ISSUE 7

Did Women and Men Benefit Equally from the Renaissance?

YES: Mary R. Beard, from *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (Collier Books, 1946)

NO: Joan Kelly-Gadol, from "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History,* 2d ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1987)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Historian Mary R. Beard contends that during the Renaissance, Italian women of the higher classes turned to the study of Greek and Roman literature and committed themselves alongside men to developing well-rounded personalities.

NO: Historian Joan Kelly-Gadol argues that women enjoyed greater advantages during the Middle Ages and experienced a relative loss of position and power during the Renaissance.

In 1974 Joan Kelly-Gadol published a pathbreaking essay that challenged traditional periodization. Before that, virtually every publication on the Renaissance proclaimed it to be a great leap forward for everyone, a time when new ideas were everywhere discussed and the old strictures of the Middle Ages were thrown off. The difficulty for Kelly-Gadol was that her own work on women during the medieval and Renaissance periods told a different story. She was one of the first to raise this troubling question: Are the turning points in history the same for women as they are for men? Kelly-Gadol found that well-born women lived in a relatively free environment during the Middle Ages. The courtly love tradition allowed powerful, property-owning women to satisfy their own sexual and emotional needs. With the arrival of the Renaissance, however, the courtly love tradition was defined by powerful male princes who found it desirable for women to be passive and chaste in order to serve the needs of the rising bourgeoisie.

Mary R. Beard is considered the original pathfinder. Her stunning 1946 book *Woman as Force in History* was written, she said, to "destroy the myth

that women have done and are suited for little else than bearing and rearing children." Beard, like Kelly-Gadol, studied women of the upper classes. She was eager to find a place for women in history to counter the prevailing view of male historians that by studying the "great man" we could understand the age he created. Beard began looking for the "great woman" and found traces of her throughout human history. After Beard's book was published, it became much more difficult for historians to treat women as passive victims of history.

The field of women's history has a history of its own. Beginning with the pioneering work of historians such as Beard, scholars first engaged in what Gerda Lerner has called "compensatory history"—compensating for past omissions by researching and writing about the great women of history. In a second phase, women's history moved to "contributory history." Looking past the great women, historians took all the traditional categories of standard male history and found women who filled them—women who spent their lives as intellectuals, soldiers, politicians, and scientists. The current phase of women's history parallels more general trends in social history, concentrating on the ordinary people who lived during historical epochs. In this more fully mature phase, the emphasis is on women's culture—how women saw the world from within their own systems and ways of doing things. If Beard was doing compensatory history, Kelly-Gadol might be said to be engaging in contributory history. The women she writes about led lives similar to those of men in their class during the Middle Ages, but Kelly-Gadol contends that they had a different experience during the Renaissance.

One caution to keep in mind is that people are not aware of the times in which they live in terms of the historical periods that scholars later use for identification. People of the past, like people today, are more concerned with their personal lives and fortunes than with historical trends. Periodization, or the marking of turning points in the past, can be useful. It can help to identify broad trends and forks in the road as we explore the past. What women's history has taught us, however, is that looking at the experiences of men may or may not tell us what the experiences of women were like during the same time periods.

Beard collaborated with her husband Charles Beard on many widely read history books. When she wrote *Woman as Force in History*, which is excerpted in the following selection, her aim was to demonstrate that women "have been a force in making all the history that has been made." Her book and the field of women's history that it inspired made possible the work of later scholars such as Kelly-Gadol. Beard challenged traditional notions about the role of women in history; Kelly-Gadol challenged history itself. If what has been said about certain turning points in human history is true only for men or much more true for men than for women, then the whole field of history must be reconceptualized. Although both of the selections that follow were written some time ago, the questions they raise remain lively today.

Mary R. Beard

YES

Evidences in Mediaeval Educational and Intellectual Interests

Humanizing Education—Individual, Civic, and Philosophic

Many things conspired to give leadership and acclaim in education and letters to the women of Italy, earlier than to women of other countries. Italy was the original home of the revival of the Latin classics and it was to Italy that the choicest of Greek classics were brought from Byzantium, before and after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. To Italy came able scholars and tutors straight from the Near East; and at their hands, or under their influence, Greek and Latin grammars and texts of the classics were issued in profusion.

With the revival of classical learning came the humanizing of intellectual interest, knowledge, and public measures; that is, thought and action were directed by this learning to human concerns, as distinguished from the divine, and to the human race in general, as distinguished from individual salvation and particular peoples. Now educated men and women in Italy had at their command, for example, the great histories written by Greek and Roman authorities in antiquity and were attracted by the difference between these human and secular works and the monkish chronicles which, besides being fragmentary, twisted the story of the past to fit theological conceptions of the universe. Now Italian men and women were in possession of literary and philosophic works dealing entirely with the great human and nature subjects, without regard for those "ultimate causes" with which theologians occupied themselves on the basis of theories and convictions respecting the nature and designs of God. Moreover, instead of the degraded Latin so often employed by monkish chroniclers, Italian men and women now had models of writing by Greek and Roman thinkers and stylists, inviting them to lofty aspirations and lucid expressions whether in poetry, letters, the arts, history, philosophy, or politics.

