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## **Women in The Renaissance: Better Off Than Before**

*"The Renaissance, crowded as it is with figures of the most cultivated women in history, is masculine in temper through and through, just as the prevailing temper of medievalism had been feminine in its strength and its weakness"*

*- Rachel Annand Taylor*

*Aspects of The Italian Renaissance*

Queens of Medieval times were renowned for their ruthlessness in the wake of their husbands' absences as they went away to fight in the many crusades of the time. Due to the men's absence, medieval Queens' rule was stronger than ever. Medieval widows were even known to inherit their husbands' estates upon their husbands' death. However, the Renaissance, women lost the right to property in many places. Convents were closed down all over Europe due to the reformation, and many women then had no alternative to marriage. Trading guilds were facing merchants: their worst competitor yet, which caused them to remove their women members in order to stay in competition. With these reasons in mind, many scholars have argued that women's rights were diminished in the Renaissance. I will not argue that women's rights during the Renaissance resembled anything close to modern day feminism. However, in comparison to the medieval times, upper class women especially did gain more opportunities and rights.

Joan Kelly, a prominent American historian, wrote "Did Women have a Renaissance?" that served to prove that women have struggled throughout history. However, her essay was mainly centered towards debunking the "widely held notion of the equality of Renaissance women with men" (Kelly 20). Kelly is correct that women did not have the same rights as men in the Renaissance, and they still did not for a long time after. However, she revolves her essay

around the point that in many ways women lost rights after the Middle Ages in terms of power and sexuality (22). She also revolves it more around lower class women, and I am focusing solely on upper class women and royalty. Although her work is undoubtedly notable, Theresa Colletti points out that she uses feudalistic and catholic principles as positive things for women and claims that it was detrimental that those things started to disappear or lose their influence during the Renaissance. Although their absence caused some immediate problems for women such as the loss of convents, “courtly love”, and inheritance to land—she omits how these changes eventually led to women gaining more rights, responsibilities, and influence in the Renaissance and later in the modern world (Coletti 255).

The difference between medieval women rulers and Renaissance women rulers comes in the sense of individualism. Medieval rulers such as Eleanor of Aquitaine (Bridenthal 140) and Queen Matilda were certainly iconic in terms of strong women rulers. However, Renaissance rulers had more control over what they wanted their political persona to be. Isabella D’Este, the Marchioness of Mantua, was diabolical in the public’s perception of her. She wanted to be known as a patron of art and for her diplomatic abilities (Meyer 130). Queen Elizabeth I of England is also a great example of a created persona. She created herself to be the Virgin Queen, she never married and therefore never had sex or diminished her “purity”. Not only did that make her powerful by destroying any chance of a man taking away her literal power by becoming king, but she also created an empowering female figure who was untouchable and unattainable to men. She also eliminated the part of her femaleness that was considered most important: her sexuality and her ability to create life. Bridenthal explains in *Becoming Visible*: "while men of the Renaissance were defined by what they accomplished, women

were defined by their sexual status, and their value came from their reputation for chaste behavior, rather than any other accomplishment" (168). Elizabeth no longer could be considered as an ordinary woman whose only purpose was to make the next male heir, but instead she had her own purposes that had nothing to do with her biological capabilities (Professor Anna Wainwright). These female rulers did not make names for themselves just by doing what needed to be done. They consciously chose their public persona and appearance in order to gain more power and recognition, an ideal that was inspired by the Renaissance individualism.

A major difference between medieval times and the Renaissance was the Religious reformation in which the Roman Catholic Church was no longer the strongest religious presence in Europe. Protestants dropped the pope and followed religious leaders such as Martin Luther or John Calvin. King Henry VIII of England overthrew Catholicism in order to become head of the Church of England (Wooding). Due to this, many convents that had provided alternatives to marriage for many women were closed down (Greenspan 142). For most protestants, one was not closer to God if they spent their entire life devoted to worshipping Him; instead, marriage and family life was considered the best way to live life in God's service (Wooding). Although this had a negative impact on women who did not want to get married, it had positive impacts as well. Some more radical protestant sects allowed women as well as men to preach (Wiltenberg 15). Education had to be found outside of the convent and church, and as a result careers such as governesses and teachers arose for women. Additionally, all of the artwork, sculptures, transcriptions, and writing that was done by nuns was signed anonymously by the Catholic Church. Due to the eradication of many convents, talented women were able to step out from under the shadow of anonymity and receive recognition for it.

