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Did One Veil Give Women a Better Life?

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Abstract

Unfortunately, a young woman in Renaissance Florence did not have many options for her future. A woman's family usually decided whether she would be able to get married or would have to enter the convent, but sometimes she was able to make this choice. In this paper, I look at the lives of wives and nuns to analyze how their lives differed in responsibilities and freedoms, but also to see how all women had similar restrictions and expectations placed upon them.

Keywords

Renaissance, Florence, Florentine women, veil

Disciplines

Ethnic Studies | European History | Family, Life Course, and Society | Gender and Sexuality | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Inequality and Stratification | Italian Language and Literature | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Women's History | Women's Studies

Comments

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Did One Veil Give Women a Better Life?¹

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Florence: Art, Money, and Power in the Renaissance City
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¹ Title inspired by Sandra Weddle, "Women's Place in the Family and the Convent: A Reconsideration of Public and Private in Renaissance Florence," *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 2 (11, 2001): 69.

The marriage veil and the convent veil were stepping stones into two very different lifestyles. One veil connected a woman to her husband for the rest of her life and the other veil connected a woman to her convent. Compared to Florentine men, Florentine women in the Renaissance did not have many options because their only two main choices were to get married or to enter the convent. In both the married and convent lifestyles, women were hard workers who remained inside most of the day. Unfortunately, from birth a Florentine woman's role in the Renaissance was usually more limited and pre-determined, compared to a man's role in society, which often had more freedoms and choices.

A woman's life was organized around what her father and husband wanted. As Dale Kent wrote, "female destiny was almost entirely in the hands of men."² The daughters from wealthier families had a little more freedom in choosing what they wanted to do with their life. Daughters from poorer families, on the other hand, were limited with less alternatives and opportunities. Some young girls, as well as widows, chose to become nuns if they were able to because they were religious or "guided by . . . piety."³ Regardless of which veil Renaissance Florentine women chose or had chosen for them, they all ended up having a few similar responsibilities and tasks. Even though having children and becoming a mother was deemed as the optimal thing for a woman to do, convents gave women more choices and freedom in following their own interests. If women had known of the wide differences in the lives of married women and nuns in the convent, as well as the similarities, then some women might have more willingly joined

² Dale Kent, "Women in Renaissance Florence," in *Virtue and Beauty : Leonardo's Ginevra De' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women / David Alan Brown ... [Et Al.]*, ed. David Alan Brown (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 26.

³ Sharon T. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence / Sharon T. Strocchia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) 3.

the convent.

Before a Florentine daughter was even born in the Renaissance, her life was already being molded by her family's social standing. She was expected to shape her family's future status through marriage. A social requirement in Renaissance Italy was that the family would provide the daughter with a dowry to bring to her husband and new family. If the family was wealthier, then they would need to give a larger dowry. Cohn references P.J.P. Goldberg, the author of *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, who discussed the 'Mediterranean Model' where there was an "emphasis on honour and its cornerstone, the dowry."⁴ For a comparison today, the dowry might be equivalent to how the majority of the wedding cost is traditionally paid by the bride's parents. The dowries destroyed families because they were so expensive or forced the family to make a decision about the daughter's future that they did not want to.

Due to the high dowry prices, a system started in 1425 to help parents with saving for dowries, similar to a college fund today. In 1425 a banking fund opened called the Monte delle Doti to assist fathers with dowries. It "permitted fathers to deposit sums for seven and a half or fifteen years" and then the family "would receive her principal plus accrued interest to be used toward her dowry."⁵ If a daughter from a wealthy family decided not to get married or if a daughter from a poorer family rebelled against her family's wishes to get married, then her father lost whatever money he had put in this fund and she was considered "'truly dead' or tamquam

⁴ Samuel Kline Cohn, "Women and Work in Renaissance Italy," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London ; New York : Longman, 1998) 46.

