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The "Powerful"

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The "Powerful"

Abstract

History is written by the powerful. It is true that since the 1960s and the beginnings of the democratization of history, less powerful minorities have taken up the pen and more profusely expressed their views of history, but to a great extent, white males have engrained their view of history into people's minds. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps because of its appealing nature, or perhaps for both reasons, the Renaissance stands out in people's minds as a definitive period in history—a period during which, arguably, intellectual and cultural progress swept across Europe.

The driving force behind much of the intellectual and cultural changes was the humanist movement; focusing on a devotion to and re-analysis of the classics, humanism arose between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Through their devotion to the *studia humanitatis* (the study of rhetoric, grammar, history, poetry, and ethics), humanists strove to improve the human condition. These developments, most frequently identified in the cultural, intellectual, and social realms, altered many people's lives for the better. These same developments, however, were also gender-biased.

Keywords

history, gender-bias, Renaissance

The “Powerful”

Molly Kay Gale

History is written by the powerful. It is true that since the 1960s and the beginnings of the democratization of history, less powerful minorities have taken up the pen and more profusely expressed their views of history, but to a great extent, white males have engrained their view of history into people’s minds. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps because of its appealing nature, or perhaps for both reasons, the Renaissance stands out in people’s minds as a definitive period in history—a period during which, arguably, intellectual and cultural progress swept across Europe.

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Upper-class men may have experienced intellectual and cultural growth, but several barriers kept upper-class women from following in their footsteps. At the forefront of these barriers, and one which overshadowed and encompassed all others, was the structural barrier in which women were confined. Women had to function within a social and mental structure that was created by men and which viewed women as subordinate to them. Within this structure, women were constricted and given no alleviation of the numerous emotional, as well as social, stresses that they endured. While males could claim to have experienced a Renaissance—a time of classic revival, of intellectual and social freedom—elite women

could not. Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, women were continually burdened by both emotional and social stresses as they attempted to maneuver under a male power structure that limited their development.

One source of emotional stress that persistently belabored women was the high reproduction rates that the urban elite experienced. David Herlihy explains in his “Social Mobility in Florence,” that “the rich households, in other words, were prolific in the number of children they were supporting.”¹ High reproduction rates were viewed by many families as desirable because they ensured their survival of at least a couple of the children into adulthood. These children, in turn, could take care of their parents in their old age. Thus, women bore a large number of children in their lifetimes because they felt the need to preserve their families: “High fertility was in the interest of the propertied family, whose ability to prevail ‘against the powerful forces of death’ required at least one surviving male heir.”²

These high rates of reproduction also meant that women were repeatedly pregnant throughout their childbearing years, and they were thus under constant emotional stress. Margaret King explains in her *Women of the Renaissance* that “most Renaissance women became mothers. Motherhood would define their lives and occupy most of their years. From their mid-twenties in most social groups, from adolescence in elite circles, they experienced a cycle of childbirth and nursing and childbirth again.”³ And elite women bore the most children of all social groups: “Since rich women did not nurse their own children . . . they conceived again soon after each birth.”⁴ How many children did elite women have? While this number was obviously dependent upon each woman’s condition, “in the sixteenth

¹ David Herlihy, “Social Mobility in Florence,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 96.

² Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

century, a wealthy Frenchwoman might rear six or seven children.”⁵ On the other hand, “from the fourteenth through the seventeenth century, the women of the noble Venetian Donato family may have achieved in each generation the average maximum biological fertility for the human female: twelve births.”⁶ With each of these births, women bore an incalculable amount of pain and stress, both physically, but even more so, emotionally.

The emotional stress that a woman endured extended far past her pregnancy and into childbirth and infancy, if the child—as well as the mother—survived the delivery. King explains that “nothing could save women from the torment of childbirth, a torment so great that it was acknowledged even by men.”⁷ The pain of childbirth, however, was only one aspect of the travail through which women went; they also had to face the possibility of their own death, or the death of their child. King explains that “for many women, ‘unkindly’ labor meant death: perhaps as many as 10 percent of mothers died as a consequence of childbirth; even the more conservative estimate of 2.5 percent for England in the late Renaissance is five or six times higher than the rate recorded in the nineteenth century.”⁸

Even greater than fearing her own death, a woman feared the death of her child. King writes that “the mothers who survived often lived to face the death of the baby they had borne at such risk. Child mortality was a fact made relentless by epidemic disease, chronic malnutrition, and unrelieved filth.”⁹ While infant deaths were greatest among the poor, upper-class Europeans faced extremely high infant mortality rates: “in French Argenteuil, approximately 19 percent of infants born to wealthy families, died, compared to 23 percent for the middle class and 26 percent for the poor.”¹⁰ An examination of the merchant class is also helpful because this class constituted a large portion of the population and conveys some

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

of the shared feelings with the upper class since the infant mortality figures are very similar for both classes.