A great deal of writing and art that was done in Medieval times was done by women. The Bayeux Tapestry, an embroidered cloth almost 70 meters long that depicts the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, was sewn almost exclusively by women, and is considered one of the greatest surviving works of art from Medieval times. It is now on permanent display in Bayeux in Normandy, France. (Power 33). Paintings, sculptures, and the beautiful hand crafted bibles were made by nuns as well as monks. However, none of them were ever signed. In Medieval times, most women stayed in anonymity: "nuns in the early middle ages... were in the mainstream of intellectual life even though denied employment in cathedral schools and universities" (Reese and Wilkinson 81). Christine de Pizan is considered one of the first feminist writers. Books such as *Cite des Dames* and *Livre Des Trois Vertus* were read all throughout Europe, by men and women alike. Pizan proved that women could write things that surpassed what they had been taught, and showed that women had thoughts of their own. Pizan lived in pre-renaissance, before the printing press, her work helped pave the way for women to be taken seriously in the world of literature. Although women were encouraged to paint and sculpt, they were rarely asked to sign any of their work, and any writing that was done remained anonymous in one of the church's many libraries.

However, in the Renaissance, women artists stood up and started to sign their work and received recognition for it, and, due to the printing press, women writers became more popular than they ever had in history. Plus, an important cultural shift in what was fashionable helped promote women. It was considered "trendy" for lack of a better word, to have women writers after the invention of the printing press (Professor Anna Wainwright). Publishers and editors did their best to seek out and publish the work of women, in order to stay popular. This might be

because more women were actually literate in the Renaissance. The Renaissance birthed dozens and dozens of women writers, as compared to the middle ages that has maybe two or three significant women writers.

Due to the printing press, women now had more opportunity than ever to spread their thoughts and ideas. Their literature started to have an impact on people. Stories and ideas no longer were spread orally, as they had in the medieval times, which often caused stories to be misconstrued and twisted the more they were spread. Novels such as *Utopia*, *The Prince*, and *The Courtier* were common books of the Renaissance. *The Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione was considered a guide for upper class men and women on how to act in society (Greenspan 140). Although from a modern perspective one can note the sexism and misogyny that is present in it, this book actually pointed out issues within society while remaining inside society's boundaries (Greenspan 140). For instance, this book promoted women's education and literacy, encouraged women to read, write, draw, paint, and play instruments. Before the Renaissance it was rare for an upper class woman to be literate, let alone speak multiple languages, play numerous instruments, and have a wide knowledge on politics and history. Isabella D'Este, an iconic woman ruler of the Renaissance, could do all those things and more. She actually baffled men at a young age with her brilliance, and later in life showed to be an ingenious diplomat and "established the first known *studiolo* (study) created for a woman" (*World Eras*). Whereas many medieval women relied on circumstances to show their intelligence, for example their husband dying or leaving for war, Isabella D'Este was relied on by her husband due to her brilliance alone.

Art played a major role in shaping upper class women's lives. Artists like Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Donatello were considered artistic geniuses and their art is still highly praised to this day. The Middle Ages was not well known for its art, as the styles tended to be a bit cruder and less realistic. Plus, most painters were just employed by the church and painted biblical images. The Renaissance saw the rise of realism and the return of classicism. It became popular for wealthy and upper class women to become patrons of the arts. Isabella D'Este had portraits done of her by Titian and Leonardo da Vinci, some of the best known painters of all time (Meyer 264). This gave upper class women power in their time, artists needed to cater to their interests to be successful in their field. Upper class women wanted to have the best collections, the best portraits, and the best architecture and furniture. The Renaissance was one of the best times to be an artist; however, due to the field usually revolving around upper class women's collections it gave upper class women great influence over the male artists of their time.