In the promotion of the new learning, two tasks had to be carried out. The first included the recovery of additional classical works, the preparation of critical editions, the reissue of the best in manuscript form and, after the

invention of printing, in book form, and critical study of the new texts. The second was the dissemination of the knowledge derived from the critical study.

The number of women who devoted themselves to scholarship was by no means as large as the number of men, for reasons other than the lack of talents; but in the fifteenth century and early sixteenth century many Italian women displayed the highest technical competence in the study, interpretation, and exposition of the revived humanist learning. Some of them, for example Isotta Nogarola, we are told by Dr. G. R. Potter in *The Cambridge Mediaeval History* (Volume VIII, Chapter XXIII), "could hold their own in matters of scholarship with the best of their male contemporaries and... were accepted and even acclaimed everywhere."

According to Dr. H. J. Mozans' *Women in Science,* women took "an active part in the great educational movement inaugurated by the revival of learning" and won "the highest honors for their sex in every department of science, art, and learning.... The universities, which had been opened to them at the close of the middle ages, gladly conferred upon them the doctorate, and eagerly welcomed them to the chairs of some of their most important faculties.... Cecelia Gonzaga, pupil of the celebrated humanist, Vittorino da Feltre, read the gospels in Greek when she was only seven years old. Isotta and Ginevra Nogarola, pupils of the humanist, Guarino Verronese, likewise distinguished themselves at an early age by their rare knowledge of Latin and Greek.... Livia Chiavello, of Fabriano, was celebrated as one of the most brilliant representatives of the Petrarchian school.... Cassandra Fidele, of Venice, deserved, according to Poliziano, the noted Florentine humanist to be ranked with that famous universal genius, Pico de la Mirandola. So extensive were her attainments that in addition to being a thorough mistress of Latin and Greek, she was likewise distinguished in music, eloquence, philosophy, and even theology.... But for the extent and variety of her attainments, Tarquinia Molza seems to have eclipsed all her contemporaries. Not only did she excel in poetry and the fine arts, she also had a rare knowledge of astronomy and mathematics, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. So great was the esteem in which she was held that the senate of Rome conferred upon her the singular honor of Roman citizenship, transmissible in perpetuity to her descendants."

In nearly every great intellectual center of Italy women were lecturing on literature and philosophy, and religious faith could not escape impacts of the new knowledge. They were studying medicine and natural science in the light of pagan learning in these subjects. Great Italian women teachers of the awakening "sent forth such students as Moritz von Spiegelberg and Rudolph Agricola to reform the instruction of Deventer and Zwoll and prepare the way for Erasmus and Reuchlin."

Some of the women crossed the Alps themselves, as the ancient learning was said to do when Erasmus and other returning students bore back to outlying countries the knowledge gleaned in Italy. One of the most distinguished classical scholars of the age, Olympia Morata, for example, meeting difficulties as Renée's court where the duchess and all her friends were persecuted by the Duke for their religious independence, fled to Germany, with a young Bavarian student of medicine and philosophy, and was planning to continue her teaching

of the classics in Heidelberg, to which she had been invited, when an untimely death closed her career.

In the dissemination of the new learning among the Italian people, especially among the rich but including some not as well off in this world's goods, five methods were widely and intensively employed: tutoring and self-directed study in families, education in schools, humanist lecturing, conversations in small private groups and larger coteries, and correspondence.

As soon as the Renaissance had got under way, Italian women in the rich commercial cities and at ducal or princely courts, such as Ferrara and Urbino, turned with avidity to the study and discussion of Greek and Roman literature.

While men of the governing class were away from their castles fighting in wars, women and girls of their families thus "improved their minds" and displayed their accomplishments to the warriors when they came home on furloughs. French officers and Spanish ambassadors who were guests in the great houses from time to time were so impressed that they let their own women relatives and friends know how backward they were and how advisable it would be for them to catch up with Italian women. When Erasmus, Grocyn, and Colet joined in the student pilgrimage to Italy early in the sixteenth century, they found women immersed in the ancient languages and lore, surrounded by poets, artists, scholars, and writers from near and distant places as companions in the new intellectual movement.

