

Renaissance Women

A Historiography

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The art of the Renaissance has fascinated people for centuries. The great figures that people typically associate with the era are the male artists, such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Raphael. There are very few female figures that come to mind when thinking about the Italian Renaissance, other than the women depicted within the works of the male artists. Despite their lack of representation in public history, women played a large role in the history of the Renaissance and have been increasingly studied by historians for many years. In this paper, I will be examining how the study of women in the Renaissance has significantly changed over the past few centuries, including looking at the few authors who have set a lasting precedent in the field through their works. First, I will provide context on the Italian Renaissance, as most of the historiography on this topic focuses in on the Italian Renaissance at one point or another. Next, I will introduce Jacob Burckhardt and his misogynistic contribution to the field as the earliest author I will be looking at. After this, I will be examining Joan Kelly's feminist contribution to the field, *Did Women Have a Renaissance?*, and her opinion regarding Burckhardt's work. Finally, I will be looking at modern perspectives on Joan Kelly's work using Theresa Coletti as a measure to the current state of the study of women in the Renaissance.

Today, the Renaissance holds an almost mythological place within the minds of people. Originally coined by Giorgio Vasari, an Italian art historian, the term "the Renaissance" was made to describe the phenomenon of the rebirth of artistry that he was witnessing happen during his time. It was not until the nineteenth century that the meaning of the term "Renaissance" expanded to define an all-encompassing period of great change in culture and politics.¹ Rather than just relating to the art of great painters and artists, such as Michaelangelo, the Renaissance encompassed greater movements,

1 E. R. Chamberlin, *The World of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 2-3.

such as nationalization and humanism. E. R. Chamberlin, focusing on the Italian Renaissance, argues that the Renaissance was “an Italian phenomenon,” which began in approximately 1300 CE and lasted until approximately the mid-sixteenth century.² In spite of this, due to how broad the label of the Renaissance is, many historians have different opinions on the range of time that is included within the Renaissance. Some historians date the Renaissance starting as early as the eleventh century, and lasting to as late as the late sixteenth century and occasionally even beyond that period.³

For many years, Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was a vital reading for those studying the Renaissance. Burckhardt was a professor of History at Basel University, located in Basel, Switzerland.⁴ His book was published in 1860 and it became known for not using historical documentation as sources, but rather Jacob’s own intuition about the era as a source. This process had the historian attempting to put himself into the mindset and spirit of those of the historical era, using imagination to illuminate the work. Using this process, Burckhardt wrote his book from a top-down perspective, looking at the lives of the elite and their cultural history. This perspective contributed to the magical and mythological perspective of the Renaissance, further allowing later authors to aggrandize the various aspects of the era such as the people and the aesthetics.⁵ Overall, Burckhardt’s work was very formative to the historical study of the Renaissance.

Within his book, Burckhardt briefly discusses the lives of women and the power that they hold within society. He argues that “women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men.”⁶ This statement clearly states Burckhardt’s belief that women were equal in all ways to men in the Renaissance. He supports his belief by explaining that “the education given to women in the upper classes was essentially the same as that given to men.”⁷ For Burckhardt, the education of women, and even more importantly their literacy, was the main factor in determining their equality. The majority of the support Burckhardt provides to support his belief of equality between men and women relates to the writing talent that women have. For example, in regard to poetry authored by women he states, “even the love-sonnets and religious poems are so precise and definite in their character [...] we should not hesitate to attribute them to male authors, if we had not clear external evidence to prove the contrary.”⁸ Within this quote, Burckhardt argues that women’s writing was up to the standard of the men’s writing. Burckhardt also examines the writings of Caterina Sforza declaring her heroism for defending Forli and keeping the providence within her rule for a long time.⁹ To Burckhardt, women gain power from their writing skills that allow them to

2 Chamberlin, 294-295.

3 Chamberlin, 299.

4 Chamberlin, 3.

5 Chamberlin, 3-4.

6 Jacob Burckhardt, “Equality of Men and Women,” in *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, translated by S. G. C. Middlemore (Kitchener: Batoche Books Books, 2001), 317.

7 Burckhardt, 318.

8 Burckhardt, 318.

9 Burckhardt, 320.

hold their own with men.

