

Did Women Have a Renaissance?

DBQ QUESTION

Analyze the educational and social opportunities and/or limitations for upper and merchant class women in Renaissance society.

Historical Background

The Renaissance refers to the period in history between 1350 and 1650 when Italian culture dominated Western Europe. Humanistic studies and scholarly analysis of Greek and Latin texts and cultures, the development of vernacular literature, and new artistic techniques and scientific theories emerged. Since the Renaissance only influenced the patrician (upper) and merchant classes, modern historians are examining whether this cultural revival had any effect on the women of Renaissance high society.

Document 1

I will proceed with the description of the queen's disposition and natural gifts of mind and body, wherein she either matched or exceeded all the princes of her time, as being of a great spirit yet tempered with moderation, in adversity never dejected, in prosperity rather joyful than proud; affable to her subjects, but always with due regard to the greatness of her estate, by reason whereof she was both loved and feared.....

Latin, French, and Italian she could speak very elegantly, and she was able in all those languages to answer ambassadors on the sudden....Of the Greek tongue she was also not altogether ignorant. She took pleasure in reading of the best and wisest histories, and some part of Tacitus' Annals she herself turned into English for her private exercise. She also translated Boethius' On the Consolation of Philosophy and a treatise of Plutarch, On Curiosity, with divers others....

SOURCE: An unknown contemporary describes British Queen Elizabeth I, late 16c.

Document 2

....It is more than a monster in nature that a woman shall reign and have empire above man. To promote a woman to bear rule, above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature, contumely to God,...and, finally, it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice. When a woman roles, the blind lead the sighted, the sick the robust, the foolish, mad and frenetic the discreet and sober. For their sight in civil regiment is but blindness, their counsel foolishment, and judgment frenzy. Woman's attempt to rule is an act of treason: For that woman reineth above man, she hath obtained it by treason and conspiracy committed against God....[Men] must study to repress her inordinate pride and tyranny to the uttermost of their power.

SOURCE: John Knox, *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, 1558.

Document 3

Percentage of Married Women According to Age, and Average Age at Marriage (Tuscany, 1427-1430)

Age	Total Country	Total City	Total Population
10 and under	0.1	0.5	0.2
11	0.1	0.0	0.1
12	0.5	0.3	0.4
13	1.2	0.5	0.9
14	3.5	4.1	3.7
15	12.0	14.5	12.7
16	26.0	31.1	27.5
17	38.1	43.3	40.0
18	65.0	71.1	66.8
19	68.2	72.4	70.1
20	89.3	87.7	89.2
25	96.1	91.6	94.8
Average Age at Marriage (in years)			
	18.1	17.5	17.9

SOURCE: 1427 *Catasto* database.

Document 4

In this way they [women] will always seem to be provoked into conversation rather than to provoke it. They should also take pains to be praised for the dignified brevity of their speech rather than for its glittering proximity....

It is proper, however, that not only arms but indeed also the speech of women never be made public; for the speech of a noble woman can be no less dangerous than the nakedness of her limbs. For this reason women ought to avoid conversations with strangers since manners and feelings often draw notice easily in these situations....

Sophocles, who is certainly no worse than the Venetian I am discussing—and most men consider his better—has termed silence the most outstanding ornament of women. Therefore, women should believe they have achieved glory of eloquence if they will honor themselves with the outstanding ornament of silence.

SOURCE: Francesco Barbaro. *On Wifely Duties*, early 15c.

Document 5

....And should we not greatly rejoice that you can be named among those admittedly few but certainly famous women [of the past], when we see that the ancients gloried in the learning of such outstanding women?....Rightly, therefore should you also, famous Isotta, receive the highest praises, since you have indeed, if I may so speak, overcome your own nature. For that true virtue which is proper to men you have pursued with remarkable zeal—not the mediocre virtue which many men seek, but that which should befit a man of the most flawless and perfect wisdom. Thus Cicero rightly said: "You young men have a womanly spirit, but that girl has a man's spirit." Therefore, dissatisfied with the lesser studies, you have applied your noble mind also to the higher disciplines, in which there is need for keenness of intelligence and mind.

SOURCE: Laura Quirini, a Venitian patrician, in a letter to Isotta Nogarola, mid-1440s.

Document 6

...Here I have in mind someone whose intellect shows the greatest promise, who despises no branch of learning, who holds all the world as her province, who, in a word, bums marvelously with a desire for knowledge and understanding. An ardent and well-motivated person like this needs, I think, to be applauded and spurred on in some directions, while in others she must be discouraged and held back. Disciplines there are, of whose rudiments some knowledge is fitting, yet whereof to obtain the mastery is a thing by no means glorious. In geometry and arithmetic, for example, if she waste a great deal of time worrying their subtle obscurities, I should seize her and tear her away from them. I should do the same in astrology, and even, perhaps, in the art of rhetoric. I say this with some hesitation, since if any living men have labored in this art, I would profess myself to be of their number. But there are many things here to be taken into account, the first of which is the person whom I am addressing. For why should the subtleties of the status, the *epicheiremata*, and *krinomena*, and a thousand other rhetorical conundrums consume the powers of a woman, who never sees the forum!