This linguistic and literary development was not confined to the ruling circles, however. Classical schools for girls and boys were opened in Italian cities, giving to the business and professional circles, as well as to patricians, opportunities to acquire knowledge of the ancient languages and the natural, or secular, philosophies embodied in Greek and Latin literature. Here entered the insurgent bourgeois influence which Henry Adams, looking back from the twentieth century and his vantage point within it, concluded was an invincible menace to the throne of Mary, Queen of Heaven.

Among the outstanding Italians of the fifteenth century who promoted education, letters, and arts were Gian Francesco Gonzaga II and his wife, Paola Malatesta, who brought to Mantua in 1425 the exceptional humanist, Vittorino da Feltre, and established him there as the teacher of their sons and daughters. The Gonzagas took it as a matter of course that their daughters should have the same kind of instruction as their sons—in an age when women, according to a tradition of our time, were supposed to have no education at all. It was with the full support of both patrons that Vittorino was to devise and execute a program of education that made his school one of the most creative in the Italy of the Renaissance.

In Chapter XVI, Volume I, of *The Cambridge Modern History,* Sir R. C. Jebb describes the new type of civic education created by Vittorino at his school in Mantua under the patronage of Gian and Paola Gonzaga in 1425 and carried on until his death in 1446: "His aim was to develop the whole nature of his pupils, intellectual, moral, and physical; not with a view to any special calling, but so as to form good citizens and useful members of society, capable of bearing their part with credit in public and private life. For intellectual training he took the Latin classics as a basis; teaching them, however, not in the

dry and meagre fashion generally prevalent in the mediaeval schools... but in the large and generous spirit of Renaissance humanism. Poetry, oratory, Roman history, and the ethics of Roman Stoicism, were studied in the best Latin writers.... By degrees Vittorino introduced some Greek also.... He provided for some teaching of mathematics, including geometry... arithmetic, and the elements of astronomy. Nor did he neglect the rudiments of such knowledge as then passed for natural philosophy and natural history. Music and singing also found a place.... With great insight and tact, Vittorino saw how far social education could be given in a school with advantage to morals and without loss to manliness; he inculcated a good tone of manners, and encouraged the acquirement of such social accomplishments as the age demanded in well-educated men."

It was not only as scholars, tutors, lecturers, members of coteries, participants in the work of academies, and patrons of schools that Italian women led and cooperated in the dissemination of the humanist learning. They carried on extensive correspondence with men and other women engaged in spreading humanist knowledge and doctrines in Italy and throughout Western Europe. Of Olympia Morata, we are told that she "corresponded on equal terms with the most learned men of the day."

All these free, wide-reaching, and influential activities of Italian women in the promotion of humanist learning were in keeping with the very spirit of the Renaissance. In the third chapter of *Die Kultur der Renaissance,* Jacob Burckhardt, a renowned authority, says: "In order to understand the higher forms of social intercourse during the Renaissance, it is necessary to know that woman was regarded as in a position of perfect equality with man. One should not allow one's self to be deceived by the cunning and in part malicious researches respecting the presumptive inferiority of the beautiful sex.... Above all, the education of the woman among the higher classes is essentially the same as that of the man. There was not the slightest hesitation among the Italians of the Renaissance in according the same literary and even philological instruction to sons and daughters; for as they saw in this new classical culture the highest possession of life, so they assumed gladly that girls were welcome to it.... There was no question of a conscious 'emancipation' of woman or anything so out of the ordinary, for the situation was understood to be a matter of course. The education of the woman of rank, just as well as that of the man, sought the development of a well-rounded personality in every respect. The same development of mind and heart that perfected the man was necessary for perfecting woman."

Men of the Renaissance not only accepted as a matter of course this free and easy association with women in the advancement of learning and the civic spirit. Many writers of the period made a point of paying special tributes to women, if frequently in exaggerated form. Take, for example, Boccaccio (1313–1375), the fervent humanist, poet, story-teller, and friend of Petrarch. Besides writing *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium,* dealing with the troubles and vanities of illustrious men from the time of Adam to the fourteenth century, he wrote illustrious women, *De Claris Mulieribus,* starting with Eve and coming down to Giovanna, queen of Naples; included were Cleopatra, Lucretia, Portia, Semi-

ramis, and Sappho. This work passed through many editions and is esteemed as among the important texts of the Renaissance. It was translated into Italian by Joseph Betussi who "in the ardor of his zeal enriched it by fifty new articles."

About a hundred years later, Henry C. Agrippa (1486–1525), German writer, soldier, physician, architect, historiographer, doctor of law, and traveler in many lands, outdid Boccaccio. In 1509 Agrippa published a work on the nobility and superexcellence of women (*De nobilitate et praecellentia feminei sexus*), dedicated to Margaret of Burgundy. In this volume of thirty chapters, Agrippa employed the writings of fable-makers, poets, historians, and the canon law in efforts to prove the case, and resorted to theological, physical, historical, moral, and even magical evidences to support his argument. He declared that he was moved to write the book by his sense of duty and obligations to duty.

