

THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN RENAISSANCE ITALY
AND WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES FOR MAKING A LIFE OF THEIR OWN

Catherine of Siena corresponded with Pope Gregory XI, visited him at Avignon and was the first woman to have works published in the Tuscan dialect.¹

Alessandra Strozzi wrote numerous letters about marriage negotiations for her exiled son, flax shipments and taxes.²

Laura Cereto supervised her brothers' education, attended lectures in mathematics and served as secretary to her magistrate father.³

Silvia Sanvitale had herself painted as the central figure in a ceiling octagon with her husband, the Count of Scandino, and Virgil as lesser figures.⁴

Properzia de 'Rossi was paid professional rates for her sculpture at the Church of San Petronio, the most important church in Bologna.⁵

These five women seem surprisingly independent given the patriarchal and misogynistic nature of Italian Renaissance society. Neither patriarchy nor misogyny was new to Italian society; however the Renaissance saw changes that institutionalised and promoted these values to a new level. Widespread popularity of books such as Boccaccio's *Famous Women* gave the illusion of praising women for their achievements while ridiculing their paganism and relentlessly accusing them of disobedience, deception, uncontrollable lust and worse.⁶ This society understood women to be timid, weak, miserly and credulous, but at the same time pious, chaste, humble, wise,

¹ *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, Volume 1, Translated with Introduction by Suzanne Noffke, (Arizona, 2000) , pp. xx and 187

² *Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi*, Translated with Introduction by Heather Gregory, (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 133-189

³ Margaret L King, 'Petrarch, the Self-Conscious Self, and the First Women Humanists' in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2005), p. 549

⁴ Katherine A. McIver, 'Matrons as Patrons, Power and Influence in the Courts of Northern Italy in the Renaissance' in *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 22, No. 43 (2001), p. 75

⁵ Caroline P. Murphy, 'The Economics of The Woman Artist' in *Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque*, Edited by Elizabeth S.G. Nicholson, Rebecca Price, Jane McAllister and Karen I. Peterfreund, (Milano, 2007), p. 23

⁶ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, Edited and Translated by Virginia Brown, (Cambridge and London, 2001)

charitable, cheerful, patient, and more obedient, temperate and law-abiding than men. It expected women to be virtuous and to have the appearance of virtue.

Castiglione was talking about women at court, but I think this would apply to all respectable women:

...[she] ought also to be more circumspect, and to take better heede that she give no occasion to bee ill reported of, and so behave her selfe, that she be not onely spotted with any fault, but not so much as with suspition. Because a woman hath not so manie waies to defend her selfe from slanderous reportes, as hath a man.⁷

BALDASSARRE CASTIGLIONE

This essay will examine the place of women in Renaissance Italian society: their physical place; their place in relation to patriarchal authority; their place in relation to family status and power; and their legal position. It will then consider some possibilities women might have had, to exercise intellectual, economic, creative or spiritual independence by means of education, employment, faith, patronage or the arts.

The extent to which the frequent exhortations to remain enclosed at home reflected reality for women, rather than merely a patriarchal ideal, varied by locality and class.

O you girls, learn how you should stay at home, and beware of whoever enters the house, as you will see that the Virgin Mary stayed shut away at home... Isn't it better if you stay shut away, and don't get familiar with men and even with women: watch for whether they are good, or otherwise.⁸

BERNADINO DA SIENA

The absence of women on the streets of Florence - where chasing women was a common leisure activity for young men⁹ - was remarked by visitors and it seems that women were more enclosed and legally forbidden from entering more places in Florence than elsewhere in Italy. Church was one of the few public spaces available to women, however it was not uncommon for curtains to be erected to segregate women from men, and women were advised not to go there unaccompanied.¹⁰ Women did not generally have free access throughout their own homes: many wives were banned from

⁷ Baldassarre Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, Translated by Sir Thomas Hoby, Introduction by W.H.D. Rouse, (London, 1966), p. 190

⁸ Quoted in *Women in Italy, 1350 – 1650, Ideals and Realities, A Sourcebook*, Translated and Introduced by Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli, (Manchester and New York, 2005), p. 45

⁹ Gene Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna, Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence*, (Berkeley, 2005), p. 77

