

WOMEN, HISTORY, AND THEORY

*The Essays of
Joan Kelly*

JOAN KELLY

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& THEORY

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WOMEN, HISTORY, & THEORY

Women in Culture and Society
A Series Edited by Catharine R. Stimpson

I dedicate this book to all my sisters,
and to each of them

FOREWORD

Joan Kelly's place in scholarship is distinguished. She was a special member of the generation that first developed the contemporary study of women. In the 1960s, she had been a Renaissance historian, trained at Columbia University. Then, in the 1970s, she moved from that field to take on the new subject of women. Her change altered the history of the Renaissance and shaped that of women.

Her influence has been pervasive and exhilarating. Perhaps most usefully, she constructed a "vantage point," a common phrase in her writing, from which to regard women and history. Her essays draft and redraft that perspective. She looked simultaneously at public and private spheres and at their linkages. In so doing, she synthesized several intellectual traditions. She drew, for example, on Marxist thought for her understanding of work; on emerging feminist theory for her sense of the family and sexuality.

Kelly thought boldly, but never arrogantly. She hoped that the study of women would prove powerful enough to stimulate future generations to test, refine, and revise her ideas. Though an exemplary and charismatic figure, she believed that her scholarship was part of a collaborative effort, done in the present for the sake of the future.

In August 1982, she died of cancer. She was fifty-

four. Before her death, she had contracted with the University of Chicago Press, the publisher of her first book, to produce a volume about women, history, and theory. When she realized she would not finish it, she planned what we have here.

This book begins with an Introduction, which five trusted friends and colleagues wrote after her death. Her most significant essays are next: "The Social Relation of the Sexes" (1976), "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" (1977), "The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory" (1979), and "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*" (1982). The first three appear as they were published. The fourth was originally printed in a shortened version. It has now been edited, as she wished, only to delete redundancies and errors she herself would have erased. The book's final section is an essay retitled "Family and Society." Lucid, sweeping, it was designed for a general, not a scholarly, audience. It shows Kelly as a teacher, a pedagogue, and a synthesizer of fact and theory.

Joan Kelly's own words introduce her essays. During the last months of her life, Kelly dictated a series of tapes. In effect they were notes for the readers of this book. I have edited their transcripts into the Author's Preface and the introduction to the final essay, "Family and Society."

I am indebted to many people for their help: Blanche Wiesen Cook, Clare Coss, Moira Ferguson, Martin Fleisher, Alice Kessler-Harris, Carolyn Lougee, Rosalind P. Petchesky, and Amy Swerdlow. We are all grateful to Joan Kelly for her faith that we would bring her book to its proper conclusion. It is posthumous, but our gallant, brilliant precursor is alive in print and memory.

Catharine R. Stimpson

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The essays gathered together in this volume were written or begun in the 1970s. The women's movement was forcing new insights upon us, raising queries about what we thought we knew so well, and disturbing us with a sense of ignorance and inadequacy about our own past. Some of the essays were to be delivered at conferences. Others were commissioned. Still others were intended as sections of a larger book about feminist theory.¹ Some are chiefly historical, others more theoretical. No matter what their shape, size, or intention, they are all of a piece. They form for me, and I hope for the reader, a coherent statement that has to do not so much with the particular content of an essay as with points discovered and elaborated upon, as with perspective.

The idea of feminism as a vantage point was, indeed, one of my first and enduring discoveries. I had come to women's history after years of training and practice, teaching and writing, as a European historian, particularly of Renaissance Italy. Even there, perspective was one of my major concerns. My book on Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) dealt with painter's perspective, which Alberti had done so much to develop.² Alberti flourished a generation before Leonardo and was very much of his type. Yet, unlike Leonardo, he was a skilled classicist, humanist, and

poet. I discovered how painter's perspective and the elementary ideas connected with it—of measure, proportion, harmony, and scale—constituted a key to Alberti and to the major changes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the perceptual organization of the world. The discovery of new pictorial, geographical, and astronomical worlds expressed this new orientation of perception and thought. It explains why a painter, like Leonardo, should be a mapmaker as well as an astronomer; why a Kepler, who developed new laws of planetary motion, should be absorbed by Pythagorean issues and the harmony of the spheres. Accompanying the enormous social, economic, and political transformations of feudal into early modern society was a comprehensive intellectual transformation that brought about a new heaven and sense of human destiny. There emerged a newly harmonious order in which everything was commensurate with everything else. The rational capacities of man could measure all.

