

The Role of Women in Renaissance Italy

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INTRODUCTION

Women in Renaissance Italian society assumed heterogeneous roles reflecting the political fragmentation of Italy itself, and a cultural, economic and social movement underpinned by the humanistic rebirth of antiquity. A change occurred during the Italian Renaissance that was in sharp distinction to traditional humanistic thinking; no longer were women inferior in thought and capacity, rather societal roles demonstrated that, given the appropriate circumstances, women were crucially able to support, mould and change the politics, culture and the economic fabric of society. The primary female role in the domestic sphere was expanded by notable women who, by virtue of Renaissance education and new societal expectations, became art patrons, writers, orators, and simply women of intellect. Wives assumed a background role in the sustenance of political stability for a spouse. Women who entered the convent participated in Renaissance cultural novelties; some nuns, *professe*, received a full humanistic education. Courtesans, *cortigiana*, enjoyed a glamorous lifestyle

augmented by an education that enabled intellectual interactions in a secular rather than a religious domain. Whether in marriage, in the convent, in court or in a position of service, each group of women were integral in shaping cultural and societal changes throughout the Italian Renaissance period.

MARRIAGE

Daughters were married to men to create powerful and advantageous matches to preserve property and familial lineage. The concept of *famiglia* is not simple: Kirshner (Najemy, 2009, pp. 82-83) argues the narrow definition of a nuclear household of husband and wife and children, servants and slaves as a ‘romantic myth’. He argues lineages were loosely defined and Renaissance marriage was subject to political, demographic and economic variation. The Roman-based overarching concept was the power of the father, *patria potestas*, referring to the ‘indivisible, inalienable... power exercised by the household’s head’ over children and descendants traced through male lineage (Najemy, 2009, p.86). Successful families, such as the Florentine Medici, utilised marriage to unite alliances for social, political and commercial benefit (Hollingsworth, 2017, p. 47). The strategy elevated the Medici to virtual rulers in the fifteenth century. Women’s traditional role of procreation became essential to Italian Renaissance aristocracy: Cosimo I de’ Medici married Eleonora who provided him with seven sons for succession and four daughters to marry into noble houses (Hollingsworth M, 2017, pp. 300-301, 304).



Eleonora de' Medici . Wikipedia.org

Italy failed to provide a consistent legal framework for marriage, with over five hundred municipal statutes existing alongside Roman-based common law (*ius commune*) (Najemy, 2009, p. 85). The prevailing attitude amongst the urban aristocracy and older nobility was a culture that promulgated primogeniture, which favoured inheritance by the first-born son at the expense of women (Wyatt, 2014, p. 351). Benadusi states that reputations were tied to the ‘status and power of the family’ (Wyatt, 2014, p. 349). Aristocratic aspirational families provided young girls of marriageable age a lavish dowry. The Florentine *Monte delle doti* demonstrates women and betrothals functioned as currency. Established in 1425, this investment fund was a mechanism to assist affordability of exorbitant dowries, but doubled as a war fund against Milan (Najemy, 2009, p. 94; Wyatt, 2014, p. 350).

In Italian oligarchic republican society, brides remained ‘invisible in public life’, were expected to be chaste and modest mothers and household managers (Cox, 2016, p. 171). Evidence of the feminine ideal exists in art. The 1472 portrait of Battista Sforza (Piero della Francesca, Uffizi, Florence) contrasts her striking ‘pure and untarnished complexion...covered hair and...delicate transparent veil’ with the tanned and wrinkled skin of her mercenary husband Federigo Da Montefeltro (Stemp, 2018, p. 86-87).



Battista Sforza & Federigo Da Montefeltro (Wikimedia commons)

The role of women was examined in Nino Tassima’s 1910 publication *The Italian Family in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. Tassima took inspiration from Jacob Burckhardt’s idea

of the Italian Renaissance as the beginning of modernity with the ‘intimate modern Renaissance family’ being anchored by the married couple (Kirshner & Molho, 1978; Najemy, 2009). His evidence included the dialogue *On the Family* by the Florentine humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72), and *On Wifely Duties* by the Venetian humanist Francesco Barbero (1390-1454). He concluded the Florentine conjugal household persevered in a period of social and political turmoil (Najemy, 2009, p. 83).