Many men wrote paeans to women, as Lucian the Roman had done and as men were to continue to do in the mood of the Renaissance, in many countries, for centuries. Finally, in 1774, just two years before the Declaration of Independence at Philadelphia, an account of such hymning of women was published at Philadelphia. This was a work in two volumes: *Essay on the Character, Manners, and Genius of Women in Different Ages*—enlarged from a French work of M. Thomas by Mr. Russell, an Englishman. It included a section on the "Revival of Letters and the Learning of Women, Of the Books written in Honour of Women, and on the Superiority of the Sexes, and the subject continued."

After giving an account of the work by Boccaccio and Betussi, the author of the *Essay* continued: "Philip de Bergamo, an Augustine monk, published a volume in Latin OF ILLUSTRIOUS WOMEN. Another performance on the same subject was published by Julius Caesar Capacio, secretary to the city of Naples; one by Charles Pinto, in Latin, and in verse; one by Ludovico Domenichi; one by James Philip Tomassini, bishop of Venice; and one by Bernard Scardioni, a canon by Padua, OF THE ILLUSTRIOUS WOMEN OF PADUA.

"Francis Augustine della Chiesa, bishop of Saluca, wrote a treatise on THE WOMEN FAMOUS IN LITERATURE; Lewis Jacob de St. Charles, a Carmelite, wrote another on THE WOMEN ILLUSTRIOUS BY THEIR WRITINGS; and Alexander Van Denbushce, of the Low Countries, wrote one on THE LEARNED WOMEN.

"The celebrated Father le Moine published a volume under the title of GALERIE DE FEMMES FORTES; and Brantome wrote THE LIVES OF ILLUSTRIOUS WOMEN. But it is to be observed that Brantome, a French knight and a courtier, speaks only of queens and princesses....

"After Brantome, Hilario da Costa, a Minim, published two volumes in quarto, each volume consisting of eight hundred pages, containing, as he tells us, the panegyrics of ALL the women of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, distinguished by their valour, their talents, or their virtues. But the pious ecclesiastic has, in fact, only given us the panegyrics of the CATHOLIC women of that period. He does not say a word, for example, of queen Elizabeth....

"But all must yield to the indefatigable Italian, Peter Paul de Ribera, who published in his own language, a work entitled 'The Immortal Triumphs and heroic Enterprises of Eight hundred and forty-five women.'...

"Besides these large compilations dedicated to the honour of the whole sex, many of the writers of those times, men of taste and gallantry, addressed

panegyrics to individuals, to women who were the living ornaments of their age. This practice was most common in Italy, where every thing conspired to favour it.... The courts of Naples, of Milan, of Mantua, of Parma, of Florence, and several others, formed so many schools of taste, between which reigned an emulation of glory and of talents. The men distinguished themselves by their address in war, or in love; the women, by their knowledge and accomplishments."

From Italy zeal for classical learning fanned out like rays from a sun. Queen Isabella of Spain became interested in it through her acquaintance with Vittoria Colonna and brought Italian men and women to Spain to instruct her courtiers and students in the universities. She studied the classics herself. She established a school of the classics in her palace. She attended examinations of students and watched with eagle eyes and sharp ears the progress of this education among her retinue. She collected texts for the courtiers to read and for students to use in the universities. One woman was commissioned to lecture on the classics at Salamanca; another on rhetoric at Alcalá. Later Philip II enriched this Spanish Renaissance by his patronage of Italian artists. He encouraged Spanish women to paint portraits as well as write letters, by inviting the Italian women portrait painter, Sophonisba Anguisciola, to his court. Of this portrait painter Van Dyck long afterward was to say that he learned more from her, even in her blind old age, than he had learned from many seeing men.

In France enthusiasm for classical learning was stimulated by Christine de Pisan—Italian in background—who grew up at the court of Charles V, in the late fourteenth century, where her father was installed as an astrologer. After the visit of Petrarch to France in quest of Greek and Latin texts possibly among the monastic treasures, monarchs began to accumulate a library for the French court. But Christine de Pisan did more than read texts there. She studied Plato and also Arab scientific learning in some books in the library. She shared Dante's interest in the State and urged the French to come to grips with their problem of national survival so seriously menaced by the invading armies of the English King. By coming to grips she meant more than war; she meant coming to realize the necessity of granting privileges to the middle class without which, she contended, France could not get up on its feet. Before Christine died, Jeanne d'Arc took the field as commander of French troops—her actual leadership financed by the great capitalist, Jacques Coeur, her will to lead inspired by her "voices," her acceptance as leader facilitated by French adoration of the Virgin.