Having taught, studied, and written about this new perspective, this great transformation, for a decade or more, I was prepared intellectually to appreciate what women's history, women's studies, feminist scholarship would or could mean. By the time my book on Alberti was published in 1969, I was caught up in the excitement of the women's movement. Yet, in no way had my first feminist interests affected my work. It is a long way from intellectual preparedness and social action to full consciousness. Before my intellectual and personal life could cohere, I had to go through an exciting transformation of consciousness such as I had once described, but now was to experience. If I have emphasized how feminism is a perspective on social reality as well as a social movement, it is because I underwent that change of consciousness so dramatically—and so self-consciously.

By 1971, I was teaching at Sarah Lawrence College. Gerda Lerner, a pioneer in women's history, wrote to members of the faculty asking her colleagues to participate in developing courses, programs, or even a lecture about women in relation to their fields. I remember dropping her a note, commending her for her interests but saying that since I was in Renaissance history, there was nothing much I could offer about women. She telephoned, insisted upon meeting me, and talked for well over

four hours on the almost infinite possibilities that lay ahead of me in women's history—considering that I was indeed a Renaissance historian. I was not convinced by what she said, but I was struck by the forcefulness and intelligence with which she said it. I promised that for the coming weekend, I would think of my field and what I knew in relation to women.

That turned out to be the most exciting intellectual adventure I can recall. It was like a very rapid repetition of the confusion into which I had been plunged in adolescence: the profoundly frightening feeling of all coherence gone, followed by restoration, if not of a new order, at least of a new direction. Suddenly, the entire world of learning was open to me. It had a new and compelling attraction and was utterly questionable at the same time. Most compelling, and most questionable, was everything I thought I had known about the Renaissance.

The change I went through was kaleidoscopic. I had not read a new book. I did not stumble upon a new archive. No fresh piece of information was added to anything I knew. But I knew now that the entire picture I had held of the Renaissance was partial, distorted, limited, and deeply flawed by those limitations. Leonardo had said that "the earth is not in 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 (*et es luminum*), and the earth would light it [the moon] as it lights us." All I had done was to say, with Leonardo, suppose we look at the 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 and confining forms, renowned for its revival of classical and republican ideas? Suppose we look at the Renaissance from the vantage point of women?

Because of my illness, if this book were to appear at all, the preparation of it had to fall on other people. Nothing guaranteed that anyone would respond to this need except out of a sense of sisterhood and love. I believe all feminist work emerges out of the spirit and reality of collectivity. Mine has. When women are scattered and cannot work together, a condition that originated with the early modern state, women suffer a loss in

position and in the possibility of feminist expression. When some connection among women exists, even if it is only a literary one (as it was among the participants in the *querelle des femmes*), it creates an impressive tradition of feminist thinking. My essays were first reviewed by friends, whom I acknowledge in the notes of each article.

The idea of collecting my essays was Kate Stimpson's. I am grateful to her. I also want to thank my friends—Clare Coss, Blanche Wiesen Cook, Alice Kessler-Harris, Rosalind Petchesky, Amy Swerdlow, and, of course, my husband, Martin Fleisher.

Thank you very much, dear friends.

Joan Kelly

Notes

1. I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for a research fellowship in 1980–81 that supported elements of my work.

2. Joan Kelly-Gadol, *Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); "Universal Man," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1973); "Alberti," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974). See, too, "The Unity of the Renaissance: Humanism, Natural Science, and Art," in *Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation: Essays in Honor of Garrett Mattingly* (New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 29–55.