¹⁰ Natalie Tomas, 'Did Women have a Space?' in *Renaissance Florence, A Social History*, Edited by Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti, (New York, 2006), p. 313

entering their husband's study¹¹ or any room where he was conducting meetings¹² and separate bedrooms were considered preferable so that the husband would not be disturbed by childbirth or illness¹³. The notion of keeping women segregated was principally a concern of the elite classes, but it came to be aspirational for shopkeepers and merchants who had traditionally, or by necessity, combined domestic life and trade, and who began to create separate spaces in order to keep women and children out of sight.¹⁴ Windows were problematic. Sitting at a window made sense when working on embroidery or sewing during the daytime, yet this also enabled women to look into the street, think about what was going on outside and be seen by men. Windows were therefore deemed public space and sitting at a window was considered equivalent to wandering about the streets unaccompanied. Keeping women inside the home ensured protection of their honour; the honour of their family and male relatives¹⁵; and also protected men's assets. Leon Battista Alberti wrote: "The woman, as she remains locked up at home, should watch over our things by staying at her post, by diligent care and watchfulness."¹⁶ By contrast, lower class women for whom family honour and status was less valuable and less vulnerable, and whose husbands had less material goods to be guarded, could be and were – not least by necessity of work and the lack of servants to send on errands - active and visible in public spaces¹⁷.

All women – as unmarried girls, wives, widows or nuns – were defined in relation to men: daughter, wife or widow of a man or married to Christ. The married woman's place in society was to give birth chastely¹⁸ and to look after her husband, children and household. If she was a widow, she "...should think of nothing else save serving God and her children..."¹⁹ A woman's honour and reputation belonged to her husband and family and had to be secured in much the same way as his money and other assets.²⁰ Women were a means of displaying men's power and status and of

¹¹ Sandra Weddle, 'Women's Place in the Family and the Convent, A Reconsideration of Public and Private in Renaissance Florence' in *Journal of Architectural Education (1984-)*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2001), p. 66

¹² Tomas, 'Did Women have a Space?', p131

¹³ Diana Robin, 'Women, Space and Renaissance Discourse' in *Sex and Gender, Medieval and Renaissance Texts, The Latin Tradition*, Edited by Barbara K. Gold, Paul Allen Miller and Charles Platter, (New York, 1997), p. 167

¹⁴ Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination, City States in Renaissance Italy*, (New York, 1979), pp. 75-76

¹⁵ Weddle, 'Women's Place in the Family and the Convent', p. 64

¹⁶ Quoted in Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *Women in the Streets, Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy*, (Baltimore, 1996), p. 18

¹⁷ Weddle, 'Women's Place in the Family and the Convent', p. 64

¹⁸ Tomas, 'Did Women have a Space?', p. 316

¹⁹ Bernardino da Siena quoted in *Ideals and Realities*, p. 188

²⁰ Weddle, 'Women's Place in the Family and the Convent', p. 65

enabling competition with rivals, by means of the quality of dress and jewellery - sometimes even in the decoration of clothes, as when Beatrice d'Este appeared in an elaborate dress embroidered with the two towers of the Genoa port - and through women's accompanied and thus respectable presence in public situations.²¹ Wives were required to be modest, to diligently care for their households, but above all to be obedient to their husbands: "In order that a wife does her duty and brings peace and harmony to her household, she must agree to the first principle that she does not disagree with her husband on any point."²²

In marriage, a young woman was essentially merchandise to be sold in order to benefit her family - establishing social and political connections with the groom's family - and to benefit the groom's family - perpetuating his family name and acquiring a substantial sum of money and goods to set up the groom's home and/or business. The marketplace language of marriage arrangements was blatant - "...we're not having any discussion about the Adimari girl until they have sold off her older sister..."²³ - although in fact families were not so much *selling* their daughters as paying men to take them as wives. Marriages were in some instances the means of ending dynastic wars,²⁴ but more commonly they were the means of enhancing family status and alliances, sometimes to the extent of increasing a family's control over a whole town or region²⁵. For the girl's family, marrying her off not only ended the cost of feeding and clothing her, but also enabled the bulk of the family inheritance to pass to sons. The giving of daughters to the Church as nuns had similar benefits for the family: reduction of living expenses, connections and alliances with the families of other nuns in the convent, and the added advantage of lower dowries than husbands expected. Gregorio Dati's journal offers insight into the significance of dowries to a man's business ventures and livelihood. This merchant habitually ran up debts and persistently made poor choices in business investments and partners. Luckily, due to the regular death in childbirth of his wives, he was able to remarry repeatedly, each time using the substantial dowry monies to pay off his debts or establish a new business. Marriage negotiations were an exclusively male domain and even decisions about unmarried mothers were made by men. When Bernardo Machiavelli's young servant became pregnant, his own