⁵ Philip Gavitt, *Gender, Honor, and Charity in Late Renaissance Florence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 280.

vere mortua.”⁶ She was “truly dead” because she was going against her parents’ wishes and not continuing the family legacy into a future generation. They were probably saving money and hoping she would get married and start a family since the day she was born. A Renaissance Florentine daughter’s life choices greatly affected her entire family. The family had an investment in the marriage because the union would benefit the daughter as well as the whole family socially. Some girls were sent to convents for a few years (“serbanza”) as “temporary boarders” in order “to protect their honor and marriage prospects.”⁷ But a woman did eventually need to get married so that she was not another mouth the family needed to feed, especially if it was a large family. Once a woman was married, she was accepted into the husband’s family and circles.⁸ If a family could not come up with an acceptable dowry then many fathers made their daughters join convents.⁹ The daughters were then forced to remain at the convent for their entire lives. This convent stay was much different from when they were sent as young girls to the convent for a couple of years through “serbanza.”¹⁰

Although the convent did not lead to children or more social growth opportunities, the religious life did assist the family in other beneficial ways. Weddle states that women in convents “produced the spiritual benefit of prayers offered on the family’s behalf and the social

⁶ Samuel Kline Cohn, *Women in the Streets : Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy* / Samuel K. Cohn Jr Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, c1996, 1996) 90., quoted in Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber *Les Toscans* 339, n. 50.

⁷ Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* / Sharon T. Strocchia 149.

⁸ Kent, *Women in Renaissance Florence* 30-31.

⁹ Cohn, *Women in the Streets : Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy* / Samuel K. Cohn Jr 85.

¹⁰ Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* / Sharon T. Strocchia 149.

benefit of potential alliances with the families of other convent members.”¹¹ But the social benefits were not as great or numerous as when two families connected through the marriage of their children. The convent was not perceived as a great alternative to marriage, as most women wanted to have children and start a family of their own and follow “the social imperatives of reproduction.”¹² When a daughter was forced to become a nun, she was unhappy and not always as dedicated to the religious life as those who had been able to willingly choose the convent veil over the marriage veil. She was also considered “truly dead”¹³ because she usually did not see her family as much. Nuns had to follow “clausura” which is defined as “cloistering to protect female honor in convents,” and was started by Boniface VIII in 1298.¹⁴ Due to this, nuns had to usually ask “ecclesiastical authorities” for permission to leave the convent.¹⁵

The convent was not a place of full freedom, but was it really so much better for a woman to be married with children instead of becoming a nun? Most women who were married had the single purpose of raising children and serving their husbands until they passed away. In Renaissance Florence, the family structure was very important and “it was regarded as a civic duty so to organize a family nucleus that the city would benefit from the stability and continuity

¹¹ Sandra Weddle, "Women's Place in the Family and the Convent: A Reconsideration of Public and Private in Renaissance Florence," *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 2 (11, 2001) 66.

¹² Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* / Sharon T. Strocchia 3.

¹³ Cohn, *Women in the Streets : Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy* / Samuel K. Cohn Jr 90. quoted in Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber *Les Toscans* 339, n. 50.

¹⁴ Gavitt, *Gender, Honor, and Charity in Late Renaissance Florence* 197.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

of the home-life of its inhabitants.”¹⁶ Family life was emphasized here in Florence, where the mother was in charge of the home.¹⁷ Some of the responsibilities of mothers included running the home, teaching the children the morals of the home, preparing the boys for jobs and preparing the girls for marriage and housework, among other things.¹⁸ Many mothers still do these things today, however, the fathers also contribute more to the education of the children and some fathers even run the household. The mother dealt with the running of the kitchen, appearance of the house, and organization of the clothes for the family as well.¹⁹

A wife did not have as much freedom as her husband and could not even watch the festivities of Carnival.²⁰ The senses were referred to “as enemies within” in a rule book in one of the convents and the eyes were considered the worst part of all of the senses.²¹ The senses were only called “enemies” for the women, however, because the culture had biased standards towards women. Women were thought of as weaker than men and women were even required to have a man help them with legal cases, because some men believed that women could not handle cases on their own.

All women, including nuns and married women, were treated badly with legal matters. From

¹⁶ "The Mother. " *The World of Renaissance Florence* [Tutto Su Firenze Rinascimentale], ed. Giuseppe Martinelli, trans. Walter Darwell (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968) 88.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Charles FitzRoy, *Renaissance Florence on 5 Florins a Day* (New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 2010) 101.

²¹ Sharon T. Strocchia, "Learning the Virtues: Convent Schools and Female Culture in Renaissance Florence," in *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe : A History, 1500-1800*, ed. Barbara J. Whitehead (New York: Garland Pub., 1999) 22.