INTRODUCTION

I can read, and do, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and feel my life connect with hers, my cause with hers. Hope I can contribute as she did; know I have, but I now want to do more. I want that suffering that we can control to stop, it outrages and tears at me, the cruel and stupid political world. And I want women's indignities to be ended—millennia long, borne with such endurance and grace. I want, what I really want, and now great pleasure comes through me: I want our day to come. I want women to take the lead. And I know, in the depth of my being and in all my knowledge of history and humanity, I know women will struggle for a social order of peace, equality, joy. Women will make the world concern itself with children. Our problem is, how do we “make” the world do that? Oh, I want an end to patriarchy! Passionately!

—Joan Kelly's *Cancer Journal* (1982)

Joan Kelly devoted her intellectual life to the understanding of consciousness, its roots, and its power to effect social change. Her life was a feminist self-creation—a work of thought and feeling, of scholarship and experience—in the pursuit of sisterhood and community. Feminism for Kelly meant a total

transformation of self as well as society. She came to feminism out of the political struggles and social tensions of the 1960s. Trained in Renaissance history, she was a professor at the City University of New York for twenty-six years. Her attentiveness to the concerns of her students and her own humanism and sense of justice impelled her to be one of the first faculty members at City College to join students in demonstrations against racial discrimination and the war in Indochina. She supported demands of minority students for an open admissions policy at City University, led her colleagues to work for the appointment of faculty members conversant with new perspectives of social history, and pioneered in fresh approaches to teaching. Her active participation in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements deepened her understanding of the connections between race, class, and sexual oppression. These concerns and activities led her to the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s. She was a leader in the struggle of women historians for recognition and equality and in the movement for reproductive rights and codirected the Women's Studies Program at Sarah Lawrence College.

Kelly saw her scholarly work as more than an individual quest for knowledge and understanding: it was part of a collective process to be shared in both its creation and its dissemination. The substantial part of her time she devoted to collective study and action groups resulted in such contributions as the *Workbook on Sterilization and Sterilization Abuse*; a feminist family text, *Household and Kin*; and a bibliography in European women's history. In addition, she helped to create two institutes on integrating women's history into the high school curriculum, she participated for many years in a Marxist-feminist discussion group, and she cotaught numerous women's studies courses. During the last years of her life, she described how she felt energized by the "incredible women's network that connected me to myself and my sisters."

For Kelly politics was everywhere. It involved more than active opposition to economic injustice, sexism, racism, and to hierarchical relationships in the larger society and in the university; it involved both writing and teaching. Kelly had a gift for making students and colleagues feel empowered by her belief in their capacities for important, effective life-enhancing work. A mem-

ber of her 1973 freshman studies class in European women's history at Sarah Lawrence College described this process: "As a class we were a community of scholars, individuals pursuing, with the same integrity and love, separate interests, which through our pursuits and sharing could only deepen our understanding of ourselves as individuals and as members of that community. The respect we learned to have for one another's work was a transmission of the respect we felt Joan had for us."

Kelly herself wrote of the last feminist theory seminar she taught at the CUNY graduate center,

I've worked out a teaching style that would have fostered me . . . and I'm convinced that it's the form for feminist and socialist growth. The students do the work, though I plan it, guide it, and . . . bring in those really central (I think) points at a time when everyone can take it in. . . . I get excited about the feminist ideas again, and I feel it in my writing and vice versa. I am energized by it, and like the sense of who I am and what I do.

Teaching for Kelly was part of learning and sharing, involving commitment and trust from both student and teacher. The last essay in this book is part of a feminist history of the family written for high school students. Kelly gave her energy and enthusiasm to this collaborative work because she believed that every generation has to find its own way to shape its own institutions, and that only through a knowledge of social process and the variety of family structures that human beings have devised over time would young people today have a sense of their own personal and social possibilities. In her 1976 commencement address at Sarah Lawrence College, she told the graduates:

Our social institutions allow us to express and share so little of our real human needs that we are forced to lock them up inside ourselves. We all bear witness to the results: the explosions and implosions of these pent-up feelings are the stuff of the private tragedies and public violence and the disorder of our everyday life. Let us acknowledge, then . . . that the personal is political; that the test of a social system is its ability to translate the personal into the public and at the same time to make community a real part of one's daily, personal life through meaningful participation in the decisions that shape us all.

