

I. WOMEN AND THE IDEA OF A RENAISSANCE

Did women have a Renaissance?

Humanism, the intellectual movement that gave the name “Renaissance,” that is, rebirth, to the era succeeding the Middle Ages, revived the study of Greek and Latin literature and philosophy, seeking to dignify and ennoble the human being through enlightened and free thinking. Using the newly recovered classical texts as guides, the Renaissance man was to create new esthetic norms and to contribute new ideas to the restructuring of society so that humankind could live happily in it. And what was woman’s part in this creative undertaking? Unfortunately, women were thought inferior and not capable of rational thought; so they were generally prevented from experiencing this rebirth of letters and the sense of freedom and dignity it was supposed to inspire. Did women have a Renaissance then? This is the question the feminist historian Joan Kelly-Gadol asked in 1977 in the title of an essay that was to spark off many studies of women in the early modern period. Nothing less was undertaken in this essay than a challenge to the traditional division of major cultural and intellectual movements in western civilization. Kelly-Gadol set out to prove that rather than experience a flourishing in their intellectual lives, women suffered a diminution of freedom and options in the passage from a feudal to an early modern state. In her view, courtly love theories of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance reflect this change. In the medieval courtly code, expressed in Capellanus’ *The Art of Courtly Love* (late 12th c.),

mutuality and freedom are the characteristics of the love relationship, which is severed from marriage. In Renaissance courtly theory, voiced by Castiglione in *The Book of the Courtier* (1525), love is linked to marriage and the man is placed higher than the woman, who is now required to possess chastity and modesty.

Pioneer historians, like Ruth Kelso and Alice Clark, had already produced evidence showing that the great changes that swept Europe between roughly 1450 and 1700 were not experienced equally or in the same way by the two sexes. But the question of a dark Renaissance for women was for the first time directly and forcefully put on the historical agenda with the publication of Kelly-Gadol's essay. In the late 1970s, in the aftermath of the feminist movement and at the dawn of new developments in critical theory, the time was ripe for a re-consideration and a re-writing of the Renaissance from the perspective of a recognized difference in the relative power and hence in the experience of the two sexes historically.

Reading the evidence

Since the publication of Joan Kelly-Gadol's essay a great deal more has been discovered about women's experience in the early modern period. The evidence that has turned up through painstaking research over the past twenty years permits us to be more optimistic than Kelly-Gadol allowed and to speak at least of a partial Renaissance for women. The writings by women that have been brought to light as well as information about their lives indicate that many women participated actively in cultural change, but the disclosed evidence cannot be read simplistically. In a sense, we have to read history differently if we are to recover women's past, and we have to interpret their products and their actions differently too if we are to see how women functioned as subjects in the male-centered world they lived in. This different reading of history entails, among other things: locating the contradictions of ideology and the paradoxical effects of change; identifying the spaces that opened up for

socially subordinate groups and the strategies women used to appear acceptably in public; recognizing the different modes of power women held and wielded. Finally, different reading of history means recognizing the textuality of historical texts, that is, the fact that they cannot be exempt from the contradictions of any other texts and hence they cannot be read straightforwardly but always with an eye on what they reveal about competing ideologies and practices.

We will examine below a number of key fields and discourses in order to determine how Renaissance women fared within them. Our attention will be drawn to the spaces that ideological contradictions left open for women to appropriate as well as to the rift between theory and practice perceivable in the various primary sources of information.