²¹ Martines, *Power and Imagination*, pp. 230 and 233

²² Francesco Barbaro quoted in Margaret L. King, *The Renaissance in Europe*, (London, 2005), p. 157

²³ *Letters of Alessandra Strozzi*, p. 189

²⁴ Carolyn James, 'Friendship and Dynastic Marriage in Renaissance Italy' in *Literature & History*, Vol. 17, No.4 (2008), p. 7

²⁵ Martines, *Power and Imagination*, p. 101

reputation and honour, together with the honour, reputation and opinions of his male friends and relatives were the focus of his concern.²⁶ Neither the girl, her mother, nor Bernardo's wife had any role in deciding what to do. This was not just the case for poor servant girls, no prospective bride or mother would be involved in such decisions.

Since a virgin neither knows nor desires the union with man, our young girl will leave all deliberations in her father's hands... Apart from the fact that this responsibility does not befit a virgin, she should not be able to make a good experience since she has no experience of the world.²⁷

LODOVICO DOLCE

In the eyes of the law, women were not citizens²⁸ and the Italian wife had no rights to her home except through her husband's presence.²⁹ On his death her ability to remain in the house with her children depended on the terms of his will, which could limit her use to particular rooms or limit who could visit her there, and typically she would be banned from the house if she remarried. In Florence, widows were only entitled to inherit property from their husbands – and then generally only as a life interest with the usual caveats over remarriage - if they did not ask for the return of their dowries.³⁰ The dowry was understood to be a payment to the groom for his support of the bride throughout the marriage and it was considered the equivalent of her inheritance from her family.³¹ During her husband's lifetime the woman's dowry was his to use or spend and although it was understood that she might bequeath it as she wished, most often it was left to her sons.³² The recurrent need for legislation and petitioning to enable widows to gain rightful access to their dowries,³³ suggests that significant numbers of husbands tried to avoid this. Presents “given” to the bride during the engagement period – often clothing and jewellery equivalent to the dowry in value - reverted to the husband on their marriage to lend, sell or rent as he wished.³⁴ Likewise any non-dotal assets the bride brought to the marriage were legally under the husband's control.³⁵ Women's access to legal and court systems was limited. In theory women

²⁶ 'The Story of the servant girl Nencia' in *Renaissance and Reformation: A Reader*, Edited by Michael Bennett, (Hobart, 2012), pp. 52-54

²⁷ Quoted in *Ideals and Realities*, p. 117

²⁸ James, 'Friendship and Dynastic Marriage', p. 6

²⁹ King, *The Renaissance in Europe*, p. 156

³⁰ Cohn, *Women in the Streets*, p. 55

³¹ Jane Fair Bestor, 'Marriage Transactions in Renaissance Italy and Mauss's Essay on the Gift' in *Past & Present*, No. 164 (1999), p. 26

³² King, *The Renaissance in Europe*, p. 158

³³ *Ideals and Realities*, pp. 194-196

³⁴ Bestor, 'Marriage Transactions', pp. 7-8

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 42

could seek legal remedies to reclaim their dowries or in other matters,³⁶ however they generally needed a male protector or intermediary and often were not legally permitted to enter court buildings. Women trying to obtain justice would be questioned outside, but could not personally observe the court proceedings.³⁷ Likewise, women accused of a crime, such as prostitution, were denied access to court buildings and thus could not be present at their own trials.

In summary, Italian Renaissance women were severely curtailed in their access to public spaces; the definition of space as private and therefore available to women, even within the home, was fluid and depended on men's use of it or perceptions about it; and women were often prevented from taking part in public activities that directly concerned them.

