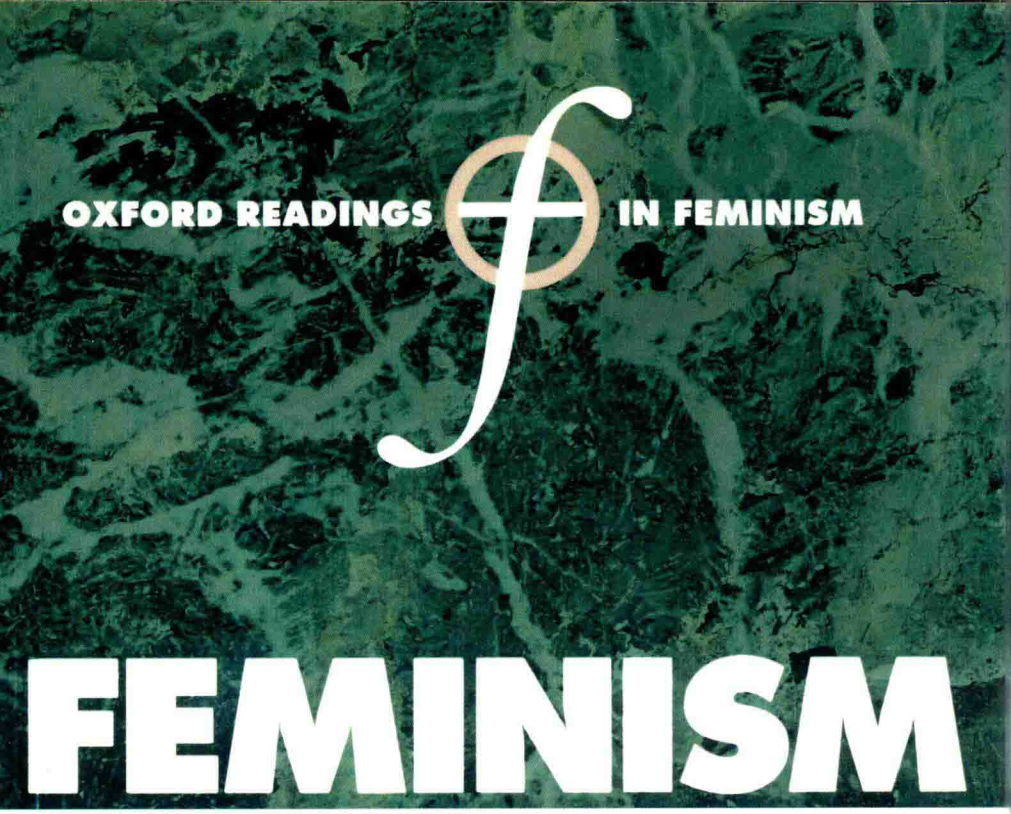

FEMINISM & RENAISSANCE STUDIES

Lorna Hutson

OXFORD READINGS IN FEMINISM

Feminism and Renaissance Studies

Edited by

Lorna Hutson

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Contents

Introduction

Lorna Hutson

FEMINISM AND THE 'RENAISSANCE'

'Women', wrote Jacob Burckhardt in 1860, 'stood on a footing of perfect equality with men' in the culture of the Italian Renaissance. There was, he went on to claim, 'no question of "woman's rights" or female emancipation, simply because the thing itself was a matter of course. . . . The same intellectual and emotional development which perfected the man was demanded for the perfection of the woman.'[1] In 1928 Virginia Woolf, writing of the English Renaissance (the age of Shakespeare), expressed a rather different view of its relation to the emancipation of women. 'Woman' in Shakespeare's age, Woolf wrote, 'pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. . . . Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.'[2] This 'queer, composite being' of poetry and social history expresses all the contradictions in the idea of 'Feminism and Renaissance Studies'. For the 'Renaissance' is not so much a historical *period*—after all, Burckhardt is talking about Italy from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, Woolf about England in the sixteenth and seventeenth—as it is a statement of belief in the civilizing power of certain forms of culture, specifically literature and the fine arts. Yet, as Woolf says, 'in real life' the women who were so full of wit and genius in Shakespeare's plays could scarcely read and write. So how are we to work out the relationship between the poetry and the reality, how are we to judge what women were capable of? The answer Woolf gave lay outside the province of 'Renaissance Studies' as conceived by Burckhardt and his followers. What she called for was more *social history*:

> What one wants, I thought—and why does not some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it?—is a mass of information; at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; had she

a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant? All these facts lie somewhere, presumably, in parish registers and account books; the life of the average Elizabethan Woman must be scattered about somewhere, could one collect it and make a book of it.[3]

The work which Woolf asked for in 1928 has been, and continues to be done. Indeed, Merry Wiesner has recently spoken of 'a flood of research' in which 'studies of women and gender in early modern England vastly outweigh those of any other European country, and perhaps those of all the countries of Europe taken together'.[4] Nevertheless, the problem of Woolf's 'queer, composite being', persists in the notion of 'Feminism and Renaissance Studies' itself. For, in academic terms, 'Renaissance Studies' are located in departments not just of history, but of literature in different languages, art history, and music. Moreover, the term 'Renaissance' implies, as 'early modern' does not, a process of cultural evaluation, and a consensus about the evaluative criteria being used.[5] When Erasmus wrote of good letters as having been 'reborn' in his own time, evaluative criteria were clearly being brought into play. The evaluative language in which he and other humanists expressed these criteria, however, was deeply implicated in definitions of sexual difference. At the beginning of his rhetorical handbook, *On the Copia of Words and Ideas*, for example, Erasmus described, in a double sexual analogy, the contrast between a man's aspirations towards performance of a successful oration and his risk of failing. 'Just as there is nothing', he writes, 'more admirable or splendid than a speech with a rich copia of words overflowing in a golden stream, so it is, assuredly, that such a thing may be striven for at no slight risk, because, according to the proverb: "Not every man has the luck to go to Corinth." '[6] The successful oration—a 'rich copia of words overflowing in a golden stream'—invokes Jove's insemination of Danaë in a shower of gold, a fantasy of affluent potency, while not having 'the luck to go to Corinth' alludes to the cost of sex with the courtesan, Lais of Corinth, thus inverting the shower of gold (a wealthy orgasm) in the identification of poverty with failure to use a woman for sex. It hardly needs pointing out that these are not metaphors which would encourage girls with Latin enough to open Erasmus's book to read on, though the book was, in fact, recommended for the use of school*boys*. In other words, it is not just that the recovery of the cultural activities of the average European woman of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries (cooking, housework, managing servants, childbirth, prayer, and so forth) would seem beside the point to 'Renaissance Studies' in the Burckhardtian tradition; it is that, traditionally, Burckhardtian 'Renais-

sance Studies' uncritically takes over (and, indeed, abstracts and makes universal) a set of evaluative languages and conceptual frameworks which, in Renaissance texts, explicitly exclude women from significant cultural activity, or align them with an inferior type of creativity.

This volume provides examples both of the feminist social history which Woolf called for, and of the literary and linguistic work required to expose the ideological work of gender in traditional Renaissance historiography. Indeed, most of the articles contain elements of both social history and deconstructive analyses of the discursive constitution of gender. In Fredrika Jacobs's article in Part IV, we learn how the print-maker, Diana Scultori, was denied full membership to the artisans' confraternity of San Guiseppe in Rome, when she and her husband moved there in 1575. This lack of material and institutional support, Jacobs writes, was compounded in a critical language 'rife with gender-based evaluative opposites' codified by the institutions in question. Similarly, Lisa Jardine's article in Part I, revealing the lack of any practical career-structure for women humanists in fifteenth-century Italy, simultaneously exposes and subjects to analysis the gendered language deployed by male humanists which ingeniously both praised women's achievements, and rendered them insignificant, subordinate to the possession of the virtue of chastity.

Nor, in the work of feminist social historians exemplified here, do we have merely the 'mass of facts' which Virginia Woolf called for. Feminist social history is now as alive to the semiotics of culture as feminist literary and art history have become to the social, material, and linguistic conditions of literary and artistic genius. In an article written in the 1970s, and reprinted here in Part II, Natalie Zemon Davis turns to Bakhtin's theories of carnivalesque practices of symbolic inversion as a way of reconsidering the meaning of women's inferior position in a social order modelled on a metaphysical hierarchy of gender. If women were, like children and fools, 'naturally' inferior, then did they not, like children and fools, enjoy a ritualized licence that might be appropriated for radical forms of action and thought? Reviewing the implications of her own practice, Davis notes that feminist social history, learning from anthropology and cultural history, has begun to take into account the question of sex roles, sexual symbolism, and sexual behaviour as a serious factor in the analysis of pre-industrial economic and social structures.[7] To Woolf's 'mass of facts' has been added the recognition that symbolic practices, involving honour (especially sexual honour) are material in analysing the economic and social position of women in the past.