Christine de Pisan tried to offset the influence of Jean de Meung's stereotype of the perfect lady in his *Roman de la Rose* by her *Le Livre des trois Vertus (The Book of the Three Virtues)* addressed especially to women. She hoped to arouse and develop political consciousness among French women. To this end she defended the spirit of the freer-thinking Italian women of her day in her *Cité des Dames* and awakened such interest that she was invited to the English court. She did not accept the invitation on the ground that her supreme duty lay in France, but this book was translated into English as *The City of Women.*

Joan Kelly-Gadol

NO

Did Women Have a Renaissance?

One of the tasks of women's history is to call into question accepted schemes of periodization. To take the emancipation of women as a vantage point is to discover that events that further the historical development of men, liberating them from natural, social, or ideological constraints, have quite different, even opposite, effects upon women. The Renaissance is a good case in point. Italy was well in advance of the rest of Europe from roughly 1350 to 1530 because of its early consolidation of genuine states, the mercantile and manufacturing economy that supported them, and its working out of postfeudal and even postguild social relations. These developments reorganized Italian society along modern lines and opened the possibilities for the social and cultural expression for which the age is known. Yet precisely these developments affected women adversely, so much so that there was no renaissance for women—at least, not during the Renaissance. The state, early capitalism, and the social relations formed by them impinged on the lives of Renaissance women in different ways according to their different positions in society. But the startling fact is that women as a group, especially among the classes that dominated Italian urban life, experienced a contradiction of social and personal options that men of their classes either did not, as was the case with the bourgeoisie, or did not experience as markedly, as was the case with the nobility.

Before demonstrating this point, which contradicts the widely held notion of the equality of Renaissance women with men, we need to consider how to establish, let alone measure, loss or gain with respect to the liberty of women. I found the following criteria most useful for gauging the relative contraction (or expansion) of the powers of Renaissance women and for determining the quality of their historical experience: 1) the regulation of *female sexuality* as compared with male sexuality; 2) women's *economic* and *political roles,* that is, the kind of work they performed as compared with men, and their access to property, political power, and the education or training necessary for work, property, and power; 3) the *cultural roles* of women in shaping the outlook of their society, and access to the education and/or institutions necessary for this; 4) *ideology* about women, in particular the sex-role system displayed or advocated in the symbolic products of the society, its art, literature, and philosophy. Two points should be made about this ideological index. One is its rich

From Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History,* 2d ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Notes omitted.

inferential value. The literature, art, and philosophy of a society, which give us direct knowledge of the attitudes of the dominant sector of that society toward women, also yield indirect knowledge about our other criteria: namely, the sexual, economic, political, and cultural activities of women. Insofar as images of women relate to what really goes on, we can infer from them something about that social reality. But, second, the relations between the ideology of sex roles and the reality we want to get at are complex and difficult to establish. Such views may be prescriptive rather than descriptive; they may describe a situation that no longer prevails; or they may use the relation of the sexes symbolically and not refer primarily to women and sex roles at all. Hence, to assess the historical significance of changes in sex-role conception, we must bring such changes into connection with all we know about general developments in the society at large.

This essay examines changes in sex-role conception, particularly with respect to sexuality, for what they tell us about Renaissance society and women's place in it. At first glance, Renaissance thought presents a problem in this regard because it cannot be simply categorized. Ideas about the relation of the sexes range from a relatively complementary sense of sex roles in literature dealing with courtly manners, love, and education, to patriarchal conceptions in writings on marriage and the family, to a fairly equal presentation of sex roles in early Utopian social theory. Such diversity need not baffle the attempt to reconstruct a history of sex-role conceptions, however, and to relate its course to the actual situation of women. Toward this end, one needs to sort out this material in terms of the social groups to which it responds: to courtly society in the first case, the nobility of the petty despotic states of Italy; to the patrician bourgeoisie in the second, particularly of republics such as Florence. In the third case, the relatively equal position accorded women in Utopian thought (and in those lower-class movements of the radical Reformation analogous to it) results from a larger critique of early modern society and all the relations of domination that flow from private ownership and control of property. Once distinguished, each of these groups of sources tells the same story. Each discloses in its own way certain new constraints suffered by Renaissance women as the family and political life were restructured in the great transition from medieval feudal society to the early modern state. The sources that represent the interests of the nobility and the bourgeoisie point to this fact by a telling, double index. Almost all such works—with certain notable exceptions, such as Boccaccio and Ariosto—establish chastity as the female norm and restructure the relation of the sexes to one of female dependency and male domination.