Alberti (Picryl.com)

Scholars and museum curators turned the focus on Renaissance interiors as a reflection of the societal role of marriage and motherhood. Funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Board, the Victoria and Albert Museum’s 2006 exhibition, *At Home in Renaissance Italy* features the *cassone* (chest for the trousseau) and the *desca di parto* (birth tray to provide refreshments for a new mother) to a woman in childbirth as a portrait of women’s domestic role (Burke, 2019, p. 10-11, p.149).



Sandro Botticelli (en.wikipedia.org)

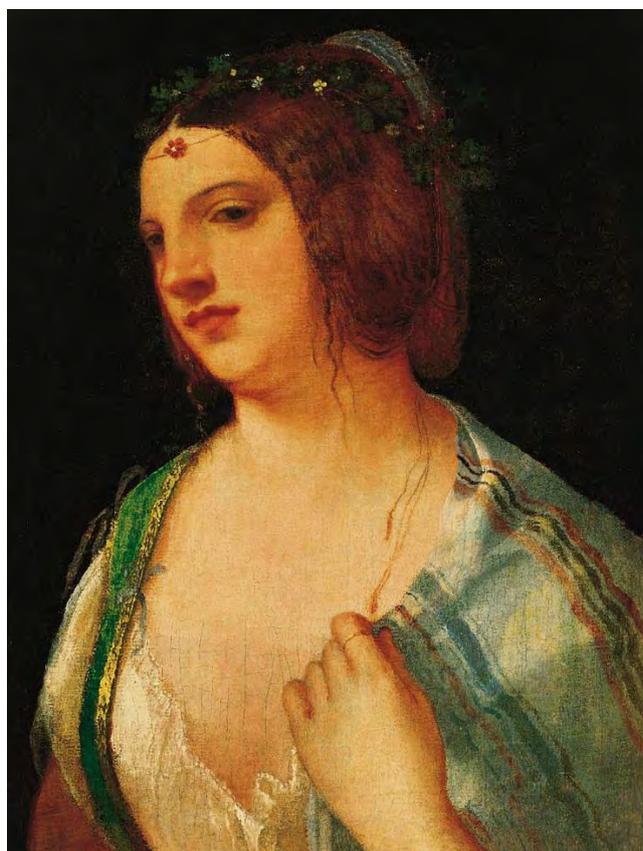
In the Renaissance, regional variations dictated the role of women and marriage, reflected in familial, economic or political agendas. Fifteenth century Sicilian nobility embraced consanguineous marriages to improve landholding, influence and kinship ties (Wyatt, 2014, p. 350). By contrast, Benadusi comments that Florentines selected endogamous marriages: local aristocratic brides functioned to protect a local 'national' identity (Wyatt, 2014, p 353). Piero di Cosimo de' Medici married chose a strategic match to heal political rifts (Tomas, 2017, p. 126-127). After 1550, Italians favoured the preservation of patrilineality, the practice of endogamous marriage between elite families and the exclusion of dowered daughters from inheritance to favour agnatic kinship (Najemy, 2009, p. 84-91).

WOMEN at COURT



The Court of Mantua (commons .wikimedia .org)

Italian courts were numerous in the Quattrocento and Cinquecento, resulting in a proliferation of competing dynasties, entourages and educated women. Rivalry at court between northern Milan, Savoy and Ferrara, and southern Naples, Rimini and Urbino was a reason for a move towards showcasing feminine culture and virtuosity (Cox, 2016, p. 173-174). By contrast, conservative Florentine and Venetian women were traditionally modest, literate in the vernacular to manage the house, and unable to write; an education described by Strocchia as ‘split literacy’ (Cox, 2016 p. 169). More liberal courts entertained ‘academicians, soldiers, patricians, wealthy foreigners, prelates, artists, musicians and courtiers’ (Bassanese, 1988, p. 298). To fulfil these requirements, women’s roles included the mastering of rhetoric, writing and classical literacy skills, artistic attributes in music and dance all delivered eloquently. The female protagonists included prince consorts, noblewomen, ladies-in waiting, young female intellectuals, along with the lesser born but equally important *cortigiana* (courtesan).



