculine', how those attributes varied by time and place, and how both women and men could appropriate these categories for different purposes. If in some places in Italy men allowed women to be guardians of their children, why did they not allow them to represent themselves in a court of law? What was 'male' and what was 'female' about these two powerful functions that women could and could not practise in one and the same place? Indeed, why could they do so in some Italian cities but not in others? Why, in the absence of obvious barriers in the law, did women in some cities, even in the same region, exercise greater independence in disposing of their property compared to women in neighbouring cities? Given the theoretical equality of the spirit between men and women in Christian thought, why was it that the ceremonies of women's consecration to the religious life increasingly resembled nuptial rites as opposed to the rites of military obligation in men's consecration? In short, what cultural constructs allowed women and men in the past to attach different meaning to similar circumstances?

The answers to these questions undermine any timeless and essentializing notion of 'woman'. They lead us instead to the category of 'gender', which enables scholars to examine the social construction of male and female identities and of the meaning attached to different social roles assumed by women and men, depending on age, social class, and other social rather than biological characteristics. Gender can also point us in the direction of examining aspects of life – of which politics is perhaps the most obvious – from which women were excluded but which were based on strong conceptions of gender that had powerful effects on both women and men. Last but not least, gender leads us in the direction of analysing the construction of male identity rather than taking men as the undifferentiated norm and women as the other. One might say that the discovery of 'woman' has led to the discovery of 'man'. With this, the tight coupling of sex and gender has come

undone; binary oppositions have weakened and it has become possible to examine gender as a process in which women and men situate themselves and are situated by others along a shifting continuum that varies according to several characteristics, among them age, class, region, and even, but by no means only, sex.[9]

Gender as a category of historical analysis is by no means beyond criticism. Judith Bennett has warned that by intellectualizing the inequality of the sexes it can gloss over past injustices. By emphasizing the agency of both women and men, it can elide the powerlessness of women in the face of patriarchy. And by its concern with meaning and metaphor, it can steer historians away from the hard realities of social history.[10] At the other end of the spectrum, Thomas Kuehn, one of the contributors to this volume, argues for 'social personhood' as a more useful conceptual tool than gender. Overly neutral though gender may sound to scholars like Bennett, Kuehn feels that it cannot escape the limitations of 'natural' sexual imagery. 'Social personhood instead points to relations between individuals, or even between parts of an individual.'[11]

The advantages and limitations of gender as an analytical tool for understanding the society of Renaissance Italy may be explored by readers in the following chapters. The contributors have sought, where possible, to transcend the limitations of women's history and to address issues of gender in order to historicize the conditions of both women and men as actors on the historical stage.

The other limitation the authors have sought to overcome is the local particularism that characterizes most scholarly work on Renaissance Italy. Because the Italian archives are generally organized according to the jurisdiction of governmental institutions in the Renaissance and since Renaissance states were organized according to cities, historians have concentrated on historical developments in one particular place, most often Florence, and secondarily Venice. After nearly three decades of research on women's history, however, it is clear that to understand the gender dimensions behind specific local variations one must look at local experiences in a comparative framework. It is also important to be attentive to temporal changes. Social history's emphasis on structure over events has tended to obscure change over time. As a consequence, the

9. Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91 (December 1986), pp. 1053–75.

10. Judith M. Bennett, 'Feminism and history', *Gender and History*, 1:3 (Autumn 1989), pp. 258–9.

11. Thomas Kuehn, see Chapter 4 below.

family. Indeed, it could be said that by creating a public sphere, the Renaissance state also created a 'private' one. The principal means through which this new institution, the state, confirmed the public roles and confronted the private interests of the elites was gender. New magistracies and new laws, starting in the late fourteenth century, asserted the prerogatives of patriarchy as a way to represent the state and control the behaviour of individuals within the family. Patriarchy, that is what it meant to be a male capable of holding authority, was defined in these centuries. In the process, the divide between men and women widened, with the latter increasingly relegated to the private sphere. But the distance between males who were deemed fit to rule and those who were not by virtue of their class, age, or position within the family also widened, and for some of the same reasons. The result was that the conflicts revealed by state efforts to mediate between these different interests created the room that enabled women to manoeuvre more effectively as notable agents in the social landscape. The Renaissance state, for Chojnacki, marks a decisive turning point in the creation of notions about the public and the private; gender lines were the contested boundaries around which these notions developed.