Renaissance men and women were not just enmeshed in family groups and networks; everyone was more or less obliged to be members of a guild, parish, confraternity or other such association. They lived in a world where it was not possible to imagine an individual could be detached or self-contained,³⁸ so the question of what opportunities women had to make their own lives cannot be considered in a 21st Century way. Italian Renaissance women had almost no possibility of travelling, setting up house on their own, choosing whether or not to marry, acquiring professional work skills or having a career, so this essay will examine some of the ways a woman might benefit not just her husband or family, but her own life – through education, work, faith, patronage and the arts.

Most Renaissance Italian girls were taught to run a household – from the cooking, baking, cleaning and sewing required in a modest household, to the supervision of servants in an affluent one - to help with the family business or farming activities, and to behave morally, that is modestly, silently, charitably and obediently.

If you have a daughter, teach her to sew and not to read, because it is not proper for a woman to know how to read unless you want her to become a nun.³⁹

PAULO DA CERTALDO

³⁶ Cohn *Women in the Street*, p. 8

³⁷ Tomas, 'Did Women have a Space?', p. 313

³⁸ John Jefferies Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, (Hampshire and New York, 2006), pp. 130-131

³⁹ Paolo da Certaldo quoted in *Ideals and Realities*, p. 102

Girls who did learn to read, were strictly limited for the most part to reading prayer books, saints' lives and moral and religious works.

...I do not approve of [noble young girls] learning languages, oratory and how to write poetry together with young male children... nor can I discern how this could be useful to the common good, or for the particular good of these young girls.⁴⁰

SILVIO ANTONIANO

Girls were considered to have innately inferior minds and educating them in the same way as boys was useless - because they could have no part to play in public life, the principal aim of a humanist education - and dangerous to society, as an educated woman might come to despise her domestic duties or disagree with her husband.⁴¹ Most girls were educated so that they would be able to teach their children good speech, good manners and the basics of virtue and religion.⁴² Elite girls were also educated to be charming companions for their husbands and appreciative audiences for men's ideas and opinions, able to enhance and promote men's conversations, but not contributing ideas themselves. Additionally, such girls were taught music, dancing, painting and 'how to be festive' in order to entertain their menfolk.⁴³ As mothers' responsibility for their children's education ended at the age of reason (7 years of age) when fathers took over, and as the education of girls beyond this age was almost always conducted by male teachers - despite concerns over girls' honour - there was no teaching role for women to justify their education beyond these basics.

Work was probably a necessity for all but elite women. Poor unmarried girls - urban and rural - were often employed as domestic servants, to learn housework skills, to earn their dowry and to reduce the burden of feeding and clothing them at home. Effectively these young women were working for money that would be given to their future husband and to acquire the skills to care for men, their children and their household assets. Married women were not employed as domestic servants, although they sometimes lived-in as wet-nurses. Often wet-nursing contracts were between the father of the baby and the wet-nurse's husband who would receive all or part of her wage.⁴⁴ Foundling hospitals also employed large numbers of wet-nurses. Married women and widows were also employed as nurses and servants in hospitals, alms-

⁴⁰ Silvio Antoniano quoted in *Ideals and Realities*, p. 104

⁴¹ Joan Gibson, 'Educating for Silence, Renaissance Women and the Language Arts' in *Hypatia*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1989), p. 12

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 15 and 19

⁴³ Joan Kelly-Gadol, 'Did Women have a Renaissance?' in *Becoming Visible, Women in European History*, Edited by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, (Boston, 1977), pp. 150-151