Ritratto di cortigiana – Giorgione (Wikimedia commons)

The wife of a dynastic prince, *condottieri* [mercenary], received an intensive humanities education. The function was beneficial to the state by providing women with practical political skills and an ability to rule by proxy if her military husband was absent or deceased, and to act as regent for their underage son (Clough, 1996, p. 31). Battista da Montefeltro, an educated daughter of a ruling Urbino family, was the first Italian woman to deliver a Latin oration. She supported her politically inept husband, Galeazzo Malatesta, and became diplomatic leader of Pesaro (Cox, 2016, p. 169-172). The treatise ‘On the Study of Literature’, essentially a letter of 1419, specified young women required competency in the Latin-based curriculum *studia humanitatis* before marriage (Clough, 1996, p.38). It is likely the document refers to her young child Elisabetta, destined to join the next generation of educated noblewomen destined to serve aristocratic Italian society.



Renaissance (en.wikipedia.org)

The Renaissance *cortigiana* [courtesan] was an educated, elegant women who emulated noblewomen in dress, speech and surroundings, Described as an ‘entertainer, hostess, siren, substitute lady, and prostitute’, one sixteenth century courtesan, Lucrezia Squarcia, went about town ‘snobbishly, with Petrarch in hand’ debating ‘Homer, Virgil, music and Tuscan speech’ (Bassanese, 1988, pp. 295-298). Literary dialogues that address the function of the courtesan include Castiglione’s 1507 *Il libro del cortegiano* [The Book of the Courtesan],

Giovanni della Casa's *Galateo* [A treatise on Manners] and Stefano Guazzo's 1574 *Della civil conversazione* [On Civil Conversation] (Snyder J, in Wyatt, 2014, p. 220-221).

Bassanese (1988, p. 296) concludes the courtesans functioned to appease men culturally, physically and erotically, a role which then ensured her income, status and reputation.



Il libro del cortegiano (commons.wikimedia.org)

NUNS

Three possible life-paths for women in Renaissance Italy, 'nun, wife, and whore', was described by the courtesan Nanna, the protagonist of *Ragionamento* (1529-1530) from Aretino's *dialoghi puttaneschi* (whore's dialogues) (Snyder J, in Wyatt, 2014, p. 221).



Jacometto Venezia (Wikimedia. Com)

Two classes of nuns existed in sixteenth and seventeenth century Italy. Educated, dowried nuns (*professe*) wrote devotional music, taught, wrote, and provided genteel industry including art and textiles, whilst poor servant nuns (*converse*) cooked, cleaned and performed manual work (Johnson, 2013, p. 7). Wealthy families sent ‘superfluous’ young girls, *educande*, from aged seven, to the convent for education, emotional and physical support (Johnson, 2013, p. 8). Many entered the church as educated Choir nuns, *professe*. Visiting aristocrats including Grand Duke Cosimo III described nun composers and instrumentalists as ‘utter perfection’, notably the ensemble of S. Radegona in Milan and S. Geminaiano in Modena (Johnson, 2013, p. 10-11). Women in the convent served an interactive and contributory role to the arts and politics, and were not cut off from society.

Nuns were educated daughters of aristocrats so their contribution to Renaissance society was not unexpected. Early fifteenth century young girls married, but the rising costs of dowries and the redirection of funds to male heirs led to *clausura forzata* [forced claustration]. By the seventeenth century over half of Florentine and Venetian women, and three quarters of upper-class Milanese daughters took vows (Benadusi G, in Wyatt, 2014, p. 352; Johnson, 2013, p. 7).

