

Gender Roles of Women in the Renaissance

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The question of "did women have a renaissance" is not something that has not been asked before. In 1977 Joan Kelly wrote an essay addressing this question specifically. In the Renaissance, when the political systems changed from the Medieval feudal systems, women of every social class saw a change in their social and political options that men did not. Celibacy became the female norm and "the relations of the sexes were restructured to one of female dependency and male domination" (Kelly 20). Women lived the life of the underlying sex. Men ruled over everything, even through half a century of Queens.

"When England was ruled for half a century by Queens but women had almost no legal power; When marriage, a women's main vocation, cost them their personal property rights; when the ideal women was rarely seen and never heard in public; when the clothes a women wore were legally dictated by her social class; when almost all school teachers were men; when medicine was prepared and purified at home; when corsets were constructed of wood and cosmetics made of bacon and eggs;

when only half of all babies survived to adulthood?" (Hull 15).

The above passage says a lot about women in the Renaissance. The role of women was a very scarce role. Women were supposed to be seen and not heard. Rarely seen at that. Women were to be prim and proper, the ideal women. Females were able to speak their minds but their thoughts and ideas were shaped by men. Mostly everything women did had input given by men. Women were controlled by her parents from the day she is born until the day she is married, then she would be handed directly to her husband so he could take over that role. In the time of the renaissance women were considered to legally belong to their husbands. Women were supposed to be typical 'housewives.'

Though women were inferior to men, women in different classes had different roles. Low class women were expected to be housewives and take care of everything to do with the house. The expectation of working class women was a little bit different. These women were expected to work for their husbands and help them run their business. They would work along side with their husbands and then go home and take care of the house hold. Upper class women may have had servants and workers working for them but the women were still expected to take care of the house hold. Women could not work by themselves. Neither could they live alone if they were not married. If a women was single, she was made to move in

with one of her male relatives or join a convent and become a nun. There was no other option at this time for women.

In accordance to different classes of women, the only women that were aloud to express themselves were upper class women, but not sufficiently. The existence of women was there but it was a marginal existence. Very rarely would a women of less than upper class be seen or heard expressing herself. It was unheard of. When women did express themselves, what they would express was tainted by male influence (Mazzocco).

The Taming of the Shrew is a play written by William Shakespeare. In this plat the main character is Katherine, she is the Shrew as mentioned in the title. A shrew is a woman who is very outspoken. The word Shrew is very negative word when relating to women. In the time of the Renaissance, people looked down on women referred to as a shrew. These women were very open about expressing anything they wanted to. In this time period, a outspoken woman was unheard of. People strongly disapproved of women like this in the renaissance. Men were the only people aloud to be outspoken and expressive.

Katherine is a shrew of the worst degree. Sometimes her words and actions are extremely violent. She was a very abusive women. There was a strong sense of disapproval from

everyone about Katherine. No one wanted to be given the job of 'taming' her. That is until Petruchio comes along and decides he will do the task in order to marry into her fortune. In this time, the renaissance, women are to be seen and not heard. The ideal woman is quiet and respectful. She has no problem being controlled by a man. She enjoys the attention she gets from men for being a dainty female. This ideal woman is Katherine's sisters Bianca. Shakespeare decided to have two characters contrast such a great deal. It shows the reader how different the two types really are. Katherine, compared to Bianca, seems like a crazy woman.

In *Taming of the Shrew*, men pine after Bianca for her beauty and her dowry. She is soft spoken and sweet. Katherine is just the opposite. She is forward and loud strong willed. Men do not want Katherine. They are frightened of her.

Shakespeare has used the two different types of female characters in the renaissance to offset each of them. Having a shrew and the ideal woman in the same play shows off the characteristics of each of these woman. They are polar opposites. The renaissance may have been ruled for half of a century by women, but in everything else men ruled. Unless you were upper class, women were unable to speak their minds freely and even then men dictated how they did such a thing. Women were supposed to be house wives and were expected to do whatever their husbands said. If a woman did

not conform to their husband she would be called a shrew. This is considered to be the beginning of contemporary times. Things have changed but this is where it all started.

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