While Burckhardt was arguing that men and women were equal, it is clear that his definition of equality is not the same as today. This is exemplified by his words, “there was no question of ‘women’s rights’ or female emancipation, simply because the thing itself was a matter of course,” and, “these women had no thought of the public; their function was to influence distinguished men, and to moderate male impulse and caprice,” both in the same paragraph.¹⁰ He goes from arguing that women had rights and were emancipated to stating that women didn’t even want to participate in the public sphere, rather they wanted to support their husbands from the background. Burckhardt’s bias as a white man living in the mid-nineteenth century is very clearly defined within these quotations. Through Burckhardt’s writing it can be presumed that men of his time idealized the separation of women from the public sphere. For him, it was even a marvel that women wrote as well as men. Within his writing, Burckhardt shows that he believes that women are naturally less than men, despite arguing otherwise.

Writing almost a century after Burckhardt, Joan Kelly ushered in a new way of thinking in how to study the women of the Renaissance. Joan Kelly was a history professor at City College of New York. Writing in the 1970s, Kelly’s views were influenced by the women’s movement and the ideas of feminism and feminist expression. Her 1977 essay, *Did Women Have a Renaissance?*, was made to discuss the Renaissance from the vantage point of women, a topic that had been barely touched upon before, as Burckhardt’s “traditional view of the equality of Renaissance women with men” dominated the history of women in the Renaissance.¹¹ Kelly argues against Burckhardt claiming that women were not equal to men in the Renaissance, rather women lost power that they had previously held during the Medieval era. Gauging the loss of power that women went through, Kelly uses four criteria, “the regulation of female sexuality,” “women’s economic and political roles,” “cultural roles of women in shaping the outlook of their society,” and “ideology about women.”¹² In evaluating these four topics, Kelly examines the role of courtly love in the medieval era, the shifting role of the Renaissance lady within societal power structures, and the ideal of chastity in the Renaissance.

Courtly love is a medieval literary romance genre in which noblewomen and a knight would pursue a relationship, usually extramarital on the behalf of the noblewomen. As explained by Kelly, “medieval courtly love, closely bound to the dominant values of feudalism and the church, allowed in a special way for the expression of sexual love by women.”¹³ The power structure of feudalism influenced the genre with its philosophies of gift giving and vassalage. Those higher in power would give gifts to others in exchange for their vassalage, or servitude. Within the medieval courtly love

10 Burckhardt, 319.

11 Joan Kelly, “Did Woman Have a Renaissance?,” in *Woman, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19, 47.

12 Kelly, 20.

13 Kelly, 22.

knight courtiers owe services to women as vassals owe services to their feudal lords. Women would give the gift of her love to the knight while he promised her homage, by serving her and fulfilling her wants and needs. In this way, “homage signified male service, not domination or subordination of the lady.”¹⁴ The homage of the knights in this genre acknowledged the sexual and affectionate needs of women¹⁵ in a way that was acknowledged little within the medieval Christian context. Within medieval courtly love women were depicted as real humans with the power to satisfy their own wants and needs, rather than simply being depicted into a stereotypical role as either a saint or a seductress.

The representation of women in the medieval courtly love genre provides a direct contrast to Burckhardt’s depiction of women whose “function was to influence distinguished men.”¹⁶ Kelly’s depiction of medieval noblewomen instead describes women as distinguished noblewomen being served by the knight who was in turn influencing her to acknowledge her own needs. In contrast, Kelly’s depiction of the Renaissance lady aligns more closely with Burckhardt’s depiction of women, though Kelly does not have the same misogynistic undertone in her writing as Burckhardt. Using the writings of Castiglione and other Italian Renaissance writers, Kelly shows the shift in the depiction of women within literature. She explains the great importance of Castiglione’s work on love and manners within the Renaissance, and how his work broke away from the medieval courtly love tradition. She focuses on two of his love theories, the connection between love and marriage and the “Neo-Platonic notion of spiritual love.”¹⁷ Castiglione believed that there should be love within marriage, that love must lead to marriage and stay within its bonds.¹⁸ While he argued for fidelity in both men and women, he wrote much less strictly about the chastity of men than the chastity of women.¹⁹ Castiglione did not acknowledge the sexual and affectionate needs of women as had been done in medieval courtly love romances and instead played a role in normalizing the double standard between men and women²⁰. Even within the Renaissance courtly love genre, intercourse was avoided for the fear of conception was so high at the time, directly contrasting the medieval “lack of concern about legitimacy.”²¹ For love outside of marriage, rather than the extramarital affairs of courtly love, Castiglione endorsed spiritual love. Within spiritual love, a lover’s goal is to ascend in awareness to understand himself, gain universal intellect, and eventually have his soul find “supreme happiness in divine love.”²² Though, even this journey is largely kept to men as is supposedly the beauty of women that inspires men to as-