In 1420, a merchant by the name of Gregorio Dati recorded his comments in relation to his family and his accounts. Dati explains that his second wife, Genevra, gave birth in March of 1405, in June of 1406, in June of 1407, in July of 1411, in October of 1412, in May of 1415, and in April of 1416. Their first son, Manetto, survived infancy only to die in 1418, before the age of twenty, while their first daughter did not survive but a few days: “It died at dawn on Sunday morning, 22 March, and was buried before the sermon.”¹¹ Their third child, Lisabetta, survived infancy but died after an illness in 1414: “She was seven years and seven months, and I was sorely grieved at her death.”¹² Another daughter, Antonia, survived infancy again only to die in 1420 of the plague at the age of 13. Their next child, a son named Niccolo, died of dysentery after approximately three months: “God was pleased to call the child very shortly to himself.”¹³ Their next son, Girolamo, appears to have survived to adulthood, and their next child, Ghita, appears to have survived as well, “after a painful and almost fatal labor.”¹⁴ Their next child, Lisa, died shortly after childbirth. Dati writes that “altogether Ginevra and I had eleven children: four boys and seven girls.” One cannot help but empathize with Ginevra’s suffering, though. After bearing eleven children, enduring painful, near-fatal labors, and watching at least six of her children die, Ginevra “died in childbirth after lengthy suffering, which she bore with remarkable strength and patience.”¹⁵

One must ask herself whether a woman such as Ginevra could possibly have experienced a Renaissance. One could argue that a Renaissance is based on economic or

¹¹ Gregorio Dati, “A Merchant Comments on Family Matters, 1420,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 113.

¹² *Ibid.*, 114.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

political freedom, or she could even argue that it is based on access to education, but underlying all of these tenets is one from which women were excluded: freedom of mind. How can anyone be excluded from freedom of mind? The social structure under which elite Renaissance women lived constrained them in numerous ways. Throughout their childbearing years, which made up the vast majority of their lives, women underwent emotional strain that gnawed away at their minds, as well as their bodies; in the Renaissance world, women could not free their minds of this oppression. Moreover, women could not even attach themselves to sturdy figures on which to lean. Their precarious family situation rendered them unable to unburden themselves, and that weight which they carried never subsided.

In the Renaissance world, women could not even fasten themselves too greatly to their own children, because they had to face the fact that the child whom they had carried for nine months might be taken away at any moment: “The apprehension of child death hovers over birth. The newborn child could have been viewed by some Renaissance mothers as an ephemeron in whom only a tentative affection could be invested.”¹⁶ The emotional burden that women carried could not even be relieved among the comforts of one’s own home life. Merry E. Wiesner explains in her *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* that “the deaths of illnesses of their children often led women into depression or even suicidal despair, and those who showed no attachment to their children were viewed as mentally disturbed.”¹⁷ Thus, women were stuck in a three-sided pit. On the one side, they had to endure the pains of childbirth and struggle for their own, as well as their child’s, survival. If they succeeded, they faced a second side; women could attach themselves to their infants, only to undergo severe depression upon the deaths of these children, either during infancy or in their early

¹⁶ Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7.

¹⁷ Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 73.

childhoods. On a third side, a woman could deliberately detach herself from her newborn infant, only to be viewed as “mentally disturbed” and heartless. So instead, women were left grappling in this pit, hopelessly at the whim of the structure in which they lived.

What about those women who survived childbirth and whose children survived childbirth? Could they then become attached to that child and relieve themselves of some of their emotional encumbrance? One reason why women could not become attached to their surviving child—at least for the first several months—was because elite women did not nurse. The reasons for this are many and varied, but husbands more times than not made this decision. Lactation has a contraceptive effect, so if an elite woman was nursing, she would not have been able to conceive another child until she had completed breast feeding her baby. Furthermore, “sexual intercourse was both forbidden and feared during lactation because it was universally thought that the milk would become corrupted by intercourse or a new conception and kill the child.”¹⁸ For this reason, husbands secured wet nurses for their newborn children to avoid this “hassle.”