1415 on, when Florence decided to go back to Lombard law, women had to have a “male protector (mundualdus)” or “lawyer (procuratore)” with them in court.²² Women were losing their independence gradually and were forced to rely on men in the legal system, even if men were the ones the women were arguing their case against. The worst part of women and the legal system was that some men pushed lower class women’s cases aside because the men did not care as much about hearing the same types of cases over and over. Women in the upper classes had more connections and might have been able to fight to have their case heard, but women in the lower classes had fewer resources. So, “law-enforcing agencies. . . simply ceased to bother with many of the normal, run-of-the-mill, assault and battery cases involving women from artisan and laboring families.”²³ Being a woman in Renaissance Florence was tough, but coming from the lower classes was even more challenging. More lower class daughters were forced into convents even though they had been made to believe since they were born that their role in life was to be a mother.

Once a girl was born, she was surrounded with examples of loving families and specifically mothers. If society had not promoted the theme of families and children to young women through artwork, then some women might have been more encouraged to become nuns. In works of art from Renaissance Florence, we see many versions of the Virgin Mary and Jesus and these “Images of the pregnant Virgin reinforced the message that the greatest honor a woman could enjoy was to bring forth life.”²⁴ One of the vows nuns take when they join the convent is a

²² Cohn, *Women in the Streets : Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy* / Samuel K. Cohn Jr 28.

²³ Ibid. 29.

²⁴ Kent, *Women in Renaissance Florence* 32.

vow of chastity, and therefore they cannot have children. But, many women passed away during childbirth or right after because the medical knowledge was not as advanced as it is today.²⁵ It was safer to be a nun and avoid putting your own life at risk through the strenuous process of a pregnancy.

Both wives and nuns had to be caring and protective of those they were responsible for. Around 1401-1403, Giovanni Dominici wrote *Regola di governo di cura familiar* and made an interesting comparison between the two lives of women. He “portrayed a ‘good’ bourgeois wife as a special kind of nun who fiercely protected the resources and reputation of her household, much as a devoted nun would act on behalf of her community.”²⁶ Women were expected to be compassionate, no matter what life path they had chosen. Although a nun was not a mother to her own children, she was a motherly figure to the schoolgirls she might have taught in the convent school.

Even though the religious life and the married life were viewed as two very separate paths, they interacted through education, work, and shopping. Girls who were going to be nuns and some girls who were going to be wives had the exact same education of “core values”²⁷ at convent schools up to a certain point. Interestingly enough, these “core values” included “self-discipline, composure, obedience, modesty, and silence.”²⁸ These traits meant that all women had to act reserved and the opposite of men. Today it is normal to see women in the same roles

²⁵ Ibid. 33.

²⁶ Strocchia, *Learning the Virtues: Convent Schools and Female Culture in Renaissance Florence* 21. As stated in Maria Ludovica Lenzi, *Donna e madonne: L’educazione femminile nel primo Rinascimento italiano* (Turin: Loescher, 1982) p. 38.

²⁷ Ibid. 23.

²⁸ Ibid.

as men in the work place, or having the same interests, but during Renaissance Florence, this was discouraged.

With no home duties or children to watch after, the nuns had time to pursue interests and activities they enjoyed. One difference between the lives of wives and nuns was how nuns in the convent were able to make money for the convent through their art. Convents started to need money to survive and so the nuns began to work on handiwork and sell their products.²⁹ Some of these products included “colorful ribbons, silk purses, embroidered cuffs, linen sheets and undershirts, thread, yarn. . . and assorted trousseau items.”³⁰ “Suor Agnold de Rabatta and Suor Gostanza Cocchi of S. Amborgio” worked on a beautiful piece of art together which stayed in their convent and Suor Gostanza did the writing, while Suor Agnola did the drawings.³¹ Although this piece stayed in S. Amborgio, the different features show the time the nuns had to devote to these activities.

Some convents also copied books to sell, because the printing press had not become mainstream yet and books were made by hand instead of machine.³² Suora Giustina Niccolini wrote a chronicle in 1598 of her convent, Santa Maria Anunziata,³³ which was said to be

²⁹ Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* / Sharon T. Strocchia 114-115.