SOURCE: Letter of Leonardo Bruni to Lady Battista Malatesta of Montefeltro, 1424.

Document 7

Some say that clerks or priests have written your works for you for they could not come from feminine intelligence. But those who say such things are ignorant, for they are not aware of the writings of other women wiser than you, even prophets who have been mentioned in past times....so I urge you to continue your work which is valid, and not be afraid of me.

SOURCE: Christen de Pisan, French writer in *Christine's Vision*, 1420s.

Document 8



SOURCE: A 15c woodblock showing the writer, Masuccio de Salerno, presenting his *Novellino* to a noble lady.

Document 9

There are already so many women in the world! Why then...was I born a woman, to be scorned by men in words and deeds. I ask myself this question in solitude....For they jeer at me throughout the city, the women mock me.

SOURCE: Isotta Nogarola in a letter to Guarino Veronese, mid-15c.

Document 10

I though their tongues should have been fine-sliced and their hearts hacked to pieces—those men whose perverted minds and inconceivable hostility [fueled by] vulgar envy so flamed that they deny, stupidly ranting, that women are able to attain eloquence in Latin. [But] I might have forgiven those pathetic men, doomed to rascality, whose patent insanity I lash with unleashed tongue. But I cannot bear the babbling and chattering women, glowing with drunkenness and wine....; but any women who excel they seek out and destroy with the venom of their envy.

SOURCE: Laura Cereta [1469-1499], a Brescian aristocrat, in a letter to Lucilia Vernacula, possibly a fictitious literary character.

Document 11

....In the case of men, however, public praise was so free in the classical world that sometimes even slaves reached the summit of philosophy. But in our age, in which it is rare even for men to excel in letters, you are the only maiden living who handles a book instead of wool, a reed pen instead of make-up, a metal stylus instead of a needle, and who smears not her skin with white lead, but rather paper with ink. This indeed is as extraordinary, as rare, as new, as if violets took root amid ice, roses in snow or lilies in frost....Indeed, you have so mastered philosophy that you sharply defend and strongly attack set propositions, and you, as a virgin, dare to compete with men in the beautiful race-course of learning in such a way that your sex does not daunt your soul, nor your soul your modesty, nor your modesty your talent....

SOURCE: Angelo Poliziano, a Florentine humanist, in a letter to Cassandra Fedele, a woman of the Venetian privileged class, 1491.

Document 12

I am amazed by the opinion of some men who claim that they do not want their daughters, wives, or kinswomen to be educated because their mores would be mined as a result....Here you can clearly see that not all opinions of men are based on reason and that these men are wrong.

....Similarly, to speak of more recent times, without searching for examples in ancient history, Giovanni Andrea, a solemn law professor in Bologna not quite sixty years old, was not of the opinion that it was bad for women to be educated. He had a fair and good daughter, named Novella, who was educated in the law to such an advanced degree that when he was occupied by some task and not at leisure to present his lectures to his students, he would send Novella, his daughter, in his place to lecture to the students from his chair. And to prevent her beauty from distracting the concentration of her audience, she had a little curtain drawn in front of her. In this manner she could on occasion supplement and lighten her father's occupation.

SOURCE: Christen de Pizan, French writer, in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1420s.

Document 13

My mother wished me to become a nun / To fatten the dowry of my sister / And I obey my Mama / Cut my hair and became one.../ Mother don't make me a nun / that I don't desire;.../I would go quite mad if I was forced to fast / and go to Vespers and Eventide and sing at all hours.

SOURCE: A 15c folk song.

Document 14

....Emperesses, queens, and duchesses....would wish to be considered one of the least of your handmaids, esteeming your condition so much more worthy, so much better than their own.

SOURCE: Angela Merici, foundress of the Ursuline Sisters, speaking to some of her nuns, mid-16c.

Document 15



SOURCE: Woodcut by Alfred Dürer of Hrotswitha, a 10c nun of Gandersheim, presenting a number of Latin farces, which she wrote, to Emperor Otto I. They were published in 1501 by the German humanist, Conrad Celtis.

Document 16

Zeal for holy chastity and virginity makes a weak young woman or woman of whatever sort stronger than many men, and than the whole world, and than all hell; and when men see such extreme energy and force, they are afraid and jump back dismayed.

SOURCE: Diego Pérez de Valdivia in his handbook for Spanish nuns.