Husbands were responsible for locating a wet nurse, who was almost always of the lower class. Perhaps not surprisingly, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber explains in her *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* that “an examination of all the nurses studied revealed that Florentines were more apt to keep their boys at home than their girls: for the whole of the period scrutinized (1300-1530), 23 percent of boys were entrusted for a relatively long period to a nurse who lived in the house, as opposed to only 12 percent of the girls. Conversely, 68.5 percent of girls and 55 percent of boys were sent to the country.”¹⁹ Klapisch-Zuber bluntly explains that “the parents’ preferences, without being systematic, are beyond doubt: it was easier for them, generally speaking, to separate themselves from a

¹⁸ Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 14.

¹⁹ Christine Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 138.

female baby than from a little boy and future heir.”²⁰ The effects of this transfer of infants to the countryside to nurses were varied. For one, women could not form immediate attachments to their newborn children, and vice versa: “The custom of exporting the babies of the upper classes to foster mothers for several years resulted in a toll of death and sadness over several centuries.”²¹

If women had little choice and heightened emotional stress in relation to their role as mothers, did they have greater freedom in their roles as wives? Even the choice of a woman’s marriage partner was dictated by a woman’s parents, and usually more specifically, her father. Federica Ambrosini explains in her “Toward a Social History of Women in Venice: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment” in John Martin and Dennis Romano’s *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797* that “apart from the impossibility of verifying to what extent such freedom could actually be exercised, a girl destined to marriage had little or no say in the choice of her husband. On the contrary, she was generally completely dependent on the approval of her parents or their executors.”²² Ambrosini further explains that “in this class arranged marriages were more or less the rule, as such unions were not meant to satisfy the sentimental needs of individuals but, rather, to fulfill a duty toward the family.”²³

Some scholars would still argue that despite the fact that women had little or no choice in their marriage partner, they still wielded significant power in the marriage in relation to their dowry. Stanley Chojnacki explains in his *Patrician Women in Venice* that “a girl’s dowry had to be not only ‘congruent’ with her family status, but in fact should

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

²¹ Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 17.

²² Federica Ambrosini, “Toward a Social History of Women in Venice: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,” in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797*, edited by John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 431.

²³ *Ibid.*, 431-432.

represent an amount roughly equal to a full share of the patrimony.”²⁴ Additionally, during the Renaissance, women’s dowries grew substantially, and this in turn gave women greater power within the family, earning them more respect from their husbands: “It was the capacity to dispose of their wealth as they liked—on the basis of calculation but also of inclination as much as the wealthy itself, that gave married women their potent new presence in patrician society.”²⁵ While women’s dowries undoubtedly increased in size during the Renaissance and while women may have experienced some type of “potent new presence,” however small that change may have been, this fact did not free them from the constrictive structure under which they functioned, and it did not constitute them experiencing a Renaissance.

Women did indeed have legal rights to their dowries. A woman’s husband was bound, upon his death, to ensure its return to his wife should she ask for it, and the assurance of its return, in fact, became the foremost duty of the husband’s surviving relatives. The dowry, while providing women with some power within the family, perhaps caused them more stress than it relieved. To begin, women were still dependent on males for the dowries themselves and the structure in which they could wield their “power.” A woman’s dowry, for instance, was managed by her husband, and he was free to invest it as he pleased.²⁶ Sally McKee explains in her “Women Under Venetian Colonial Rule in the Early Renaissance: Observations on Their Economic Activities” that “a widow’s right to control her own property had at least a legal basis. In most Italian cities, a widow took back into her control her dowry and exercised free use of it, although the degree of that freedom varied from city to

²⁴ Stanley Chojnacki, “Patrician Women in Early Renaissance Venice,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 21 (1974): 186.

²⁵ Stanley Chojnacki, “Wives and Husbands in Late Medieval Venice,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 330.

²⁶ Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 49.

city.”²⁷ Chojnacki further explains that “because the dowry was regarded as a means of helping the husband bear the economic burdens of marriage, his wife could not invest or otherwise use it without his consent.”²⁸ Thus, elite women exercised their dowry rights within an established framework of male power.

A woman’s decision to claim her dowry from her deceased husband’s family, however, was not a clear-cut decision. It was, in fact, perhaps one of the most difficult decisions that she would encounter in her lifetime because inherent in that decision, was her decision of whether or not to remarry. For some widows, the decision was simple; if a woman was past her childbearing years, then she would not be able to remarry because men seeking wives were looking for women who could bear them children. In this case, she would live out her days under her husband’s family’s roof, close to her children. If she was still in her childbearing years, however, the decision was more complicated. A woman could choose to live independently near her children, but this decision was extremely rare because of the stress she felt from her own, as well as her husband’s, family.