³⁰ Strocchia, *Learning the Virtues: Convent Schools and Female Culture in Renaissance Florence* 7.

³¹ Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* / Sharon T. Strocchia 147.

³² Ibid. 144.

³³ K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 5.

“probably most successful convent in Florence.”³⁴ Some of the beautiful details on the title page include animals and illustrations and flowers.³⁵ K.J.P. Lowe examines how nuns’ chronicles with information on different convents is very important to discovering more about the convents today, in his book, *Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation*. If more wives wrote about what had gone on in their homes, historians today would have more first hand accounts which could give us a glimpse into the daily lives of common families. The nuns’ works give us valuable information, but we lack as many comparable sources for mothers and life at home.

Wives met with nuns through the selling of the items nuns made at the convents. A handful of nuns, such as those at the Lapo convent even taught their students who would later get married “spinning, weaving, sewing, and embroidery, since so much of their own livelihood depended on a mastery of these skills.”³⁶ Once convents had enough money from other means, they might have decided to open a convent school, where they would teach the above skills.³⁷ The wives needed these skills to make clothing for their family at home if they could not afford to pay someone to make it. While the nuns sewed and embroidered because they wanted to, wives did so because the family needed to keep up a certain appearance.

On the other hand, wives were not able to work as much as nuns. Statistics say that “in 1427, the tax officials identified 237 women household heads, or 13 per cent of all women, as having a

³⁴ Ibid. 206.

³⁵ Ibid. 19.

³⁶ Strocchia, *Learning the Virtues: Convent Schools and Female Culture in Renaissance Florence* 30.

³⁷ Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* / Sharon T. Strocchia 115.

profession.”³⁸ However, “In Florence, 90 per cent of women household heads in 1427 were widows, in 1480, the figure had climbed to 96 per cent.”³⁹ So, if you were married, you probably did not work until your husband passed away. The majority of women workers in Florence who had a house were widows. Nuns did not have to take care of children during the day and could not spend their whole day praying or going to church so therefore they had time to work.

In terms of being able to go outside, nuns usually had the advantage, but it depended on the convent. In 1433, the Council of Basel ordered bishops to be increasingly strict about “clausura.”⁴⁰ Due to this, the nuns did stay inside the convent the majority of the time. If they went against “clausura” and did not have permission to leave then they could be thrown in jail.⁴¹ However, nuns left the convents specifically for celebrations, unlike married women who were left watching from indoors: “nuns’ visibility on certain festive occasions proved crucial to sustaining a public ritual presence.”⁴² This was called “open reclusion” and the nuns could even receive visitors. They ventured outside when they could so that the public knew of their support and so that they could “fulfill the spiritual obligations thrust on them, by which they made a discernable impact on the surrounding community.”⁴³ The nuns did not have the responsibility and reputation of a family name to uphold, but they did have to follow some rules because even

³⁸ Cohn, *Women and Work in Renaissance Italy* 115.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 111.

⁴⁰ Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* / Sharon T. Strocchia. 167.

⁴¹ Gavitt, *Gender, Honor, and Charity in Late Renaissance Florence* 200.

⁴² Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* / Sharon T. Strocchia 157.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 157-158.

they were viewed as “weak-willed yet powerful beings who needed protection from both the world and themselves.”⁴⁴ While they were outside, they were working in the community, but while inside, the nuns worked diligently on both their spiritual and convent responsibilities.

All women in Renaissance Florence were greatly affected by the view that they were not as mentally strong and capable as men were. Both the nuns and the wives during this time had certain rules to follow, and therefore did not have autonomous power. Society placed a lot of focus on the family, which was beneficial, however it also did not give women a lot of freedom in choosing or not choosing what they wanted to do. Because society made the dowry such a big part of the marriage, it showed that Renaissance Florence wanted the women to get married and create families. Women in the convent, however, had opportunities to teach, to pursue artistic interests such as drawing or copying books, and even to go outside. Nuns not only had these opportunities, but they were encouraged to do them because there was a necessity at the convent for other financial sources. Nuns had more freedom in their daily lives than married women. Even though creating a family was rewarding, nuns in Renaissance Florence did have the advantage over married women in relation to having a more relaxed, self-determined lifestyle.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 155.

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