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Pen Replacing Looms and Needles:

The Emergence of Female Authors and Authority in Renaissance Europe

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The existence of Renaissance feminism was first speculated with Joan Kelly's intricate question—"Did women have a Renaissance?"<sup>1</sup> The feminist emergence in the European Renaissance was likely the first daunting step of feminism on the cluttering platform of a male dominated society. On one hand, men were extolled as superior, literate, and enlightened but on the other, women were loathed as inferior, backward, ignorant and weak. Such medieval narrow perceptions accordingly prevented women from acquiring any estimable position, but these primitive misconceptions did jostle against the revolutionary tides of the Renaissance allowing the flourish of feminine literacy across Europe. However, questions emerge as to what caused a sudden empowerment amongst women: was it due to the surrounding Reformist environment? Or perhaps, due to the intellectual males who included women in the Humanist Movement?

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Kelly, "Did Women have a Renaissance", in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Brindethal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 139.

Whatever possible reasons might have propelled the urge for feminine writing its commencement can be traced back to the fourteenth century. The grounds for rudimentary knowledge in girls had emerged with inevitable significance during the early Renaissance when men had to often remain absent from the family leaving their business interests in their wives' hands. Consequently, women, given charge of such duties, had to possess elemental education as a means for communicative purpose.<sup>2</sup> Although they were deprived of the predominant teachings of the Latin vernacular, upper-middle-class women evidently began consuming literature besides maintaining the household. Such initial steps towards reading resulted in a literary obsession, and this quest for reading eventually conceived attempts to write. Upper-class noblewomen and girls of royal families including figures like Queen Mary I (1516-1558) and Elizabeth I (1533-1603) of England, Eleanor of Aragon (1402-1445) did receive classical education but contrary to these women, common females were not expected to utilize their wisdom professionally as men did; it was meant to serve in terms of mental nourishment only. Furthermore, religious enterprises did not approve of female scholarship at all; rather condemned it with a claim that women, under no circumstance, should surpass the credentials of men as it may distort the nature's order; they must abide themselves by the bleak survival under the supreme authority of men.

These dogmatic beliefs were, however, confronted by a number of men themselves who not only did occupy high positions in human history but were also devotees to the "Humanist Educational Agenda"<sup>3</sup> including eminent personalities like Boccaccio, Erasmus, Thomas More,

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<sup>2</sup> "Renaissance Women Writers," Arts and Humanities through the Eras, *Encyclopedia.com*, accessed February 02, 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/culture-magazines/renaissance-women-writers>.

<sup>3</sup> For further reading on the subject, see Robert Black *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Traditions and Innovations from Latin Schools from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Montaigne, Juan Vives, Martin Luther and others. These activists had pioneered and shaped the minds of women in order to drag them out from the derogatory views of immoral conventions.

### Women: Representatives of Mary or Eve?

Before the dawn of Renaissance broke out, women's monotonous existence in the medieval age stunned their growth of intellect. This remark can be best amplified by Virginia Woolf who in her "A Room of One's Own" clarified that "Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at."<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not they committed any nuisance, women were subjected to judgement; they were scrutinized under the restrictive authority as being the descendants of Eve who was believed to be the first human to violate the rules of Paradise by consuming the forbidden fruit of knowledge. This very reference perhaps enabled the Church to validate its claim on how women may bring about harmful consequences if consented to acquire knowledge; a well-read woman was thus capable of causing mankind's downfall. Therefore, the Medieval Europe was adamant to prohibit women from reading or writing; and those opposing this papal authority were tormented with severe punishment. Seldom were women granted permission to perform literary activities that too only in the field of religious endeavors. But, how far was Elena Piscopia (1656-1684) given due credit as the first woman to hold a PhD?<sup>5</sup> Were such scholarly women some mere victims of masculine desolation?

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd, 1929), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Robin, Anna R. Larsen, and Carole Levin, eds., *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance: Italy, France and England* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2007), 292.