Husbands did not want their wives, upon their own deaths, to ask for the return of their dowries because that drew wealthy away from their own families and that of their children. Ambrosini explains that “it was mainly husbands who belonged to the upper classes who urged their wives, or rather insistently begged them, not to ask for the restitution of their dowries and to keep living in widowhood together with their offspring.”²⁹ A woman’s alternative choice was to ask for her dowry back, remarry, and leave her children with her husband’s family. Her own family would have pushed for this decision because the

²⁷ Sally McKee, “Women Under Venetian Colonial Rule in the Early Renaissance: Observations on Their Economic Activities,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1998): 52.

²⁸ Stanley Chojnacki, “Patrician Women in Early Renaissance Venice,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 21 (1974): 190-191.

²⁹ Federica Ambrosini, “Toward a Social History of Women in Venice: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,” in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797*, edited by John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 434.

dowry would be returned to the woman and her family could arrange another, usually economically beneficial, match with a new family.

What would a woman choose to do? Klapisch-Zuber explains in her “Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence” that “widows had few legal weapons, their whole upbringing had inculcated docility in them, and only in exceptional circumstances could they avoid remarriage if their relatives had decided in favor of it.”³⁰ Thus, a woman was often forced to claim her dowry and leave her deceased husband’s family, along with her children. This decision, however, would result in her being regarded as a “cruel mother”: “The mother who deserted the roof under which her children lived placed the interests of her own lineage and her own family above her children’s interests, and that is why she was stigmatized.”³¹ A “good mother,” on the other hand, would refuse to remarry and act as both a mother and a father to her children under her husband’s roof.³²

A woman could attempt to maneuver within this male-dictated familial structure, but in either situation, a woman essentially lost. If she chose to stay with her children under her husband’s roof, she was ostracized by her own family, who was angry that she did not reclaim her dowry in order to forge a new marriage contract with another family. On the other hand, if she left her husband’s family, she would have to abandon her own children, most likely never to see them again, and be labeled as a “cruel mother.” So did her increasingly large dowry bring her more “power?” Perhaps.

Chojnacki has argued that women’s dowries allowed them to wield power within the family to influence their husbands’ wills, for instance. Chojnacki explains that “husbands were obliged, by self-interest and lineage interest—and specifically by the centrality in

³⁰ Christine Klapisch-Zuber, “Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 323.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 324.

³² *Ibid.*, 324.

family strategy of favorable marriage alliances—to pay more attention to their well-dowered wives (and daughters).”³³ But this increased attention that women received from their husbands and the increased influence that they may have had on their husbands did not overshadow the emotional and social stresses that they had to face in relation to their dowries. Klapisch-Zuber movingly presents a woman’s predicament when she writes:

For how could the “honor” and the “status” of a lineage be increased by taking back a woman and her dowry in order to give them elsewhere, without offending the honor and the standing of the family to which she had given children? How could such a family reassert its rights over the persona and the wealth of a woman without depriving another family of those rights? How could the separation of mother and child be avoided when the mother’s identity was always borrowed and the child could belong only to his paternal kin? How could a woman be reproached for her docility before men when society denied her economic and legal autonomy?³⁴

The torment that a woman underwent as a result of being widowed outweighed any power that a Renaissance may have brought her. A woman’s mind was not free when she carried around the burden of whether or not to abandon her children.

At the core of a woman’s predicament was her lack of identity, or perhaps, the plethora of identities that she held. Sharon T. Strocchia explains in her “Remembering the Family: Women, kin, and Commemorative Masses in Renaissance Florence” that “the conflict between family regimes worked to carve out a central social position for patrician women, on the one hand, and to fragment their social identity on the other.”³⁵ One needs to keep in mind that “from the instant of her birth, the prospect of a dowry loomed large over the female: she represented potential loss rather than potential gain.”³⁶ Strocchia further

³³ Stanley Chojnacki, “Wives and Husbands in Late Medieval Venice,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 336.

³⁴ Christine Klapisch-Zuber, “Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 326.

³⁵ Sharon T. Strocchia, “Remembering the Family: Women, Kin, and Commemorative Masses in Renaissance Florence,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1989): 638.