⁴⁴ *Ideals and Realities*, pp. 268-269

houses and hospices, as plague nurses, mid-wives and lying-in women. Many women worked in their family's business - assisting father, brother, husband, son - to his financial benefit rather than receiving a wage herself.⁴⁵ Spinning for the textile industry was always predominantly women's work, especially rural women. Even middle-class women such as Alessandra Strozzi, who had servants and indeed slaves, would personally spin flax into fine linen⁴⁶ for the use of her own household and family. Rural women worked on their family farms, tying vines, harvesting grapes as well as gathering mulberry leaves, raising silk cocoons and spinning and reeling silk for the emerging silk industry.⁴⁷ For the relatively small proportion of women who did earn a wage, it was usually barely subsistence level and many more women than men were obliged to supplement their wages with handouts from charitable institutions.⁴⁸ The only potentially well-paid employment for women I found in my reading was as Matron of a hospital, a management position similar in many ways to a Prioress in a convent.⁴⁹ Another large group of Italian Renaissance women working without pay were nuns and nun-servants. Nuns took up a variety of management positions, such as Mother Superior or Abbess, Treasurer and Novice Mistress, as well as undertaking the spiritual work of prayer - primarily singing and saying the eight daily canonical offices - all requiring the ability to read Latin and therefore generally limited to elite women.⁵⁰ To avoid idleness and to earn money for their convent, these Choir nuns were also generally expected to undertake other tasks, such as spinning and weaving, lacework and other decorations⁵¹, or as scribes, copying and illuminating manuscripts, and with the advent of printing, as compositors for local printing shops.⁵² Domestic work - cleaning, washing, kitchen work, baking and attending to the garden and chickens - was the responsibility of Servant nuns, who were admitted to convents with smaller or no dowries, but under more stringent rules than Choir nuns, forbidden to go to another convent, learn to read or be anything other than a servant for the rest of their lives.⁵³

⁴⁵ Judith C. Brown, 'A Woman's Place was in the Home, Women's Work in Renaissance Tuscany' in *Rewriting the Renaissance, The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, Edited by Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers, (Chicago, London, 1987), p. 208

⁴⁶ *Letters of Alessandra Strozzi*, p. 139

⁴⁷ Brown, 'A Woman's Place', pp. 220-221

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 224

⁴⁹ *Ideals and Realities*, pp. 270-272

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 216

⁵¹ Silvia Evangelisti, 'To Find God in Work? Female Social Stratification in Early Modern Italian Convents' in *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2009), p. 406

⁵² *Ideals and Realities*, p. 219

⁵³ Evangelisti, 'To Find God in Work?', pp. 409-411

Participation in confraternities enabled women, especially widows, to undertake charitable and spiritual activities and to live a religious life with vows of obedience and chastity, without actually being enclosed.⁵⁴ This work included caring for the sick, laying out the dead, or raising dowry funds for poor girls and prostitutes.⁵⁵ Membership in confraternities enabled some women to found hospitals or visit and comfort criminals in prison or at executions.⁵⁶ Confraternity membership might offer social activities, the possibility of status as an office bearer - although very few management roles were available to women, even in so-called women's confraternities - and participation in religious activities such as processions and flagellation - again often unavailable to women.⁵⁷ Although the number and importance of women saints increased significantly during this period, they were still a small minority and although King tells us that "Italy abounded with holy women", only 152 such women have been identified in Italy between the 14th and 18th Centuries⁵⁸, not so very abundant, given the large numbers of women who were dispatched to convents as children and young women or who chose a religious lifestyle as widows. Nevertheless women such as Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Bologna, Catherine of Genoa and Angela Merici were recognised and respected as mystics, scholars, educators and founders of hospitals. However, in most cases, senior Churchmen were appointed as spiritual directors to these holy women and were highly significant in directing and controlling their lives.⁵⁹

In the Middle Ages, especially in northern Italian courts, it had been possible for some elite widows to control their own wealth and their children's marriages and to some extent this continued into the Renaissance period. However the cultural and legal view that assets and children were 'owned' by men not women, meant that even when a man willed property and responsibility for their children to his widow this often led to many years of legal wrangling as her control was contested by male relatives.⁶⁰ A few elite women flourished as matriarchs, sometimes even briefly ruling – such as Caterina Sforza, Duchess of Milan in the late 1400's – although usually only as regent for a male

⁵⁴ *Ideals and Realities*, p. 231

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50

⁵⁶ King, *The Renaissance in Europe*, p. 179

⁵⁷ Linda Guzzetti and Antje Ziemann, 'Women in the Fourteenth-Century Venetian Scuole' in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (2002), pp. 1-2 and 13

⁵⁸ King, *The Renaissance in Europe*, pp. 181-182

⁵⁹ John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power, Female Saints and their Male Collaborators*, (New York, 2006), pp. 173-176