14 Kelly, 23.

15 Kelly, 27.

16 Burckardt, “Equality of Men and Women,” 319.

17 Kelly, “Did Woman Have a Renaissance?,” 40.

18 Kelly, 39.

19 Kelly, 41.

20 Kelly, 40.

21 Kelly, 28, 42.

22 Kelly, 40.

cent.²³ It is here where we see that the Renaissance ideal for women is as influencers of men simply through their existence and external beauty.

Kelly also briefly covers the life of Caterina Sforza and how she fits into the role of a Renaissance lady. While Burckhardt argues that Caterina Sforza is heroic and a good woman for how she was almost as good as a man would be at her job, Kelly takes her story to look at how the importance of legitimacy played a role in the power Sforza held. According to Kelly, Caterina Sforza was able to inherit and rule her principality in Naples due to the importance of legitimacy and feudal tradition, rather than her talent or influence.²⁴ After a series of many deaths and assassinations within her family, despite being illegitimate, Sforza was able to take power of Forli as a regent for her son. At this point her capability and talent in politics was clear as she “ruled because she mustered superior force and exercised it personally, and to the end she had to exert repeatedly the skill, forcefulness, and ruthless ambition that brought her to power.”²⁵ In spite of her power, after a heroic defense Sforza was divested of power after her uncle, the Duke of Milan, refused to support her.²⁶ As an illegitimate daughter, Caterina Sforza never even came close to ruling the Duchy of Milan, despite being the daughter of an heir to the Duchy. While the rule was usurped from her half-brother by her uncle, Caterina Sforza was instead married off to the nephew of the pope. It was only by chance and numerous deaths that she was able to gain the political power that she did hold, despite her talent.

While Kelly agrees with Burckhardt on some topics of the lives of women in the Renaissance, they completely disagree with the way women held power. Burckhardt argued that women gained power in the Renaissance due to how similar their education was to men. This allowed for women to have a writing style that was almost as good as men’s writing showing that women held power and influence in the Renaissance. While Kelly agrees that men and women had very similar educations, she argues that education was no longer the primary occupation for women. Instead, women had to be charming. A lady had to be pleasing to men. Kelly argues that the role of a lady was aestheticized, pushing her away from doing unbecoming activities such as handling weapons and riding horses.²⁷ This can be seen in how women’s beauty was used as an instrument for men in understanding the Neoplatonic universal intelligence and divine love. Within Kelly’s view of the Renaissance, women were no longer treated as a person, rather women were treated as tools for men in a highly patriarchal society.²⁸

Like Burckhardt, Kelly’s writing has provided a long-lasting impact on the study of women in the Renaissance inspiring decades of scholarship on the topic, including Theresa Coletti’s “*Did Women Have a Renaissance?*” *A Medievalist Reads*

23 Kelly, 40-41.

24 Kelly, 31.

25 Kelly, 32.

26 Kelly, 32.

27 Kelly, 33.

28 Kelly, 39.

Joan Kelly and Aemilia Lanyer. Coletti was a Medievalist English professor at the University of Maryland who recently retired in 2021. Her essay was published in the journal *Early Modern Women* in a 2013 forum addressing the work of Joan Kelly. The essay examines how Kelly's work might be different if she had published in 2013 and how the topic has been nuanced over the years.²⁹ One of the largest changes that Coletti proposes would be in the periodization of Kelly's essay. Coletti points out that Kelly is using the Burckhardtian formulation in which the Italian Renaissance was brought about by political, social, and economic developments between 1350 and 1530 C.E., allowing for a sharp division between the medieval era and the Renaissance.³⁰ With additional research and study, this division in Kelly's essay provided an outline for the new temporal divide of the "transition from medieval feudal society to the early modern state."³¹ This does not mean though that Kelly's essay provided a new definite periodization, but rather she provided a new way of thinking about periodization as the boundaries within the temporal categories are extremely fraught.³² Coletti even goes so far as to suggest that Kelly might not even use the terminology the "Renaissance" as the word carries "cultural and ideological freight."³³ In her essay, Colletti tends to opt to use the term early modern to describe the period that Kelly is claiming as the Renaissance, showing her reluctance to use the term "Renaissance."