'HUMANISM' AFTER FEMINISM

Woolf's observations notwithstanding, Renaissance scholars continued for the most part throughout the twentieth century to accept Burckhardt's view that the humanist classical revival improved the lot of women both in Italy and in the Northern Renaissance. Northern Europe, moreover, was blessed by the Reformation, which was thought to have enhanced the status of women through its rejection of a misogynist cult of virginity, and its promotion of a more affectionate model of conjugal relations.[8] When the feminist movement first impinged on literary studies of the Renaissance, this sanguine view of the liberating effects of Renaissance humanism and reformed religion was still in the ascendant, and not only Erasmus and St Thomas More, but Shakespeare and even Ben Jonson were all congratulated for their 'feminism'.[9] Yet the Burckhardtian narrative of a Renaissance humanism which was also liberating to women is, in itself, a misleading one. To take Burckhardt's own remarks about the liberated behaviour of women as a starting point, it is striking that most of these occur in the context of his discussions of the novelist Matteo Bandello (*c.*1480–1562) whose stories of domestic adultery and ingenious revenge were translated into French and English, and subsequently supplied the plots of much English Renaissance drama, including Shakespeare's. To Burckhardt, for whom the Italian Renaissance serves as the cradle of modern self-consciousness, the birth of the modern 'individual', Bandello's novels are statements about the freedom of Italian domestic morality, the private-life counterpart of the political individualism that characterizes his famous view of 'the state as a work of art'. Burckhardt sums up the Italian moral character as one in which 'the individual first inwardly casts off the authority of a state' after which, 'his love . . . turns mostly for satisfaction to *another individuality, equally developed*, namely, to his neighbour's wife' (italics mine). The adulteries and revenges that Burckhardt found so 'thrillingly' described in Bandello thus take on the heroic colouring of the Italian political individualism which he elsewhere celebrates. The 'individuality' of this fictional type of Renaissance woman helps to support Burckhardt's argument that Italy was the first culture in Europe to produce an internalization of personal morality—'a modern standard of good and evil—a sense of moral responsibility—which is essentially different from that which was familiar to the Middle Ages'.[10]

'Renaissance Woman' plays a very minor part within the larger Bur-

ckhardtian drama in which the political and religious naivety of the Middle Ages was exchanged, via the revival of learning and the arts fostered by Italian republics and despotisms, for the spirit of enquiry and scepticism that was henceforth to characterize modern Europe. Yet what feminist criticism calls into question is not just the accuracy of the Burckhardtian image of women, but the larger historical drama itself. For the 'Renaissance' as Burckhardt conceived it (and as his conception was given popular currency by John Addington Symonds and Matthew Arnold) underwrites what Tony Davies has called 'the myth of essential and universal Man', that is, the idea that there can be a human essence (ungendered but implicitly masculine, and unaffected by history or culture, but implicitly European or North American and 'civilized') the condition of which it is the job of great art and literature to express.[11] As Davies points out, the retrospective attribution of this nineteenth-century universalizing humanism to the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century classical scholars who called themselves 'humanists' is an anachronism. However, the influence of the Burckhardtian narrative of the Renaissance as the beginning of a new age of liberated self-discovery for 'Man' can scarcely be overemphasized. The first essay in this collection is a famously direct assault on that narrative by the erstwhile Burckhardtian Renaissance scholar, Joan Kelly. In her first book on Leon Battista Alberti (written under the name of Joan Gadol) Kelly actually defended Burckhardt against a recent scholarly attack, citing as 'brilliant' an essay by the distinguished Renaissance scholar, Ernst Cassirer which argued that in sixteenth-century literature, 'The consideration of individuality acquires an entirely new value.'[12] Later on, when Kelly was very ill with cancer and knew that she would not live to see the completion of the feminist work she had begun, she described the revolution that feminism had brought to her thinking as a decentring of Renaissance Man from her mental universe:

> I knew now that the entire picture I had of the Renaissance was partial, distorted, limited . . . Leonardo had said that 'the earth is not the center of the sun's orbit nor at the center of the universe . . . and anyone standing on the moon, when it and the sun are both beneath us, would see this our earth and the element of water upon it just as we see the moon . . . ' All I had done was to say, with Leonardo, suppose we look again at this dark, dense immobile earth from the vantage point of the moon? Suppose we look again at this age, the Renaissance, reputed for its liberation from old conforming forms, renowned for its revival of classical and republican ideas? Suppose we look at the Renaissance from the vantage point of women?[13]