Kelly's feminist vision had been prefigured in her earlier work on the Renaissance. The subject of her first major book, Leon Battista Alberti, appealed to Kelly because his life joined practice and theory; blended artistic, technical, and humanist concerns; and reflected a commitment to reason, harmony, and inspired intuition. He appeared to Kelly as an extraordinary spirit of the time whose life seemed to bear out his own youthful conviction that "nothing is too difficult for study and determination to overcome." She was not only impressed by Alberti's "versatility and determination to excel" but attracted to another outstanding trait: "That which others created he welcomed joyfully, . . . and [he] held every human achievement which followed the laws of beauty for something almost divine." The most significant question asked by Renaissance humanists such as Alberti was, How do we perceive our world, from what perspective, which vantage point? Once asked, that question leads in many directions at once. Like the Renaissance humanists committed to perspectival reorganization, Kelly's goal was to achieve a level of consciousness about the psyche, the economy, the process of creativity that would render new patterns of living accessible.

Kelly's intellectual and theoretical transformation from Renaissance scholar to feminist scholar encompassed every mode of being. Music, literature, art, architecture, and society were the ongoing subjects of her inquiry. Only her perspective changed. Feminism required another look at the nature of the "universalist" theme of the Renaissance. Her task was not unlike Alberti's. Where he asked how humanists perceive and create a coherent moral metaphysical pattern of understanding out of the alienating and crumbling structures of medieval society, she asked how feminists might confront a misogynist society. For Kelly feminism was "a perspective on social reality as well as a social movement."

To shift the perspective, to adjust the vantage point, creates new contours, possibilities, and realities. To look at the Renaissance from the perspective of women exploded all previous understanding about women in history. Even the universalist view of society, so central to Renaissance thought, required reordering. To refocus the prism to show the role and place of women in the Renaissance made Kelly "acutely aware of the need to

supplement this 'universalist' view which, ironically, is too limited, too one-dimensional, for historical truth." Renaissance women were not, Kelly recognized, "on a footing of perfect equality with men." In her early article, "Women in the Renaissance and Renaissance Historiography," she wrote: "As soon as we take the emancipation of women as our vantage point, we discover that events which change the course of history for men, liberating them from natural, social, or ideological restraints upon their powers, may have quite different, even opposite effects upon women."

In Kelly's generative essays on women and the Renaissance, she transformed the way scholars look at historical society: They now are called upon to take into account (1) the regulation of female sexuality as compared with male sexuality; (2) women's economic and political roles and the education needed for work, property, and power; (3) the cultural role of women in shaping the outlook of society; and (4) the prevailing ideology about women. Contrasting the place and conditions of medieval and Renaissance women, Kelly, in one of her most incisive contributions to our understanding of ideology, noted that

the sexual nature of courtly love . . . represents an ideological liberation of [feudal women's] sexual and affective powers that must have some social reference. This is not to raise the fruitless question of whether such love relationships actually existed or if they were mere literary conventions. The real issue regarding ideology is, rather, what kind of society could posit as a social ideal a love relation outside of marriage, one that women freely entered and that, despite its reciprocity, made women the gift givers while men did the service. What were the social conditions that fostered these particular conventions rather than the more common ones of female chastity and/or dependence? ("Did Women Have a Renaissance?")

Building upon contemporary feminist theorists, Kelly proposed that we regard "the social relationships of the sexes as a fundamental category of historical thought." To effect "a new, systematic relation between men and women, and between the particular and the universal," was, Kelly wrote, "as fundamental to the analysis of human history as the social relationship of