The bourgeois writings on education, domestic life, and society constitute the extreme in this denial of women's independence. Suffice it to say that they sharply distinguish an inferior domestic realm of women from the superior public realm of men, achieving a veritable "renaissance" of the outlook and practices of classical Athens, with its domestic imprisonment of citizen wives. The courtly Renaissance literature we will consider was more gracious. But even here, by analyzing a few of the representative works of this genre, we find a new repression of the noblewoman's affective experience, in contrast to the latitude afforded her by medieval literature, and some of the social and cultural

reasons for it. Dante and Castiglione, who continued a literary tradition that began with the courtly love literature of eleventh- and twelfth-century Provence, transformed medieval conceptions of love and nobility. In the love ideal they formed, we can discern the inferior position the Renaissance noblewoman held in the relation of the sexes by comparison with her male counterpart and with her medieval predecessor as well.

Love and the Medieval Lady

Medieval courtly love, closely bound to the dominant values of feudalism and the Church, allowed in a special way for the expression of sexual love by women. Of course, only aristocratic women gained their sexual and affective rights thereby. If a knight wanted a peasant girl, the twelfth-century theorist of *The Art of Courtly Love,* Andreas Capellanus, encouraged him "not [to] hesitate to take what you seek and to embrace her by force." Toward the lady, however, "a true lover considers nothing good except what he thinks will please his beloved"; for if courtly love were to define itself as a noble phenomenon, it had to attribute an essential freedom to the relation between lovers. Hence, it metaphorically extended the social relation of vassalage to the love relationship, a "conceit" that Maurice Valency rightly called "the shaping principle of the whole design" of courtly love.

Of the two dominant sets of dependent social relations formed by feudalism—*les liens de dépendence,* as Marc Bloch called them—vassalage, the military relation of knight to lord, distinguished itself (in its early days) by being freely entered into. At a time when everyone was somebody's "man," the right to freely enter a relation of service characterized aristocratic bonds, whereas hereditability marked the servile work relation of serf to lord. Thus, in medieval romances, a parley typically followed a declaration of love until love freely proffered was freely returned. A kiss (like the kiss of homage) sealed the pledge, rings were exchanged, and the knight entered the love service of his lady. Representing love along the lines of vassalage had several liberating implications for aristocratic women. Most fundamental, ideas of homage and mutuality entered the notion of heterosexual relations along with the idea of freedom. As symbolized on shields and other illustrations that place the knight in the ritual attitude of commendation, kneeling before his lady with his hands folded between hers, homage signified male service, not domination or subordination of the lady, and it signified fidelity, constancy in that service. "A lady must honor her lover as a friend, not as a master," wrote Marie de Ventadour, a female troubadour or *trobairitz.* At the same time, homage entailed a reciprocity of rights and obligations, a service on the lady's part as well. In one of Marie de France's romances, a knight is about to be judged by the barons of King Arthur's court when his lady rides to the castle to give him "succor" and pleads successfully for him, as any overlord might. Mutuality, or complementarity, marks the relation the lady entered into with her *ami* (the favored name for "lover" and, significantly, a synonym for "vassal").

This relation between knight and lady was very much at variance with the patriarchal family relations obtaining in that same level of society. Aware of its incompatibility with prevailing family and marital relations, the celebrants of courtly love kept love detached from marriage. "We dare not oppose the opinion of the Countess of Champagne who rules that love can exert no power between husband and wife," Andreas Capellanus wrote (p. 175). But in opting for a free and reciprocal heterosexual relation outside marriage, the poets and theorists of courtly love ignored the almost universal demand of patriarchal society for female chastity, in the sense of the woman's strict bondage to the marital bed. The reasons why they did so, and even the fact that they did so, have long been disputed, but the ideas and values that justify this kind of adulterous love are plain. Marriage, as a relation arranged by others, carried the taint of social necessity for the aristocracy. And if the feudality denigrated marriage by disdaining obligatory service, the Church did so by regarding it not as a "religious" state, but an inferior one that responded to natural necessity. Moreover, Christianity positively fostered the ideal of courtly love at a deep level of feeling. The courtly relation between lovers took vassalage as its structural model, but its passion was nourished by Christianity's exaltation of love.