Thomas Kuehn examines the role played by law in this process. Legal scholarship has often portrayed the law in Renaissance Italy as a prison for women. Kuehn concludes that if it was a prison, it was not an effective one; moreover, it was also increasingly one for men, as local statutes elaborated new sets of laws to complement, supplant, or deal with new developments that had not been covered in the common law (*ius commune*) that was the legal inheritance of the Roman and the medieval worlds. It was these new local statutes, not common law, that 'detracted most from the legal condition of women in the Renaissance'. Kuehn examines two types of statutes that clashed with common law – those governing inheritance and those imposing male guardianship over women's property rights. While Renaissance lawmakers may have wanted to depart from *ius commune* and to limit inheritance to agnates, that is those relatives whose kinship was traceable exclusively through male lines, the reality of family life often dictated that property move through women. Similarly, in cities like Florence, where male guardianship (*mundualdus*) over women was most pronounced, women could be required to have a *mundualdus* in court while at the same time having the right of principal guardianship over their children as long as there was a male co-guardian somewhere in the scene.

This was a right that they had not had in Roman law. Kuehn argues that because there was no single, uniform body of law, the discrepancies between common law and local statutes led to a growing number of legal disputes and court cases in which women asserted their agency. Women, like some categories of men, may have had a limited persona in common law, but they did have personhood and legal rights they could assert. In this they were often aided by male relatives – husbands, fathers, or children – whose interests lined up with theirs. Thus women and men were able to manoeuvre around some of the legal barriers that went up around them. The plurality of law, both according to type of law and according to place, resulted in considerable flexibility. The one common denominator was that women could not have *patria potestas* (paternal legal control), but neither could certain categories of males. The study of gender in Renaissance law reveals that clear-cut dichotomies between male and female did not exist either in legal theory or in everyday practice.

The absence of rigid boundaries also extended to the world of work. Samuel Kline Cohn finds that the distribution of men and women in the labour force depended on notions of gender-appropriate work, not on biology. The historical documents that bear on the question conceal as much as they reveal; however, they do show women in occupations requiring heavy physical exertions, such as skinners, carders, and stretchers in the wool industry. The documents also show women in occupations, such as sheep-herding over long distances, which put them away from home and in potentially risky situations that had previously been thought closed to them. Whether such activities were common for both women and men, or whether the sexual division of labour varied by region or time, is not yet clear, but what Cohn argues convincingly is that the chronology, geography and causes behind the shifts in labour-force gender patterns are far from being understood. Some historians have posited a demographic model of labour participation, with women driven out of the labour force during periods of population growth. When such patterns are shown to have persisted after the cataclysmic contractions of population brought on by the Black Death, others have focused on the consolidation of guilds as the primary determinant for the exclusion of women from the paid labour force. When this explanation seemed inadequate, yet others turned to economic expansion as the key. But when this too failed to explain the ratio of male and female workers in different cities

of the Italian Renaissance or in certain occupations, some turned to a 'Mediterranean' model. According to this explanation, women were kept out of the work place because of notions of honour and shame that had deleterious effects not only for women but for the Italian economy, which lost ground to the burgeoning economies of northern Europe. Cohn's survey of the experience of different parts of Italy, however, suggests that there was no such single model. Not only was there no steady deterioration in the participation of women in the world of work, as the Mediterranean model or the model proposed by Joan Kelly posit, but cycles of participation varied considerably from one place to another, from one set of decades to the next, and even from one stage in women's lives to another. Much more detailed research will need to be done before we understand the reasons for these patterns.

Renaissance notions of what was masculine and what was feminine were to a large extent rooted in Renaissance notions about human biology. Part Three of this volume, 'The Social Body', explores some of these ideas. Katharine Park notes that while many anatomists and natural philosophers adhered to the Aristotelians' conceptions of women as defective males, whose colder and moister humours affected everything from menstruation to intelligence to sexual behaviour, most medical practitioners and their patients held a variety of opinions that were more gender-neutral. The emphasis of medical practice was on evacuating the substances that impacted and corrupted the humours. This could be accomplished through urination, menstruation, bleeding, sweating, and so on, with the process being analogous in men and women. Indeed, so close were these systems that some physicians discussed them with reference to 'menstruating men'. Because physicians did not have a clearly dichotomous view of the bodies of women and men, they tended to interpret female inferiority to behaviour patterns rather than to corporeal imperatives.