Another major change in the art world was that it was no longer just men that monopolized the field, or at least signed their work. Popular women artists started popping up during the late Renaissance and gaining major traction in the art world. Women such as Lucia Anguissola (1536-1635), an Italian painter known for her mannerist paintings; Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588), a self-taught nun artist and first (known) female artist of the Renaissance in Florence; and Marietta Robusti or Tintoretto (1560-1590), a well known Venetian portraitist. One of the most notable woman artists is Elisabetta Siranni who was a "pivotal figure in promoting the prominence of women artists in Bologna" (Bohn 52). At 14 she started her own workshop where she trained other women artists, including her two sisters (Zirpolo). At 19 her father was

ill with gout, so Elisabetta supported herself and the rest of her family entirely through her art. She differed from other female artists of the time as she did not just limit herself to portraiture or still lifes. Women at the time also were not allowed to go to classes where they taught drawing of nude figures, as it was considered unseemly, but Elisabetta found a loophole by appealing to virtuosity by only doing the nude figure of Christ (NMWA). Unfortunately her artistic career ended at 27 when she died unexpectedly. The entire city mourned her and “she was given a grand funeral in the Dominican Church in Bologna” (Zirpolo). By the time of her death she had already produced 200 (known) paintings, drawings, and etchings (NMWA). The Renaissance was a time that women artists didn’t just exist or finally receive recognition, but they *thrived*.

The fashion of the Renaissance brought out some more painful conformities for women. Fashion was a lot more elaborate than it had been in Medieval times: with the Renaissance came corsets and platform shoes. Catherine de Medici was one of the fashion icons of her time, she seemed to sport a more elaborate hairstyle every time she went out. She also is credited with the invention of the side-saddle, which made it easier for women to ride (Knecht 20). Women with the help of their servants now spent hours every day doing and undoing their corsets, their ornate hairstyles, all while following the custom of a calm and relaxed lady. Wealthy women promoted “lady-like inactivity” (Greenspan 143), which was the cause for the misconception that women became more lazy in the Renaissance. Additionally, many “traditional” men considered make-up and fashion by extension to be a woman’s way of tricking men that they were more attractive than they actually were (Professor Anna Wainwright). In Italian, the word for make-up is “trucco” which also directly translates to “trick”. In this sense, fashion was not simply something that grew to be more confining, but as a way for women to rebel against “tradition” and even

have the power to change perceptions of their appearance. Credit must be given to these women, who wore painful, bone-constricting corsets, towers of hair layered with jewels and stones, high heels, and heavy dresses, and yet went along every day walking, socializing, reading, and playing instruments. Although some Venetian women went a little too overboard with 30 inch *chopine* platform shoe that caused their wearers to have to be carried anywhere they wished to go (Greenspan 138). The emphasis should not be put on how this fashion confined women, but instead how women managed to overcome those physical restrictions and still show the world through leadership, literature, and their art, that women were not just wives or mothers.

Feminism has come a long way since Medieval times. The Renaissance is a great beginning for that journey to equality, with more religious acceptance, scientific discoveries, and the liberation of art that the Renaissance inspired. Female writers were able to gain more popularity for their work due to the invention of the printing press and the trend of wanting women authors that went along with it. Women were able to come out from the anonymity that the convent provided, in order to receive praise and recognition for their work. Plus, some of the most iconic women rulers of all time emerged during the Renaissance: Queen Elizabeth I of England, Queen Isabella I of Spain, Isabella D'Este of Mantua, and Catherine de Medici. Women were writers, sculptors, leaders, *thinkers* and they could be those things while simultaneously still being mothers and wives. They were so much more than just ladies of the house, and in the Renaissance was the time they offered proof.

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