In the essay reprinted here, Kelly integrates Marxism and feminism to argue that in economic, social, and ideological terms, the developments which Burckhardt celebrated as constituting the liberating forces of the Renaissance—the development of modern states, the abandonment of feudal relations, the diffusion of Latin literacy and with it classical models of the division between household and politics, public and private—were far from liberating for women. In doing so, she also implicitly challenges the liberal humanist reading that identifies (as Cassirer did) the compellingly individualized voices of canonical Renaissance texts with a 'universally human' point of view. She shows that Baldesar Castiglione's dialogue, *The Courtier*, for all its attractive illusion of spontaneity (which, according to Burckhardt would bespeak the emergence of a more self-conscious individuality) articulates for women a position of considerably less social power and sexual freedom than that granted them by the less individualized poetic texts of the medieval tradition of *amor courtois*. She argues, moreover, that feminists need to read canonical Renaissance texts, such as Castiglione's or Leon Battista Alberti's (who wrote a dialogue on household life, as Castiglione wrote a dialogue on life at court) in the context of analysing the wider social, economic, and discursive constitution of femininity. Thus, where Burckhardt saw expressed in Alberti's works, including his treatise on domestic economy, the sensibility of their author, in particular the 'sympathetic intensity with which he entered into the whole of life around him', Kelly rather observes the way in which Alberti's treatise borrowed from Aristotelian political and economic writings in order to identify women with the *oikos* or household, rather than the *polis* or the city, the sphere of 'politics'. Some feminists have argued that Kelly reads canonical authors too literally, failing to register the play of meaning opened up by the dialogue form.[14] Nevertheless, Kelly's contrast between the freedoms enjoyed by two types of courtly lady—the twelfth-century Eleanor of Aquitaine and the sixteenth-century Elizabetta Gonzaga as humanistically portrayed by Castiglione—remains a striking refutation of the Burckhardtian idealization of the necessarily liberating effects on women of Renaissance court culture and humanist learning. Her conclusions remain controversial, too, in the light of the way in which a Burckhardtian emphasis on reading Renaissance canonical texts as a key site for the 'emergence of individuality' has been given a new lease of life in Stephen Greenblatt's particular version of the new historicist criticism.[15]

Lisa Jardine's essay is taken from a book co-authored with Anthony Grafton on the legacy of Renaissance humanist propaganda for the

self-image of the humanities in schools and universities in the late twentieth century. Nineteenth-century historiography of the Renaissance assimilated to the notion of the Renaissance 'humanist'—the scholar concerned with the revival of Greek and Latin literature—the associations of the German word '*Humanismus*' (translated as 'humanism') which suggested, quite inaccurately, that the humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were concerned with 'an essential humanity, unconditioned by time or place'.[16] Historians of education in the Burckhardtian tradition, influenced by this idea, tended to idealize the educational aims of the humanists, often citing as both exceptional and 'characteristic' of the humanists' lofty aims the achievements of a small minority of women who were favoured with the same education in Latin and Greek as their male kin.[17] Jardine and Grafton's general argument against taking at face value the inflated claims for the ethical worth of Latin literacy made by fifteenth-century humanists and exaggerated by their nineteenth-century historians is given point by their analysis of the practical uselessness of a humanist education for women. Active civic virtue—the professed goal of a humanist education—being, as Kelly also pointed out, denied to women, the humanist celebrants of learned women (like their nineteenth-century historians) fall back on insisting on the learned woman's iconic chastity.

My own essay in this collection develops Kelly's and Jardine's suggestions about the way in which the humanist classical revival actually reinforced the idea that man's destiny as a deliberative 'political animal' (in Aristotle's formulation) was dependent on a prior definition of the household as the non-political sphere to which women were confined. It shows how the *Oeconomicus* of Xenophon was read by Northern humanists as a text which offered an image—in the figure of the 'good husband' sitting outside in the 'agora', or political arena—of the potential of humanist eloquence as a form of learning the true value of which could only be realized *outside* the cloisters and the universities, in the public, negotiating spheres of politics and commerce. Women, then, became figuratively associated, through the wide diffusion of the *Oeconomicus* via Erasmus, Shakespeare, and others, with a domestic resource which has a capacity to err, and which therefore must (like the errant resources of eloquence itself) be mastered by the 'good husband'.

Stephanie Jed's article, though not, ostensibly, concerned with humanism as such, implicitly rethinks the assumptions behind a famous chapter of Burckhardt's *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*