As evident from many dignified women's biographical accounts, their educational accomplishment was nothing but a consolation prize in a society where their fertility power only assisted them in gaining honour. Regardless of their class, though class did invariably matter, women were the sinful daughters of Eve who carried the infectious traits of lust and concupiscence, and thereby, were to remain beneath the control of Church, State, father and husband.<sup>6</sup> The Mother of God had greater respect than the mother of mankind. However, the former was characterized as the true figure of chastity and those following her footsteps as the blessed virgins. Whilst these notions forbade vernacular education for common women, the Renaissance made its notable appearance and women could not escape its capacious clutch of art and culture.

Irrespective of her family status, every woman was expected to tie a marital knot. The married women were thus chained to a pole of male dominance who unlike the nuns did not have access to independence, nor were permitted to perform any literary activity, except few noble ladies including William Cavendish's wife Lady Margaret (1623-1673) who received such generous support from her husband that it evoked her to author the first utopia as a woman, "The Description of a New World Called the Blazing World."<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly enough, the educated women by the late Medieval and the early Renaissance era were mostly nuns or widows who managed to utilize their leisure by engaging in procreative writing and Scripture. Freedom from matrimonial bondage enabled them to denote more time to writing which was not an option to a busy married woman performing domestic responsibilities.

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1891), x.

<sup>7</sup> Robin, Larsen, Levin, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance*, xx.

Therefore, surviving manuscripts authored by a number of nuns carry the modern readers off to the transitional phase when the Catholic faith was pushed on the verge of Reformation. Works by Sister Jeanne Jussie (1503-1561), Caritas Pirckheimer (1467-1532) record both the insights of the contemporary backdrop and the heroic deeds women commissioned.<sup>8</sup> Not all the narratives, of course, were in favour of the Reformation but do clearly establish that women were no longer intimidated to venture their voices, or to express their personal views. Approaching the Early Modern Era women had been, however, witnessing a certain upheaval in their daily existence which had been introduced by some prolific male scholars and educators. Not a more opportune time was there for women to invest in the educative vigour.

#### Men as both Protagonists and Antagonists

As the age of reawakening, the Renaissance strived to minimise the relatively low literacy rates the Middle Age had left behind. Apparently, with the widespread of the Humanist Educational Agenda, cultural education was reaching an epitome. This was the befitting moment women took aid of. From eminent scholars like Catherina of Siena (1347-1380) to monumental writers like Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416), women with progressive minds came under the expertise of male humanists who enthused them with classical education and philosophical readings. Scholar Katherina M. Wilson claims that most women writers in the Renaissance era were greatly indebted to the educational outcome of the humanist movement.<sup>9</sup> However, quite

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<sup>8</sup> For further reading on the subject, see Caritas Pirckheimer *Caritas Pirckheimer: A Journal of the Reformation Years 1524-1528*, trans. Paul A. MacKenzie (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), Katherine M. Wilson ed. *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Katherine M. Wilson, "Renaissance Women Writers", in *Renaissance Literature: Greenheaven Press Companion to Literary Movements and Genres*, ed. Stephen P. Thompson (New York City: Greenheaven Press, 2001), 125.

the opposite view also prevailed where defiant women like Marie de Gourney (1565-1645) suffered poignantly from the adverse attacks of the Puritan society. Oliva Sabuco de Nantes Barrera (1562-1622), a lady of higher distinction and a follower of Scottish Philosopher Duns Scotus (1266-1308), who rebelled against the exploitations of women caught in the whims of patriarchy, was amongst the three major sixteenth century Spanish writers to foreground advance medical philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, not all the Renaissance reformers were female supporters either. John Knox (d.1572), a Scottish Theologian and Renaissance activist, was of the opinion that women who by nature are incompetent and weak, cannot govern a monarchy with efficiency; moreover, he postulated in his “First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women” (1558) the terrible consequences women might invite if they were educated; in fact, to his conscience and evident from his writings, it was absolute foolishness to teach and train a woman who would bring no positive fruition to her country’s realm.<sup>11</sup> This is suggestive of how educational and professional opportunities were not open to women to the same extent as to men. Records do indicate the active participation of many female humanists but the enunciation of vocational achievements were set differently for women. Thus, the society lacked vertical mobility despite the exalting contribution of the Renaissance. Negative social attitudes functioned as obstacles in the path of feminine development.