If in everyday practice, views of the human body were less gendered than the theoretical literature suggests, gender nonetheless figured prominently in the practice of medicine. Women healers did not exclusively treat women patients, as conventional wisdom would have it, but they tended to rely on different types of healing methods. Women medical practitioners and magical healers relied more heavily than their male counterparts on bodily fluids to compose medicines for their patients. Male healers, perhaps because they had a greater level of education, tended to rely more frequently on the written word to compose remedies and amulets.

Women practitioners also clustered more frequently in the ranks of empirics and magical healers. Much has been made in modern scholarship about Renaissance women being edged out of the medical and other professions that they had practised in the Middle Ages. Park argues that while there is some truth in this, the reason was not that women were excluded from medical practice as such, but that the professionalization of medicine, with its emphasis on university-trained and learned physicians, worked against informal practitioners and magical healers where women figured prominently. The professionalization of medicine and the increasing concern of the Church with establishing the limits of orthodoxy in the sixteenth century undoubtedly had a negative effect, and in the case of sorcerers an even lethal effect on women. Yet the essence of Park's analysis suggests a greater degree of flexibility in Renaissance beliefs, a plurality of medical approaches, an eclectic set of ideas about the effects of sexual difference on the body, and a need for greater subtlety in the interpretation of the evidence.

This call for a more nuanced interpretation is echoed in Michael Rocke's chapter on sexuality. Rocke looks at how gender differences entered into the prescriptive discourse about sexual behaviour and how gender ideology shaped the sexual behaviour of men and women in a range of cross-sex and same-sex activities. As in many of the other chapters in this volume, Rocke finds that social reality departs considerably from prescriptive statements. While sex outside marriage was in theory proscribed to men and women alike, there was greater flexibility and toleration towards it on the part of men than of women. Chastity was the central component of women's honour and its loss had serious social consequences. The difficulty was that women were less prone to reason and hence more vulnerable to sexual temptations. A lot rested on a very weak base. This may be one reason that male adulterers were hardly ever punished, whereas females were prosecuted and punished publicly. Public shaming may have been seen as a preventive measure for women in the audience who may have been contemplating similar transgressions.

Within marriage, both partners were supposed to render the conjugal debt, but here again there were contradictions. On the one hand, women were subject to the authority of their husbands; on the other, they were supposed to be informed about and refuse illicit, that is non-procreative, sexual acts considered sinful by the Church. As Rocke points out, Renaissance moralists tended to disempower women as autonomous sexual subjects and to place

greater responsibility on them to act as guardians not only of their chastity, but of the sexual morality of their husbands as well.[12]

For Rocke, same-sex relations between males are a particularly useful vantage point from which to examine the construction of gendered identities in Renaissance Italy because they so clearly separate notions of gender from the sex of the body. Same-sex erotic activities among males were quite widespread and frequently punished. In Florence alone, between 1432 and 1502 roughly 3,000 males were convicted and more than five times that many were incriminated for such behaviour. Homosexual acts, however, were not related to any sense of homosexual identity, but rather were part of a common life stage that saw young males taking on 'passive', receiving sexual roles *vis-à-vis* older men as part of a wider set of social relations. In these exchanges, the passive partner was seen as feminine, and what made him so was not his appearance, but his receptive role in the sexual act. 'Sodomite', a term that did not have gendered connotations, was reserved for the 'active' partner who penetrated his younger companion. Most youths made the transition from one role to the other around the age of eighteen. Once they became adults, most of these men, even those who engaged in same-sex erotic relations with younger males, also had sexual relations with women. Because diminished capacity was in a sense associated with women and the young, opprobrium was attached, not to passive young males, but to the few older men who did not manage to cross over into accepted roles. Gender identity then was not fixed, but was constructed along age and behaviour patterns. The sex of the body had little to do with it.

Nothing would seem more removed from the body than questions of spirituality. Yet the chapters in Part Four reveal the strong links as well as the affinities in the handling of gender issues. Daniel Bornstein examines the tensions between the religious ideal of celibacy and the social pressures to reproduce in an age haunted by the ravages of the Black Death. In trying to negotiate these tensions, individuals did not remain quietly and passively in their predicted roles. While male theologians, preachers and humanists increasingly wrote about family and the religious life in tracts addressed to women, it is clear that their audience, in the process of assimilating their messages, really modified them and often reversed the roles assigned to them. Catherine of Siena is perhaps the most famous example of this. Bornstein shows how she 'turned

12. See below, pp. 155–6.

her family home into a sacred place' and how she replaced her biological family with a spiritual one. In this new environment, a convicted young nobleman becomes a 'bride' of Christ and her father confessor becomes her son and spiritual spouse.