Christianity had accomplished its elevation of love by purging it of sexuality, and in this respect, by recombining the two, courtly love clearly departed from Christian teaching. The toleration of adultery it fostered thereby was in itself not so grievous. The feudality disregarded any number of church rulings that affected their interests, such as prohibitions of tournaments and repudiation of spouses (divorce) and remarriage. Moreover, adultery hardly needed the sanction of courtly love, which, if anything, acted rather as a restraining force by binding sexuality (except in marriage) to love. Lancelot, in Chrétien de Troyes's twelfth-century romance, lies in bed with a lovely woman because of a promise he has made, but "not once does he look at her, nor show her any courtesy. Why not? Because his heart does not go out to her.... The knight has only one heart, and this one is no longer really his, but has been entrusted to someone else, so that he cannot bestow it elsewhere." Actually, Lancelot's chastity represented more of a threat to Christian doctrine than the fact that his passion (for Guinevere) was adulterous, because his attitudes justified sexual love. Sexuality could only be "mere sexuality" for the medieval Church, to be consecrated and directed toward procreation by Christian marriage. Love, on the other hand, defined as passion for the good, perfects the individual; hence love, according to Thomas Aquinas, properly directs itself toward God. Like the churchman, Lancelot spurned mere sexuality—but for the sake of sexual love. He defied Christian *teaching* by reattaching love to sex; and experiencing his love as a devout vocation, as a passion, he found himself in utter accord with Christian *feeling*....

The Renaissance Lady: Politics and Culture

In his handbook for the nobility, Baldassare Castiglione's description of the lady of the court makes [the] difference in sex roles quite clear. On the one hand, the Renaissance lady appears as the equivalent of the courtier. She has the same virtues of mind as he, and her education is symmetrical with his. She learns everything—well, almost everything—he does: "knowledge of letters,

of music, of painting, and... how to dance and how to be festive." Culture is an accomplishment for noblewoman and man alike, used to charm others as much as to develop the self. But for the woman, charm had become the primary occupation and aim. Whereas the courtier's chief task is defined as the profession of arms, "in a Lady who lives at court a certain pleasing affability is becoming above all else, whereby she will be able to entertain graciously every kind of man" (p. 207).

... The Renaissance lady is not desired, not loved for herself. Rendered passive and chaste, she merely mediates the courtier's safe transcendence of an otherwise demeaning necessity. On the plane of symbolism, Castiglione thus had the courtier dominate both her and the prince; and on the plane of reality, he indirectly acknowledged the courtier's actual domination of the lady by having him adopt "woman's ways" in his relations to the prince. Castiglione had to defend against effeminacy in the courtier, both the charge of it (p. 92) and the actuality of faces "soft and feminine as many attempt to have who not only curl their hair and pluck their eyebrows, but preen themselves... and appear so tender and languid... and utter their words so limply" (p. 36). Yet the close-fitting costume of the Renaissance nobleman displayed the courtier exactly as Castiglione would have him, "well built and shapely of limb" (p. 36). His clothes set off his grace, as did his nonchalant ease, the new manner of those "who seem in words, laughter, in posture not to care" (p. 44). To be attractive, accomplished, and seem not to care; to charm and do so coolly—how concerned with impression, how masked the true self. And how manipulative: petitioning his lord, the courtier knows to be "discreet in choosing the occasion, and will ask things that are proper and reasonable; and he will so frame his request, omitting those parts that he knows can cause displeasure, and will skillfully make easy the difficult points so that his lord will always grant it" (p. 111). In short, how like a woman—or a dependent, for that is the root of the simile.

The accommodation of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century courtier to the ways and dress of women in no way bespeaks a greater parity between them. It reflects, rather, that general restructuring of social relations that entailed for the Renaissance noblewoman a greater dependency upon men as feudal independence and reciprocity yielded to the state. In this new situation, the entire nobility suffered a loss. Hence, the courtier's posture of dependency, his concern with the pleasing impression, his resolve "to perceive what his prince likes, and... to bend himself to this" (pp. 110–111). But as the state overrode aristocratic power, the lady suffered a double loss. Deprived of the possibility of independent power that the combined interests of kinship and feudalism guaranteed some women in the Middle Ages, and that the states of early modern Europe would preserve in part, the Italian noblewoman in particular entered a relation of almost universal dependence upon her family and her husband. And she experienced this dependency at the same time as she lost her commanding position with respect to the secular culture of her society.

Hence, the love theory of the Italian courts developed in ways as indifferent to the interests of women as the courtier, in his self-sufficiency, was indifferent as a lover. It accepted, as medieval courtly love did not, the double standard. It bound the lady to chastity, to the merely procreative sex of political marriage,

just as her weighty and costly costume came to conceal and constrain her body while it displayed her husband's noble rank. Indeed, the person of the woman became so inconsequential to this love relation that one doubted whether she could love at all. The question that emerges at the end of *The Courtier* as to "whether or not women are as capable of divine love as men" (p. 350) belongs to a love theory structured by mediation rather than mutuality. Woman's beauty inspired love but the lover, the agent, was man. And the question stands unresolved at the end of *The Courtier*—because at heart the spokesmen for Renaissance love were not really concerned about women or love at all.