⁶⁰ McIver, 'Matrons as Patrons', p. 78-9

child or until a male forcibly took control.⁶¹ Many wives and daughters of elite families appeared to have access to power, however in most cases this was indirect or provisional. For example Francesco Gonzaga encouraged his young, intelligent wife to assume some of his political duties only so long as she deferred to his authority and opinions.⁶² The Medici women in Florence, by representing and supporting the political interests of their male relatives rather than any interests of their own, were able to play a part in the political arena, to the extent of acting as patrons to people who wished them to intercede with the men of the family.⁶³ Artistic patronage by women was also limited, partly due to lack of control over the necessary wealth and partly due to the widespread view that it was a man's role to spend and a woman's role to conserve what the man had acquired.⁶⁴ A few women, usually older widows, had the resources to commission works of art, most often for their church or family funerary chapels, but even elite women such as Isabella d'Este and Eleonora di Toledo would ask men to act as intermediaries in their negotiations with artists.⁶⁵ Similarly, those nuns who commissioned works such as altarpieces usually used male intermediaries.⁶⁶

Those few Italian Renaissance women who gained recognition for their artistic talents – as artists, musicians, actresses or poets – were typically praised in ways that affirmed the primacy of masculine creativity, such as Ippolita, wife of Fabrizio Parmigiano, who was commended for painting frescos that were indistinguishable from his⁶⁷. Women were members of theatrical companies – generally part of a husband and wife team - there were a few professional singers and musicians, and sometimes nuns performed concerts and put on plays for their own entertainment. Women's access to artistic training depended on the attitude of their father or husband, or their ability to teach themselves. Sofonisba Anglissola and her five sisters received training as artists because their father saw this as a means to his own financial gain, while Plautilla Nelli, a nun from the age of 14, was a self-taught painter and miniaturist. Of those women who were able to practice as artists, very few received commissions directly – due to the

⁶¹ Kelly-Gadol, 'Did Women have a Renaissance?', p. 149

⁶² James, 'Friendship and Dynastic Marriage', pp. 14-16

⁶³ Tomas, 'Did Women have a Space?', pp. 325-326

⁶⁴ P. Murphy, 'The Economics of the Woman Artist', in *Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque*, Edited by Elizabeth S.G. Nicholson, Rebecca Price, Jane McAllister and Karen I. Peterfreund, (Milano, 2007), pp. 31-32

⁶⁵ *Ideals and Realities*, pp. 246-247

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 226

⁶⁷ Claudio Strinati, 'On the Origins of Women Painters', in *Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque*, Edited by Elizabeth S.G. Nicholson, Rebecca Price, Jane McAllister and Karen I. Peterfreund, (Milano, 2007), p. 15

social norms that prevented women from “scurrying around”, promoting themselves and actively seeking work the way that male artists did – and very few were paid in cash – instead they often received payment in the form of gifts.⁶⁸ Architecture was not open women, due to its public nature and because women were deemed untrustworthy with expenditure on this scale.⁶⁹ Twelve Renaissance Italian women gained reputations as humanist writers, poets and orators, which seems like a significant number until one compares it with the identification of 600 male humanists just up to 1530.⁷⁰ Several of these twelve women are known only by reputation – no written work survived - and only three or four were still writing beyond their mid-twenties. Women who received a humanist education were denied training in rhetoric or dialectic debate, were often referred to as honorary males and were described as fierce, combative and unchaste.⁷¹ Poetry was a public act, literally something to be displayed on a wall, and therefore unsuitable, even dangerous, for women to engage in.⁷² Although there are a few surviving works by women that suggest a passion for women’s education or what we would today call women’s rights, most conformed to, even promoted prevailing ideas about the nature of women:

O female sex, how frail you are,
how mutable you are, how lacking duty.
So that it’s true, imperfect animal,
that you have no sense of honour.
You think you are never wrong, nor live wickedly,
thus ever demonstrating your high conceit.
O woman of impatient lust,
How easily you twist and change.⁷³

LAURA TERRACINA

A few (very young) women had opportunities for public speaking. These orations generally presented them as charming and accomplished, and were aimed at praising men, such as visiting dignities, rather than opportunities to present their own ideas. Continuing to write beyond their youth exposed these women not only to accusations of manliness, but of immodesty and lack of chasteness, and contradicted the goal of

