

Women in the renaissance era



Renaissance Humanism: The Feminine Voice

The Renaissance Humanism, albeit a movement headed by males who agreed with the misogynist insights in ancient texts opened the door to the review of the misogynist tradition making it possible for the female humanists like Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele, Laura Cereta, and Olimpia Morata et al to write about the “ woman question,” and thus changing the notion of Humanism from its earlier misogynist approach to re-evaluation of women’s nature by putting household issues at the heart of academic concern and regenerating the relevant classical texts (Cereta, 1997). The triumph of women in Western Europe and the United States originates from a movement about six hundred years ago in the era of Renaissance. This was the time when the “ other voice,” meaning the feminine voice, was first heard against the background of a three-thousand-year history of misogyny rooted in western culture, whether Hebrew, Greek, Roman or Christian. The hatred against women in these traditions suffused the intellectual, medical, legal, religious and social systems that grew during the European Middle Ages. Concurrent with a general reformation of European culture in this early modern or Renaissance days (roughly during 1300 to 1700) issues related to female equality and opening emerged out that still echo and are still unanswered. This paper deals with the misogynistic tradition defeated by early modern Europeans and the new institution that suppressed the “ other voice” called to defy the ruling theories and conjectures about women as lesser to the male in mind and body. The long-established Misogyny in European culture broke down to take to pieces when the modern period began — hard task, no doubt. The progress started as part of a huge cultural

movement involving a serious review of ideas received from the antiquated and medieval past—an attempt initiated by the humanists.

The Renaissance, as the name suggests, was something new, according to some. The contenders hold that it fundamentally pursued medieval models revising them — an idea that gets more confused with the added fact that the Renaissance in Italy was at variance from the Renaissance in other places. The Renaissance started in Italy around 1300. The first and foremost name associated with this movement was Dante Alighieri, the deeply religious author of spiritual parables, a dedicated catholic who used academic philosophy and was often adverse to the political set-up of the Italian church. One can easily sense from his *Divine Comedy* that he basically belonged to the Middle Ages except that, as distinct most lofty intellectuals, he wrote mostly in Italian rather than Latin. After him comes the named of Giovanni Boccaccio in the fourteenth century, who wrote the extremely sensational *Decameron* , written in Italian too. Goeffrey Chaucer in England also wrote the lewd *The Canterbury Tales* , most likely, which like the *Decameron* , was a true account of how medieval people acted. But the classic successor of Dante was Francesco Petrarch who wrote both in Italian and Latin about secular themes, even though he was deeply religious often bothering that his secular writings were a diversion from man’s only right goal, that is, deliverance (Stearns, 1977). Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch put very much in to the unearthing and safeguarding of classical works. Humanist values were powerfully articulate by another Italian scholar, Pico della Mirandola, in his *Oration on the dignity of man*. Hamlet’s well-known speech:

“ What a piece of work is a man? How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god—the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!” is directly influenced Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

The humanist movement was supplemented by the entry of Byzantine scholars to Italy after the collapse of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and also by the founding of the Platonic Academy in Florence. The academy established by the 15th-century Florentine statesman and sponsor of the arts Cosimo de’ Medici, revitalized Platonism and changing the literature, painting, and architecture of the period. The compilation and translation of classical texts among the higher clergy and nobles, the invention of printing with variable types around the mid-15th century gave fuelled humanism to progress more through the distribution of editions of the classics- in Italy though literature and art, in central Europe through theology and education—a primary basis of the Reformation.

One of the most significant scholars in humanism in France was the Dutch cleric Desiderius Erasmus, who also played crucial role to spread the movement into England, firstly at the University. By the middle of the 16th century humanism had won wide acceptance as an educational system. Oxford by classical scholars like William Grocyn (1446-1519) and Thomas Linacre, and at the University of Cambridge by Erasmus and the English prelate John Fisher (1459-1535) to ultimately all through English society thus making the way for the thriving of Elizabethan literature and culture (Witt, 1978).

The Humanists reverence for the academic philosophy of medieval universities effected a literary flare-up consisting of works by both men and women, in Latin and in lingua franca—works detailing the attainments of prominent women, works confuting the main allegations made against women, works contending for the equal education of men and women, works labeling and reclassifying women's appropriate role in the family, at court, and in public and works depicting women's lives and experiences. The proto-feminism of these "other voices" represents an important aspect of the literary effects of the Renaissance. Around 1365, Boccaccio whose *Corbaccio* made the typical attacks against female nature wrote *Concerning Famous Women*, a humanist discourse based on classical texts eulogizing distinguished women from pagan Greek, Roman ancient times, and from the religious and cultural tradition since the olden times making all readers conscious of a sex usually damned or forgot ten. However, in it, Boccaccio's position was typically misogynist. The book only honored those women who maintained the conventional female "qualities" like virginity, quiet, and compliance. Socially active women, for example, sovereigns and fighters, were portrayed as enduring appalling penalties for infringing into male-domain. Even if Boccaccio chose women as his theme, he maintained his male chauvinistic attitude although in the book. Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* contains a second catalogue of famous women, as a reaction to Boccaccio's.