That women deserved equal rights as men did was perceived by a group of male humanist activists who mandated the urgency of female literacy as a deserving cause which would

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Ellen Waithe, ed., *A History of Women Philosophers: Volume II Medieval, Renaissance and Enlightenment Women Philosophers A.D. 500-1600* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 262.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Maria van Schrumen, *Whether a Christian Women Should Be Educated and Other Writings from her Intellectual Circle* (London: Chicago University Press, 1998), xxiii.

felicitate the moral growth of the society. These generous social beings respected the dynamic personality of females who manifested their efforts in inducing Theology with Logic by producing a product of pure intellect.

Addressed as the birth place of the Renaissance, Italy was the first and foremost country to witness the feminine emergence in different respective fields. Popular Italian noblewomen such as Isotta Nogarola (1418-1466), Alessandra Scala (1475-1506) played instrumental roles in inspiring young women with their implicit classical wisdom in oration. Cassandra Fedele (1465-1558), a Venetian scholar, who was one of the most dominant female writers of the European History was tutored by her father who taught her Philosophy and Greek by explaining the rich laws of Logic and reason.<sup>12</sup> Fedele's bright prospective that she garnered from her father was given a praiseworthy admiration by the Florentine Classical Scholar Angelo Poliziano(1454-1494), courtier of the de facto ruler of the Florentine Republic, Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492). In France there also existed literate women including the most paramount author Christine de Pisan (1364-c.1430), the first professional woman writer and poetess in European History.<sup>13</sup>

These women and the supportive measures they received reveal that some space was reserved for independent female authorship and that they did make wilful efforts to wave these into the fabric of writing. In accordance with their freedom to earn knowledge, what mostly mattered was their equal recognition to males, rendering them credible acknowledgement in social circles. These instances are evident how the Renaissance came into effect differently in different European provinces not at the same time altogether.

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<sup>12</sup> Robin, Larsen, Levin, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance*, 137.

<sup>13</sup> Waithe, *A History of Women Philosophers*, 312.



Dutch Scholar Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) and another celebrated English humanist Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) occupied the forefront in the list of men for fostering education for women.<sup>14</sup> Amongst the women, they exercised their teachings on, was Thomas More's eldest daughter Margaret More Roper (1505-1544) who was a distinguished woman with firm command at Rhetoric, Logic, and Theology. Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540), a Spanish humanist and tutor to Queen Mary I of England, introduced to some females the splendour of the Greek Classics and in order to navigate their devotion towards literary education he had authored the book *De Institutione Feminae Christianae [The Education of a Christian Woman]*.<sup>15</sup>

Comprehensive analysis has unfolded that intellectual concerns were not limited to men but quite the opposite; philosophical history reveals both males and females had equal engagements in the contribution of scholastic research and humanist reforms.<sup>16</sup> Feminist immersion in the form of writing predates to the history of feudal Europe when seeds of Reformation were about to sprout. In the germinating process of the Renaissance, proto-feminist works began to take place as dominant themes of social issues. The introduction of Protestant faith had strongly opposed the old Christian doctrines and as a consequence, the Reformist agenda magnified the brevity of education as a basic means for enlightenment. It was necessary for women to formulate scholasticism, modal language and theological methodologies to navigate wisdom and spiritual attainment.

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Teresa Howe, *Education and Women in the Early Modern Hispanic World* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 100.

<sup>15</sup> Howe, *Education and Women in the Early Modern Hispanic World*, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Carmel McCallum Barry, "Learned Women of the Renaissance and Early Modern Period in Italy and England: Relevance of their Scholarship", in *Women Classical Scholars: Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly*, eds., Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 30.

To accelerate these initiatives, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) had long ago felt compelled to provide women with Neoclassical advancement as a form of support. His Latin productions imitated from Plutarch's *Lives* unfurl the essential questions related to female education. His *De Mulieribus Clarissa (On Famous Women)* demonstrated the cultivating virtues of women in relation to masculine embracement.<sup>17</sup> Boccaccio not only voiced against the anomalies of social beliefs but also clearly classified the vitality of women's education by acknowledging their uniqueness of literary interests, and holding a steadfast protest against the Medieval misogyny. The revival of Greek and Latin Classics in the early modern age provided the authors with an opportunity to explore the classical antiquity and derive exclusive vehicles of literary conventions that forced them to deviate from the slender concepts. This very transmission was given a positive welcome by Juan Luis Vives whose vehement hustles helped pave a literary path for women through the constitution of Theologies from Aristotle and Plato.