³⁶ Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 26.

explains that “the agility and variety with which women moved both within and across family units resulted in a plurality of overlapping identities that reflected women’s experiences as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters.”³⁷ This constantly changing and continually indefinite identity resulted in women’s inability to fit completely into one familial sphere or another, thus complicating their decisions in relation to their dowries: “women positioned themselves as the structural nexus not only within but between families by commissioning bequests for their natal kin.”³⁸

Women forever lived within a male-constructed society, and any power with which they were blessed was to be utilized only within this patriarchal structure. Women could not experience the Renaissance—a change in mindsets and social opportunities—when their very lives and minds were controlled by males. Klapisch-Zuber explains that “the marriage that brought a woman out of the paternal house and lineage, the widowhood that often led to her return, these incessant comings and going of wives between *case* introduced a truly indeterminate quality in the ways they were designated: since reference to a male was necessary, a woman was spoken of in relation to her father or her husband, even when they were dead.”³⁹ Women were, at all times, essentially pawns—pawns to be played by their fathers or their husbands. Chojnacki explains, for instance, that “practical interest blended with cultural principles to make daughters instruments of the family strategies pursued by their fathers.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Sharon T. Strocchia, “Remembering the Family: Women, Kin, and Commemorative Masses in Renaissance Florence,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1989): 649.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 648.

³⁹ Christine Klapisch-Zuber, “Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 319.

⁴⁰ Stanley Chojnacki, “‘The Most Serious Duty’: Motherhood, Gender, and Patrician Culture in Renaissance Venice” in *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 143-144.

One could argue, however, that women were emerging with greater power as the Renaissance wore on. As was previously explained, Chojnacki writes that “later marriages, larger dowries, and the choice of vocations altered the gender balance in patrician society, giving each successive generation of wives greater means of affecting the culture of the ruling class.”⁴¹ This may be true, but all of these changes, arguably slight, occurred *within* the construct of male power. Women married later *through their fathers’ permission*. Women had larger dowries *through their fathers’ graces*. Women had greater choice of vocations *through their fathers’ acknowledgement*. Chojnacki succinctly expresses this point when he writes that these “possibilities of alternative gender identities were contained within the formal boundaries of patriarchy. . . .”⁴²

One can see this pattern playing out in the economic realm, for instance. Judith C. Brown has argued in her “Women’s Work in Renaissance Tuscany” that in the 1500s and 1600s, women’s economic options extended to new trades, and thus, women may have experienced a Renaissance at this time. One cannot deny, however, that all of the options that were opened for women were dictated by the decisions of men. Brown explains that “as men shifted from the production of textiles to that of luxury crafts, the women began to perform many of the previously male tasks in the wool and silk industries. This, more than anything else, probably explains the larger participation of women in the labor force.”⁴³ Not only did women get to work in these industries *only* as males vacated them, but they were also restricted to these opportunities because “women have had first and foremost a reproductive responsibility in the home.”⁴⁴ Brown further explains that “other occupations in

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴³ Judith C. Brown, “Women’s Work in Renaissance Tuscany,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 69.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

the textile sector, such as cleaning or carding, were done in central workshops and would have required women to give up their productive roles within the household.”⁴⁵

Women were thus restricted to the home in their economic pursuits. But as has been delineated, women were not just restricted economically or physically, but mentally and socially as well. They were left in the home to bear the stresses of pregnancy and childbirth. They were left in the home while their infants were sent to the countryside to nurse, and they were left to endure the pain of their infants’ deaths. They were left to watch their spouses die, and to ponder whether to take their dowry or to stay with their husband’s family. They were left to be “good mothers” or “cruel mothers.” They were left to bear the burdens of a male-dominated society that restricted their own thoughts. King explains that “injunctions of the preachers and the humanists alike restricted woman to the home, to silence, to plainness; they required a total flattening of her expressive will, her body, her voice, her ornament.”⁴⁶ Moreover, “subject to the will of others I the management of her own body, as she was in her social relations, women’s identities faded to anonymity within the marriage bond. Male control was matched by female insignificance. The patriarchal form of marriage was grounded in a fundamentally negative attitude toward women.”⁴⁷

Women of the Renaissance lacked a clear identity. They were daughters, wives, and mothers, but they could not claim any identity that was not almost entirely dependent upon males. Their sense of identity, or lack thereof, was dictated by the male-dominated structure in which they lived. Within this structure, women were confined physically to a point, but more importantly, mentally and socially. Within this structure, women were given no alleviation of their emotional and social stresses. Within this structure, women attempted to maneuver, and while they may have made some progress in limited areas, they did not

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁶ Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

succeed to a great enough extent to constitute experiencing a Renaissance. History is indeed written by the powerful. When will that be women?