Role reversal was not confined to women. Bornstein also examines the experience of men, such as the friar Giovanni Dominici, born less than a decade after the Black Death. Although Giovanni was the sole surviving son of a widowed mother and joined the religious life against her wishes, thus dooming the family line to extinction, he did not hesitate to counsel secular women to serve God outside the monastic life, thus fulfilling their obligations simultaneously to God and their families. Neither did he hesitate to offer them advice about childrearing, even though as a celibate friar, he had no experience in the matter. In turn, however, the Florentine housewife to whom he proffered the advice did not hesitate to offer spiritual counsel in return. While his letters were full of the details of the domestic life, hers sounded like the products of the male spiritual adviser of a convent. Neither biology nor family ties seemed to keep men or women in their place.

The kind of gender continuum and role reversal observed by nearly all the contributors to this volume became more difficult to maintain in many areas of social life after the mid-sixteenth century. Gabriella Zarri explores efforts to impose gendered social discipline in religious life in the wake of pressures brought about by the Protestant Reformation and by internal reform currents within the Catholic Church. The new norms focused on the reform of religious orders in general but they had different effects on men and women. The metaphor of spiritual marriage that had shaped the life of nuns and the military metaphor that had influenced the life of monks grew in importance and were now exemplified by new types of religious orders, the Ursulines and the Jesuits. Marriage became the unifying status for women, both inside and outside the convent. With this came a heightened sense that women needed to submit to male authority – the father, the husband, the confessor, or the bishop. After the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century, women's independence was also curbed by stricter rules of enclosure in convents. This affected a growing proportion of women as more of them were sent to convents by their families, which were intent on keeping the family patrimony intact rather than dividing it up into multiple dowries. To be sure, priests and monks were also held to tighter standards than before but the latter could leave the monastery for cause. As soldiers of

Christ, engaged in missionary activity, many men did just that, experiencing the freedom (and the hardship) of spreading the gospel to parts of the world that were far removed from the restraints and the comforts of European society.

Yet even within the confines of the convent, women were producers of culture. In the last chapter of this volume, the art historian Karen-edis Barzman examines how gender affected cultural production. She begins with the question that animated Linda Nochlin's essay, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' She goes on to explore the scholarship on women as artists and patrons of the arts and the gendered institutional limitations on both. She also examines the meaning of images of women for men and women and the problematics of looking at Renaissance art as a timeless aesthetic contribution to culture. More importantly, she broadens the focus from art, as traditionally defined (painting, sculpture, architecture), to 'cultural production', that is the production, use and appropriation of meaning in images and everyday objects. Barzman uses as her example the life of the sixteenth-century Florentine nun, Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, who used the religious images that were the common currency of her time to fashion herself as a work of art. Her self-fashioning gave her an authoritative voice that at times subverted the intent of the images and that made her the kind of Renaissance woman that Lucrezia Marinella and Modesta Pozzo may have had in mind.

To conclude, the chapters that follow challenge us with a more complex view of the interplay between gender and society than was possible to imagine when women's studies began several decades ago. All of the authors suggest that the relationships between men and women in the society of Renaissance Italy do not fit dichotomous categorizations. Because the meaning of gender was culturally produced, it had no fixed boundaries; classifications of gender had to be constantly reinvented and reinforced. To be sure, some clear patterns emerge. In the course of the Renaissance, the state, religious institutions and the professionalization of knowledge all worked to harden gender categories. The emergence of capitalism, on the other hand, had no such obvious results. There were also enormous regional variations whose causes and ramifications need to be explored further. Most important, the men and women of Renaissance Italy found ways to undermine the social restrictions imposed on them by custom and by the emergence of new sets of beliefs. Their ability to do so often required them to marshal all their imaginative capacities and to incur considerable risks. Nothing

better illustrates their achievements and the price paid for them than the ambiguous praise heaped by Lauro Querini on the learned Isotta Nogarola: 'The greatest praise is justly bestowed upon you, Illustrious Isotta, since you have ... overcome your own nature. For you have sought with singular zeal that true virtue, which is essentially male ... as befits the whole and perfect wisdom that men attain.'[13] In short, by overcoming the limitations of her sex, Isotta had constructed herself and was perceived by others as a male intellectual. Her predicament encapsulates the complications of gender in the society of Renaissance Italy.

13. Cited in Margaret L. King, 'Book-lined cells: women and humanism in the early Italian Renaissance', in Patricia Labalme, ed., *Beyond their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (New York, 1980), pp. 76, 89.