Taking in account Plato's ideology, one can observe how he insisted upon moral education and spiritual upbringing of the human mind regardless of gender and class. According to Christine Garside Allen, "Plato develops two separate arguments to support this claim. The first is based on metaphysical and the second on pragmatic considerations."<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Plato seemingly promotes his view of equal rights and accessibility amidst all. In this regard, Aristotle's perception is, nonetheless, identical to Plato's, prioritizing early education as a preparation for textual techniques, required for both boys and girls. This practice of education was a common tradition followed by the Roman society. Although girls were not permitted to

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<sup>17</sup> Barry, "Learned Women of the Renaissance and Early Modern Period in Italy and England," 68.

<sup>18</sup>Christine Garside Allen, "Plato on Women", *Feminist Studies*, no.2/3 (1975): 134, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177773>.

step outside their home to seek education, aristocratic women were supervised by qualified tutors in a domestic environment and were taught Language, History, Art, Music and even Classic literature. Of these privately tutored privilege-class women Laura Cereta (1469-99), an influential Renaissance figure and poetess, dismissed the orthodox conceptions relating to female fragility, and was one of the first known feminists of Early Modern Europe.<sup>19</sup>

In England, the Renaissance was framed by the socio-political components of the Reformation more than it was by classical discernment. Accordingly, human conscience was modified by exclusive and experimental religious concerns – concerns so vivid and omnipresent that these were tailored not only by men but widely by a number of prolific female reformers also. The arresting descriptions of the English reform in the dramas co-authored by the Cavendish sisters and the tectonic portraiture of the political phenomenon in the writings of Elizabeth Tanfield (1585-1639), the first English woman to publish a tragedy, help depict the monarchical turmoil English nationals had to deal with.<sup>20</sup> These effusive works by women, in the face of criticism, are putative of how they were capable to contrive literary methods while juxtaposing parallel perspectives to pen down intersectional issues; on the same hand these also substantiate that, contrary to condemnation, women had much beneficence to offer both politically and academically.

### Women Armed with Bleeding Quills

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<sup>19</sup> Sarah Gwyneth Ross, *Birth of Feminism: Women as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Robin, Larsen, Kevin, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance*, 64, 71.

The exhumation of ancient Classics incubated a blooming educational growth, for both common men and women, disregarding the discriminating interference of the Church. With the foundation stone of feminine literacy being already laid during the late medieval period, the Renaissance inaugurated a full-fledged genesis of women authors who fused their prose and poetry with diverse thematic conjugations.

From Mary Wroth's (1587-1652) dialectic diction to Mary Sidney's (1561-1621) literary patronage in England; from the Italian poetic stance of Gaspara Stampa (1523-54) to the secular writings of Vittoria Colonna (1492-1547) in Italy; from the impudent penetrations of Christine de Pisan's poetry to the sharpness of Marie de Gourney's psychological novels - all delineated with the fervors of literary excellence.

Appetite for Petrarchan and Neoplatonic acumen prompted the Renaissance women to pen down erudite literature, central to the early modern curricula.<sup>21</sup> Of these leading learned bourgeoisie women, most successful writers had been backed by their male family members. While Beatriz Galindo (c.1465-1535), Latin tutor to Queen Isabella of Spain (1451-1504), dared to oppose the Catholic restrictions for founding schools, Birgitta of Sweden (c.1303-1373) revolted against the abuses of the Catholic Church during performing critical roles at the court of Queen of Cyprus. Catherina of Siena, the greatest Italian mystic and Augustinian Philosopher, wrote doctrines of salvation, reflecting the religious reforms. Veronica Franco (1546-1591), a Venetian courtesan, satirized the stereotyping views about women. Christine de Pisan, an author of forty-one poems herself, assaulted French author Jean de Meun for aiming mockery at women.

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<sup>21</sup> S.P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne Davies, eds., *Readings in Renaissance Women's Drama: Criticism, History and Performance 1594-1998* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 221-22.