THE ARTS and PATRONAGE

Few female elite artists existed in Renaissance Italy, rather female patrons commissioned paintings, statues and buildings (Burke, 2019, p 9), and educated women published literature and poetry. Patronage and the commission of artworks is explored by King (1998) to demonstrate how the Renaissance laywomen functioned as artistic contributors. Marital status factored as legally a woman ‘might require a legal guardian’ to commission a work (King, 1998, p. 3).

Men financed most chapels and classicising villas in art and architecture. When women commissioners led the styling of architecture, for example the *Capella Pelligrini* (1529-1557) and *Villa Badoer-Guistinian* (1514), they were required to commemorate male relatives (King, 1998, p. 11). The commissioning pattern differed for women of different societal rank. Less wealthy women, widows, and poorer wives and relatives of guild workers could only engage in joint commissions so their individual contribution was rarely documented. Women related to men in the law and medical professions and minor nobility were capable of funding ‘more prominent and attention seeking projects’ (King, 1998, p.10). Unless a women commissioner was related to a sovereign, ruler, or de-facto ruler (such as the Medici), she had limited access to marble, bronze, nor could she purchase ‘images referring to classical mythology or stories from ancient history’ (King, 1998, p. 11).



Capella Pelligrini ([Wikimedia.commons.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Capella_Pelligrini.jpg))

It was considered ideologically inappropriate for women to commission public art. Even art destined for the courts and domestic enjoyment had to be ‘circumscribed within gender expectations ...to serve the court hierarchy’(Burke, 2019, p. 10; San Juan, 1991, p. 70). Isabella d’Este, educated marchioness who arrived in Mantua in 1490, was described in *Orlando Furioso* as pivotal in challenging her husband’s patronage and achievements (San Juan, 1991, p.70). She maintained courtly culture, collected poets, composers and musicians, and is renowned for an exceptional collection of mythological paintings and antique statuary in dedicated *studiolo* [display rooms] (San Juan, 1991, p 70-72). Isabella’s collection leads

her to emerge as a credible identity in the female sphere as a facilitator of social and political art collection, an exceptional role amongst Renaissance court women.



Isabella d'Este (commons.wikimedia.org)

Female writers emerged in sixteenth century; this can be attributed to the commencement of humanist education of elite girls in the fourteenth century. Vittoria Colonna, Marchess of Pescara, published poetry from 1538 (Pater, 2010, p. 186). Vittoria's early 'verse letter' to her husband, absent at battle, was a humanistic endeavour modelled on the classical Roman poet Ovid's *Heroines* (Cox, 2016, p. 186). She subsequently achieved prominence in spiritual poetry, disseminating reforming beliefs to other cities and her innovations gained prominence amid religious controversies of the Reformation (Shemek in Wyatt, 2014, p. 187; Najemy, 2009, p.262).



Vittoria Colonna (flickr.com)