In looking at how the changes of periodization would change Kelly's essay, Colletti focuses on women's literary culture. Looking at the early modern period, Colletti claims that there was an "increased volume of women's writing [...] and greater numbers of known, named women authors,"³⁴ something that is not touched upon by Kelly. This increase in women's writing aligns with the Burckhardt praises of women writers, as more works from this period would have been available for him to read due to the invention of print in the early modern period and "persistence of manuscript culture."³⁵ Colletti also comments on the religious literature Kelly did not include within her essay due to the scope of her analysis focusing on secular elites. To Colletti this is a major resource of texts by women that were overlooked.³⁶ Colletti finds great importance and respect for Kelly's work, but she believes it is important to note the changes within the field of history and how they impact Kelly's essay.

In examining women in the Renaissance, all three authors provided analysis of the lives and power of women that aligned with the time that they wrote. Burckhardt, writing in the 1860s, provided an account that depicted women as happily subservient to their husbands, by choice. The power that women held was as much as they could influence their husbands, but they were still equal due to their equal edu-

29 Theresa Coletti, "'Did Women Have a Renaissance?'" A Medievalist Reads Joan Kelly and Aemilia Lanyer" *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 8 (2013): 249.

30 Coletti, 250.

31 Coletti, 250.

32 Coletti, 251.

33 Coletti, 251.

34 Coletti, 252.

35 Coletti, 252.

36 Coletti, 253.

cation. To Burckhardt, the best aspect of women in the Renaissance was their writing, as it was almost indistinguishable from the writing of men. This misogynistic representation of women in the Renaissance was depicted within the social lens of the 1860s where women were seen as less than men. This view is clearly shown within Burckhardt's writing. Kelly wrote a century later than Burckhardt, during the 1970s women's movement. Due to this, Kelly introduced a feminist flair to her essay. Rather than following Burckhardt in defining women by their relationship to how close they were to men, Kelly instead came up with a system to define and gauge women's power within society. Also, unlike Burckhardt, Kelly argued that women had lost power in the Renaissance with the shift from socially acceptable marital affairs in the medieval period to the strict legitimacy and fidelity focused social setting in the Renaissance. Writing in 2013, Colletti provided a much more nuanced assessment of Kelly's essay. While she largely agrees with Kelly's argument, she believes that her essay could be more nuanced, particularly when compared to more modern scholarship. Rather than looking at the status of women, Colletti is examining the periodization within Kelly's essay and comparing it to more modern theory. To Colletti the change in periodization could further strengthen Kelly's essay, as it would help define the changes in women's literature. Overall, all three authors provide distinct and constrictive arguments that help the author examine both the time period they are writing about, and the time period they are writing in.

Within all three of the works examined in this essay, there is a common theme of literature. Burckhardt's focus on women's education and his approval of the writing of women provides the basis of his argument of women's equality to men. Kelly focuses on the changes in the courtly love literary genre as a way of measuring women's sexual freedom. Colletti's argument is formed around the importance of women's literary culture in providing periodization between the medieval era and the early modern period. Literature seems to be an integral piece within the current study of women in the Renaissance.

As literature is a common theme within the study of women in the Renaissance, I propose that the future of the field may look further into adding material culture and archaeology within their studies. While literature is quite important, if not necessary, to studying early modern and pre-modern contexts, having material culture could add another layer to examine the changes in power of early modern women. Is the expense or style of jewelry that noblewomen wore in any way related to their status and power? Is where women's rooms are positioned within their residence related to the power within their family, or outside of their family? I believe that looking into the changes in medieval and early modern material culture could provide new arguments for how women's power changed going into the Renaissance and early modern era.

In conclusion, the study of women in the Renaissance has greatly changed over the past few centuries. Starting with Jacob Burckhardt in the 1860s, the "field" was limited to a misogynistic subsection of a chapter in a book. Over a century later, Joan Kelly attempted to write a history of women in the Renaissance where the women and their experience were the focus of the essay. Forty years after Kelly, Theresa

Colletti questions the use of the title Renaissance itself, instead opting for the use of the early modern era. The field has rapidly grown and changed from its origins 150 years ago and I hope it will continue to grow and explore the lives of women who were overlooked for so long.