Where courtly love had used the social relation of vassalage to work out a genuine concern with sexual love, Castiglione's thought moved in exactly the opposite direction. He allegorized love as fully as Dante did, using the relation of the sexes to symbolize the new political order. In this, his love theory reflects the social realities of the Renaissance. The denial of the right and power of women to love, the transformation of women into passive "others" who serve, fits the self-image of the courtier, the one Castiglione sought to remedy. The symbolic relation of the sexes thus mirrors the new social relations of the state, much as courtly love displayed the feudal relations of reciprocal personal dependence. But Renaissance love reflects, as well, the actual condition of dependency suffered by noblewomen as the state arose. If the courtier who charms the prince bears the same relation to him as the lady bears to the courtier, it is because Castiglione understood the relation of the sexes in the same terms that he used to describe the political relation: that is, as a relation between servant and lord. The nobleman suffered this relation in the public domain only. The lady, denied access to a freely chosen, mutually satisfying love relation, suffered it in the personal domain as well. Moreover, Castiglione's theory, unlike the courtly love it superseded, subordinated love itself to the public concerns of the Renaissance nobleman. He set forth the relation of the sexes as one of dependency and domination, but he did so in order to express and deal with the political relation and its problems. The personal values of love, which the entire feudality once prized, were henceforth increasingly left to the lady. The courtier formed his primary bond with the modern prince.

In sum, a new division between personal and public life made itself felt as the state came to organize Renaissance society, and with that division the modern relation of the sexes made its appearance, even among the Renaissance nobility. Noblewomen, too, were increasingly removed from public concerns—economic, political, and cultural—and although they did not disappear into a private realm of family and domestic concerns as fully as their sisters in the patrician bourgeoisie, their loss of public power made itself felt in new constraints placed upon their personal as well as their social lives. Renaissance ideas on love and manners, more classical than medieval, and almost exclusively a male product, expressed this new subordination of women to the interests of husbands and male-dominated kin groups and served to justify the removal of women from an "unladylike" position of power and erotic independence. All the advances of Renaissance Italy, its protocapitalist economy, its states, and its humanistic culture, worked to mold the noblewoman into an aesthetic object: decorous, chaste, and doubly dependent—on her husband as well as the prince.

POSTSCRIPT

Did Women and Men Benefit Equally from the Renaissance?

Once we begin to consider the experiences of women in history as separate from those of men, we meet a new set of challenges. Women are not a universal category, and their experiences throughout history are as varied as their race, social class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and a host of other categories make them. In recent years historians have begun to consider both the ways in which women's historical experiences are more or less the same and the ways in which one woman's experience differs radically from another's. There are instances in which being a woman is the most important variable (with regard to childbirth, access to birth control or lack of it, and female sexuality, for example), times when race is what matters most and women feel more attuned to men of their own race than to women of different races, and times when social class is the key factor and both racial and gender differences seem less significant than a common class experience or approach to life.

The periodization question remains a fascinating one. Following Kelly-Gadol, other scholars began to look at historical periods with which they were familiar with an eye to using women's experiences as a starting point. For example, in *Becoming Visible* (from which Kelly-Gadol's selection was excerpted), William Monter poses this question: Was there a Reformation for women? Beginning with women's experience, this anthology offers a number of good points of departure for exploring the issue of periodization. For a fuller explanation of the differences among compensatory, contributory, and women's culture approaches, see Gerda Lerner's essay "Placing Women in History," in *Major Problems in Women's History*, 2d ed., edited by Mary Beth Norton and Ruth Alexander (D. C. Heath, 1996). This book also contains Gisela Bock's "Challenging Dichotomies in Women's History"—which explores nature versus culture, work versus family, public versus private, sex versus gender, equality versus difference, and integration versus autonomy—and "Afro-American Women in History," by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, which questions the concept of a universal womanhood by exploring the varying experiences of African American women.

For a Marxist analysis of women in history, see the chapter entitled "Four Structures in a Complex Unity" in Juliet Mitchell's *Woman's Estate* (Pantheon Books, 1972). In it, Mitchell argues that production, reproduction, sexuality, and the socialization of children must all be transformed together if the liberation of women is to be achieved; otherwise, progress in one area can be offset by reinforcement in another. This links the question of women's roles in history

to economic forces such as production and social forces such as sexuality and childrearing.

Another good way to start is to explore our understanding of gender—what it has meant to be a woman (or a man) at a specific time in human history. Historian Joan W. Scott considers how gender and power designators construct one another in "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* (December 1986). She sees in the categories "man" and "woman" a primary way in which social relationships are defined and power is signified. Linda Nicholson, in "Interpreting Gender," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Autumn 1994), explores the question of biological foundationalism —the extent to which physicality influences gender construction. In this analysis, the body becomes a historically specific variable whose meaning changes or is capable of changing over time.