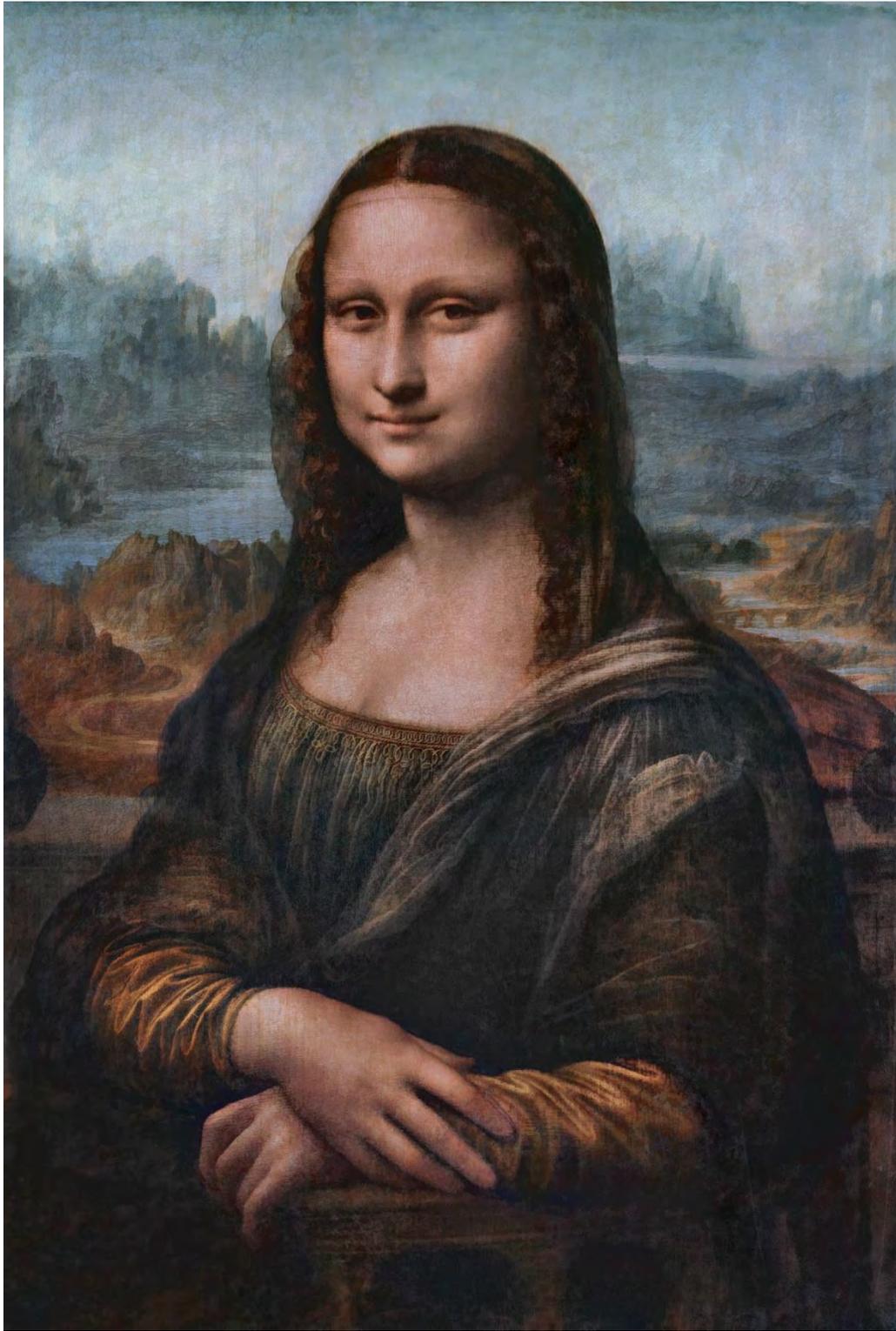
Accomplished female lyricists (Gambara, Terracina, Matraini and Battiferri) adopted ‘Petrarchan themes of marital love, moral reflection and religious devotion’ (Wyatt, 2014, p. 186). Courtesans writers emerged (Tullia d’Aragona) to underline a social identity and later employed openly erotic themes (Veronica Franco) (Cox, 2016, p. 193). Musicians of the merchant-class (Gaspara Stampa) sang poetry in Venetian *ridotti* [salons] (Wyatt, 2014, p. 187). In 1600 *The Worth of Women* by Moderata Fonte (pseudonym for Modesta Pozzo) was published, detailing the role and status of women from the perspective on seven Venetian noblewomen. The work was a significant contribution a novel Renaissance acknowledgement that, as equals, women could choose an existence independent of man (Cox, 2016, p. 196). Cox notes that the issues surrounding ‘female equality and opportunity still resound’ in her introduction to her edited and translated publication of this Renaissance work (Cox, 1997, p. vii), which underpins how pivotal the Renaissance woman could sculpt ideology that persists today.



Moderata Fonte (ar.m.wikipedia.org)

Women in Renaissance Italy adopted many roles; wives of nobility, women at court and women in the convent were increasingly visible over this period of social and cultural

'rebirth'. Specific contributions to art and culture, the economy, and the political landscape was dependent upon social status, wealth and the city-republic in which she lived.



MonaLisa

(Wikimedia commons)

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