⁶⁸ Jordana Pomeroy, ‘Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque’ in *Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque*, Edited by Elizabeth S.G. Nicholson, Rebecca Price, Jane McAllister and Karen I. Peterfreund, (Milano, 2007), pp. 20-21

⁶⁹ Jonathon W. Zophy, *A Short History of Renaissance and Reformation Europe, Dances over Fire and Water*, (New Jersey, 2003), p. 120

⁷⁰ King, *The Renaissance in Europe*, p. 138

⁷¹ Gibson, ‘Educating Women for Silence’, pp. 16 and 18

⁷² Holt Parker, ‘Latin and Greek Poetry by Five Renaissance Italian Women Humanists’ in *Sex and Gender, Medieval and Renaissance Texts, The Latin Tradition*, Edited by Barbara K. Gold, Paul Allen Miller and Charles Platter, (New York, 1997),p. 249

⁷³ Quoted in *Ideals and Realities*, p. 14

teaching girls in order that they became silent women.⁷⁴ On the whole, more praise and respect was given to women for creativity in traditional female activities such as lacework and embroidery, yet even here it was men, such as Cesare Vecellio, who published the elegant and aspirational pattern books women followed.⁷⁵

Although there were some limited opportunities for women to develop knowledge and skills, to earn a living, to express themselves creatively or to undertake good works, I could find no activities or space for women in Renaissance Italy that was not severely circumscribed or controlled by men and their values. This essay began by identifying five Italian Renaissance women who appeared to be exercising a degree of autonomy in their lives, despite living in a society that expected them to be more or less enclosed, more or less silent, and to be subservient to men and patriarchal authority, no matter their stage or place in life. The reality of women's agency and power in Renaissance Italy is poignantly encapsulated by looking a little closer at each of these women's lives.

Catherine of Siena was most famous for her letter writing, yet in fact she could not write; she could barely read and almost certainly never read any of the letters sent in her name. Analysis shows that the letters are fairly consistent in terms of language and style, however although her most recent editor believes this to be evidence she dictated them all⁷⁶, perhaps it merely confirms there was a single mind behind the letters, not whose mind it was. Furthermore, throughout the last, most important years of her life, Catherine's activities were very closely directed and monitored by Raymond of Capua, who subsequently wrote the official Life and coordinated her canonisation proceedings.

Laura Cereta was proficient in Latin by the age of eleven and continued her studies until she married at the age of fifteen. For the next three years she continued writing, however few of her letters seem to have been sent and many were written to imaginary people. Her writing shows her to have been a highly educated young woman, passionate about women's education, but - and we cannot be sure why - she wrote nothing in the remaining eleven years to her death. Of the hundreds of important male humanists, surely few if any felt they could or should cease writing at the age of eighteen.

⁷⁴ Gibson, 'Educating Women for Silence', pp. 17-19

⁷⁵ *Ideals and Realities*, p. 263

⁷⁶ Suzanne Noffke, 'Introduction' in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, p. xxlvii

Alessandra Strozzi's letters suggest a woman at the centre of her family; with children and businesses and all the decisions to be made about them, swirling around her. However, when we look more closely at the marriage arrangements for example, it becomes apparent that in fact she made no independent decisions, took no part in negotiations, only ever saw those prospective brides by accident. Even though they were her children and her family's businesses, control was in the hands of her male relatives. Alessandra could make suggestions and comments, be a communication channel between the men in her family, but she always had to wait for men to make the decisions.

Living in northern Italy where elite women experienced slightly less constrained lives, Silvia Sanvitale was responsible for an interesting artwork now located in a museum in Modena, and her widowed mother Laura – who paid for the renovations – appears to have had control over a large inheritance. But even they were limited to decorating private rooms in Silvia's husband's mansion and commissioning art work from a local painter, Nicolo dell'Abate, in the early years of his career prior to his heading off to Bologna and France to make a name for himself.

The saddest story belongs to Properzia de' Rossi. Her relief sculpture in the Church of San Petronio is quite beautiful, but it was her only serious work. Other than that, that she eked out a living selling carved peach pips and on several occasions was taken to court - apparently for simply trying to obtain commissions, but her manner was considered too aggressive and inappropriate for a woman. Three years after finishing her accomplished work of art at the Church of San Petronio, aged forty, Properzia died in a syphilitic hospital.