Despite their pre-eminence, females faced incoherent criticisms and even castigation. Contrary to expectations, it was not their personal faith that women were prosecuted for, but their attribute of teaching—an activity that was neither allowed by the Catholics nor by the Protestants,<sup>22</sup> though female tutors like Mildred Cooke (1526-1589) brightened female minds. Historical accounts inform of many women who lost their lives either on the scaffold or at the stakes. Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was, however, fortunate to not have received a death sentence when she was accused of teaching Theology to both males and females, but was banished from the Boston Church.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Hutchinson, another English noblewoman, Anne Askew (1521-1546) could not protect herself from the blazing flames after being convicted and burnt for denying to accept the Eucharist Views.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, it was not that they were not aware of the possible consequences and thus were subjected to cruelty, but it was their stubbornness despite foreseeing the probable perils that had caused their downfall; attempts to practice individualism from the customary obedience and social rules devastated their reputation and lives.

The fact that women's aspirations were shrouded was a result of many women's ignorance as well who must have doubted their own abilities and questioned their self-worth in a masculine environment. The Reformist projects carried out by both men and women were primarily meant to excite laymen and common audience. In course of regulating the religious and liturgical modifications, it was perhaps becoming a sound demand to permit the female community to attend educational and enlightening programmes.

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<sup>22</sup> King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

However, whilst feminine sensibility was bruised by the social callousness, female Monarchs, by contrast, followed the path of muscular rule to administer their realm. Queen Marguerite of Navarre (1492-1549) maintained female scholars in her court; Catherine de Medici (1519-1589) in France dazzled her court with honorary poetesses; Katherina Jagellonica (1526-1583), queen of Sweden was perhaps the only ruling monarch of Europe to have comprehended in seven languages.<sup>25</sup> Isabella of Spain summoned Cassandra Fedele to emulate her court.<sup>26</sup> One of the most cultured English Reformers and Lutherans, Anne Boleyn(c.1501-1536), second wife of King Henry VIII (1491-1547) and mother of Queen Elizabeth I of England, aired her grievance against the dissolution of monasteries despite being a devout Protestant herself; Anne also happened to be the Patron to the evangelicals.<sup>27</sup> Katherine Parr (1512-1548), sixth wife of King Henry VIII was the first English woman to publish a book of her own.<sup>28</sup> Queen Elizabeth I of England, Catherina of Portugal (1638-1705) promoted and administered literary salons and libraries in their courts.

These women who had to arduously deal with gender prejudices, redrafted the general notion of feminine mystique, and foregrounded that they had the power to excel circumstantial limitations in an atmosphere where misogyny often bruised feminine efforts. They clearly unveiled the pitiful truth of how contemporary male criticizers were psychologically incompetent in accepting women as their equals. Women who professionally captivated and bested the

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<sup>25</sup> Wilson, "Renaissance Women Writers," 127.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>27</sup> Robin, Larsen, Levin, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 289-90.

dogmatic medievalism, sometimes with their sceptres and sometimes with their pens, to a great extent, dismissed the myth of female incompetence.

### Conclusion: Renaissance Feminism, Myth or Reality

The age of rebirth arrived with numerous possibilities but unfortunately failed to offer women entry to Universities or formal educational institutions. On the same scale, men attained the practical application of their knowledge whereas, women only the theoretical one.<sup>29</sup> For men, the accumulated wisdom would serve for public purposes, but for women, only for private amusement. Despite these discriminations, comparing the European women to those of the contemporary East would vindicate that the Renaissance had done away with the dark verdicts. All the exemplary female figures competitively coexisted with their male counterparts, and in many cases, did supersede men in terms of intellect.

Therefore, the Renaissance, more or less, did introduce feminism to Europe prior to the nineteenth or twentieth century. Women's multidimensional literary compositions warranted them to embark outside the pejorative connotations. Undeniably, treatment of feminine triumph differed from that of men; women were yet to forsake the meek, docile and submissive outlook, but embodied the virtues which guided them on the path to victory. Female writers of the following ages thus owe to these Renaissance female authors, publishers and rulers for their distinctive voice. As a matter of fact, transcending the social stigmas enthralled their literary creations.

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<sup>29</sup> Wilson, "Renaissance Women Writers," 126.

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