

Women in the Renaissance

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Rinascita (Renaissance) is the historical period that follows the so-called "dark ages" and that brings the rebirth of the greco-roman artistic values. In the Renaissance one observes the transition from a sacred/metaphysical culture to a secular/physical one. For instance, Lux and Tenebrae (light and darkness) change their meaning. While in the Middle Ages Lux was a synonym of the divine revelation of Christ, in the Renaissance it was linked to a scientific progress, to the development of modern thought, to the idea that one can shape his own destiny. While Tenebrae in the Dark ages referred to the ignorance of the nonbelievers, in the Renaissance it was connected to the failure to rediscover classical culture. Keeping in mind the differences between the two periods, one can evaluate the place of women in the Renaissance.

Did they have a Renaissance? What was their role in society?

The woman of the Middle Ages (in the poems of **Dante** for example) was an embodiment of the Madonna -- full of platonic (spiritual) love, endowed with marvelous qualities, virtuous and holy. She was timeless in her intangibility in the sense that she christianized everyone she was in contact with.

The woman in the Renaissance poems of **Gaspara Stampa** (1523-1554), on the contrary, was the Donna -- the embodiment of passion, of eros, and of sensuality. In writing her poems, Stampa identifies with a male point of view, conforms to the conventions of society, and accepts the system as a whole. But while professing female emancipation, she becomes a real martyr torn between two opposite feelings:

But either way it nourishes my heart
And either way brings suffering and joy.
To this end I was fated from my cradle.

Isabella d'Este (1474-1539), on the other hand, turns out to be a strong woman and a clever diplomat. Having received a classical male education, she was relentless about collecting artistic works from the leading artists of the century. Aggressively assertive, she knew her own mind and set clear conditions to the artists: "but you are forbidden to introduce anything of your own invention." Her educational level could be reached by a woman

only if she followed certain educational criteria.

According to **Leonardo Bruni** (1370-1444), a young woman's education should aim at acquiring literary skills and factual knowledge. Literary skills were essential since they included the reading of the most outstanding classical writers, the knowledge of literature and grammar, the selection of good word choice and the use of excellent expression. Factual knowledge was necessary because it was related to logic, mathematics, and the sciences. However, in all these skills rhetoric had no importance for a young woman for she was not granted any significant social functions. For Bruni learning of the "finishing touch" becomes negligible compared to the emphasis on the *studia humanitatis* or the liberal arts.

To conclude, upper-class women in the Renaissance were given ways to express themselves. Their voice, however, was shaped by a male point of view since the education they received was male oriented. Did women have a Renaissance? Yes, compared to the Middle Ages perspective, and not, compared to the modern perspective. Women were allowed to express themselves but not sufficiently. Their role was marginal but still existent.

Laura Cereta
(1469-1499)

*Letter to Augustinus Aemilius,
Curse Against the Ornamentation of Women*

Laura Cereta's life is much like the lives of other Quattrocento women humanists. All came from wealthy, often aristocratic, families who lived in the Renaissance cities of Northern Italy. Learning was valued in all of their homes, often with a tradition of learning in the family extending back several generations. Each girl's father strongly supported her desire for an education, tutoring her himself, choosing her tutor for her, or sending her to a convent for her education. Early in life they were heartily encouraged and strongly supported in their studies: their families, male humanists, and even their cities hailed them as prodigies. But when these women entered their adult years and continued to pursue a dream of having a humanist career, the praise turned to disdain and hostility. The social structure of Renaissance Italy had no place for a learned woman. Upon reaching adulthood, most of the women either entered religious orders to continue their studies or married and gave up their studies.

Laura Cereta was educated in both Latin and Greek. Shortly after her marriage to Brescian businessman Pietro Serina, Cereta flouted convention by beginning a literary correspondence in Latin with local humanists. In the end, she may have succumbed to pressure to give up her intellectual life, but she was widowed after 18 months when her husband became a victim of the plague. She dealt with her profound grief by entering the world of humanism.

Alternately praised and condemned for her humanist intellectual activities, Cereta considered most male flattery as condescension: that being a learned woman was unusual was a slight against womankind. Cereta was by any definition a feminist, most times staunchly defending womankind, and at other times, pleading with women to better their lives by bettering themselves.

Six months after publishing her only volume of letters in 1488, Cereta's father, her strongest emotional support for her work, died. Finding no support for her work and attacked by both men and women from all sides, Cereta never published again. She never remarried, nor did she enter religious orders. She did find a more socially acceptable outlet for her humanist intellect.

Living two generations after the great Quattrocento feminist humanist Isotta Nogarola (1417-1461/8), Laura Cereta's comments on the creation story in Genesis echo her predecessors words. Indeed, King states that Cereta made clear in other works that she was familiar with Nogarola's work. From this tiny comment, we see that a nascent feminist movement was being born. Nogarola's work and knowledge of it was preserved and transmitted from one generation to another. Never again would a generation pass when knowledge of our feminist predecessors died away. Perhaps only a tiny group of women would remember our foremothers, but they were remembered and their works were preserved and transmitted from one generation to another. We do indeed stand on the shoulders of a long list of giants.

In a letter entitled "Curse against the Ornamentation of Women" written to Augustinus Aemilius, Cereta denounces women who are more interested in their physical adornment, cosmetics, and jewels, than in adorning their minds. Like many women writers of Quattrocento Italy, and unlike Nogarola's work, Cereta's work in general and this work in particular, is largely secular. Cereta encourages women both to forsake their lustful cravings for material possessions and to delight in the adornment of their character - their honor, their virtue, and their minds. With that, here is Cereta's brief reference to Nogarola's work:

"Therefore, Augustine, you have had ample opportunity to see that I consider this splendid magnificence foolish, and I wish you would pay no attention to my age or at least my sex. For [woman's] nature is not to be immune to sin; nature produced our mother [Eve], not from earth or rock, but from Adam's humanity. To be human is, however, to incline sometimes to good, but sometimes to pleasure. We are quite an imperfect animal, and our puny strength is not sufficient for mighty battles. [But] you great men, wielding such authority, commanding such success, who justly discern among your number so many present-day Brutuses, so many Curiuses, Fabriciuses, Catos, and Aemiliuses, be careful: do not therefore be taken by the snare of this carefully arranged elegance. For where there is greater wisdom, there lies greater guilt."

February 12 [1487]."