Where Boccaccio's book shows feminine virtue as extraordinary, her book describes it as common. Many women in history were leaders, visionaries and valiant sufferers for a cause or stayed pure in spite of the lecherous

advances from men. The work of Boccaccio enthused a run of such catalogues of famous women of the biblical, classical, Christian, and indigenous past: works by Alvaro de Luna, Jacopo Filippo Foresti, Brantôme, Pierre Le Moyne, Pietro Paolo de Ribera (who recorded 845 names), and many others. Whatever prejudices these catalogues contained, these catalogues illustrated the public the prospect of female superiority. Yet simultaneously, questions surfaced: Could a woman be moral? Could she act strikingly? Could she be as equal as a man? These questions were argued over four centuries, in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and English, by male and female authors, among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, in tedious volumes and gusty booklets, the debate being referred as the *querelle des femmes*, the “*Woman Question*.” The opening torrent of this war took place in the first years of the fifteenth century, in a literary debate generated by Christine de Pizan. Humanism provided the materials for a positive counter concept to the misogyny embedded in scholastic philosophy and law, and inherited from the Greek, Roman, and Christian pasts. A series of humanist treatises on marriage and family, on education and deportment, and on the nature of women helped construct these new perspectives.

There were, of course, views opinions by women that went against women’s emerging new roles, the works by Francesco Barbaro and Leon Battista Alberti, respectively *On Marriage* (1415) and *On the Family* (1434-37), reaffirmed women’s duties to look after children and supervise house hold maintenance while being submissive, virtuous, and quiet. Even then, that served the purpose of pondering over the “question women” by placing household matters at the focus of academia and reviving the relevant

classical texts. In addition, Barbaro stressed the importance of a wife's religious and rational virtues for the happiness of the family, topics that came back in later humanist works on marriage and the education of women by Juan Luis Vives and Erasmus who were fairly sensitive to the condition of women, without taking it too far.

A more constructive stance towards women was seen in the virtually unknown work *In Praise of Women* (ca. 1487), a catalogue of famous women, by the Italian humanist Bartolommeo Goggio where he contended that male and female are essentially the same, and that women are in fact better. Almost similarly, the Italian humanist Mario Equicola stressed the sacred equality of men and women in *On Women*. An outlook more favorable to women characterizes the nearly unknown work *In Praise of Women* (ca. 1487) by the Italian humanist Bartolommeo Goggio. In addition to providing a catalogue of illustrious women, Goggio contended that male and female are essentially the same and that women are in fact better. Similarly, the Italian humanist Mario Equicola stressed the divine equality of men and women in *On Women* (1501). In 1525, Galeazzo Flavio Capra (or Capella) published his work *On the Excellence and Dignity of Women*. This humanist tradition of discourses guarding the value of women ended in the work of Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, *On the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*, an incomparable attempt by a male humanist to concisely or openly present the case for female self-respect.

Works written on the women's question had an extra point in the sense that volumes of them were written by women. A woman writing was in herself a declaration of women's assertion to self-respect. Only a handful of women

wrote anything before the the early modern era, for three reasons—first, they hardly ever had the culture that facilitated them to write, second, they were not let in to have public roles—as officer, civil servant, lawyer or attorney, university professor where they might attain information about matters worth writing about and lastly , the male-dominated culture suppressed the voice of women with the hidden social dictate that considered speaking her mind as a unchaste. Under such condition it was amazing for those who did write before the fourteenth century. Women writes mostly were nuns or spiritual women whose secluded life made their assertion more tolerable. From the fourteenth century on, the number increased rapidly, women went on writing devotional literature, even though not always as secluded nuns. They also wrote journals, often having it in mind as mementos for their children; guides to their children; letters to family members and friends; and family memoirs that could as well be considered as histories of some sorts. A few women wrote works directly related to the “ woman question,” and some of these, were well trained.

While women’s rights were a novel idea, educated women concentrated on another aspect of women, which is witch-hunting. There was a distinctive hostility against witches and a number of booklets and pamphlets on instructions to protect them against witches, who were considered essentially women. The most notorious witch-hunting manual was *The Hammer of Witches* (1486), by two Dominican inquisitors, Heinrich Krämer and Jacob Sprenger. Witches were often accused of exaggerated deeds as well as deceitful and lust-ridden. Hence, women were equated with the devil who held unholy powers. Of course, rational men, protested such opinion but

the most believed in these. For example, the German Ulrich Molitur, the Frenchman Nicolas Rémy, the Italian Stefano Guazzo described sinister orgies with the devil and the celebrated French jurist, historian, and political philosopher Jean Bodin often suspended regular legal routine in order to try women charged with “ exceptional crime”.

Thus, the early Renaissance involved misogynists. Even when they followed new norms in all matters of society and philosophy, these did not include women. It was up to the women themselves to make their new rules. They formed their own literature and culture while the men, even rational otherwise, had distinctive hostility. But the women slowly broke down the barriers gradually as women who were otherwise cocooned within the arena of women began to write and express themselves. Yet, the Renaissance did help women to find their own voice. Even as they have faced new challenges over the years, they have continued to struggle to make their own place up to now.

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