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Introduction

MARGARET W. FERGUSON, WITH MAUREN QUILLIGAN
AND NANCY J. VICKERS

In his famous study *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), Jacob Burckhardt wrote that "to understand the higher forms of social intercourse in this period, we must keep before our minds the fact that women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men."¹ This remarkable assertion is belied by its appearance in an eight-page chapter, "The Position of Women," in Burckhardt's massive book; and the argument of this chapter would doubtless have astonished Renaissance women whatever their social class. Even those privileged enough to participate in those "higher forms of social intercourse" that Burckhardt's book celebrates would have been less likely to agree with him than with the Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti, whose treatise *La Semplicità Ingannata o la Tirannia Paterna* (*Simplicity Deceived or Paternal Tyranny*, 1654) describes the enormous obstacles women encountered whenever they attempted to engage in the quintessential humanist task of giving ideas public expression through writing. "I who know may freely testify," Tarabotti writes—with considerable irony, as what she is describing is precisely women's lack of freedom to testify—that when "women are seen with pen in hand, they are met immediately with shrieks commanding a return to that life of pain which their writing had interrupted, a life devoted to the women's work of needle and distaff."²

To oppose the virtually unknown voice of Tarabotti to Burckhardt's famous one is to highlight the simple but important fact that our views of the Renaissance have, until quite recently, been largely shaped by educated middle-class men writing for, and frequently about, other educated men. Burckhardt's account of the Renaissance as an era of splendid achievements in art and science—achievements made possible by the early humanists' rediscovery of the "freedom and dignity of man"—illustrates the ideologically significant skewing of perspective that occurs when cultural historians focus their attention chiefly on the beliefs and productions of a small elite

group. The humanists constituted such a group, and although they did indeed advocate a certain equality of education for daughters and sons of wealthy burghers and patricians, they most certainly did not place women on a footing of "perfect equality" with men in Italy or elsewhere. On the contrary, as Margaret King has shown, humanist texts often dramatize profound social inequalities between men and women, both in the rhetoric of praise they use for learned ladies and in the actual programs of study they recommend for girls.³ A pedagogic imperative like Leonardo Bruni's—that young women should study the liberal arts just as young men did but should on no account be introduced to rhetoric, which "lies absolutely outside the province of women"—went unnoticed by Burckhardt because he shared the common, although not universal, humanist assumption that women's province was the private rather than the public sphere.⁴ The very distinction between these spheres, however, is a complex historical phenomenon that needs to be analyzed with reference to social and economic changes that occurred in the Renaissance.⁵ Historians who want to understand women's relegation to a "private" realm cannot afford to view the period, as Burckhardt did, chiefly through the lens provided by the humanists themselves.⁶ Too much is left out, and too much is at stake.

What is left out is not only the critical view of women's place in Renaissance society provided by witnesses like Tarabotti and by earlier Italian women like the scholar Isotta Nogarola, who lamented that she had ever been born female "to be scorned by men in words and deeds."⁷ Also missing from Burckhardt's perspective, which has by no means ceased to inform more recent scholarship, particularly in the humanities, is a sense that history is more than the story of the political, artistic, and scientific achievements of great individuals. Only when we incorporate into our studies of Renaissance art and literature the findings of social historians who have begun to analyze new data about the lives of members of the lower as well as the upper strata of Renaissance society will we see how important the period is for students of modern society in general and for feminists in particular. What is at stake in a reevaluation of the Renaissance is the possibility of a fuller, more historically grounded understanding of the socioeconomic system under which we now live, as well as a better appreciation of differences: not only those that distinguish late twentieth century western societies from those of Renaissance Europe but also those of class and gender that existed within the societies commonly designated by the term *Renaissance*.

According to another nineteenth-century German scholar whose

view of history was at once darker and more comprehensive than Burckhardt's, the epochal significance of the years roughly between 1450 and 1700 in Western Europe lay in the gradual replacement during this era of a feudal mode of production by a capitalist one.⁸ The experience of women and men in everyday life therefore underwent a change as profound as that which marked the transition from the socioeconomic system of late antiquity to the feudal one of the Middle Ages. From a Marxist perspective, European humanists were right to perceive a significant cultural rift between their era and the one that preceded it. The name given by the humanists to their era, however, was somewhat misleading, for if the period did see the "rebirth" (albeit in altered form) of certain aspects of ancient civilization in the realms of art, literature, law, historiography, and political theory, it also saw the emergence of social structures previously unknown on the stage of world history. The changes that occurred in the Renaissance, indeed, link that period more closely to our own than to the Middle Ages or to the classical era that the early humanists themselves thought they were in some sense privileged to see reborn, as historians in the last thirty years have suggested by referring to the Renaissance as the "early modern period."⁹ The new name, which poses its own set of problems for theories of periodization, generally does not replace the old one but supplements it, calling attention to features of the period that Renaissance writers could not see as clearly as we can. Chief among those features important for the study of women during the period is the development of capitalism. Although debate continues among social and economic historians about the origins of capitalism and even about the meaning of the term, historians of various political perspectives have increasingly emphasized the idea that capitalism is a distinctive economic and social phenomenon, characteristic of a distinctive period of history. It entailed, among other things, a new type of relationship between workers and their work, on the one hand, and between workers and employers, on the other.¹⁰ As production was organized on a larger scale, workplace and home were increasingly separated and an individual wage replaced the family earnings of domestic production; such changes had profound effects on women's lives and on their relations to men.¹¹

In Western Europe and England, the gradual and uneven transition from feudal to capitalist societies was accompanied by at least two other developments that are important for an understanding of the social relations between the sexes in the early modern period. One is the emergence of those centrally administered nation states to which we owe the existence of powerful female queens within the royal

dynasties of Spain, France, and England; the other is the significant set of changes that occurred in the structure of the family and therefore in women's roles during this era. Describing these latter changes in "The Rise of the Nuclear Family in Early Modern England," Lawrence Stone, for example, posits three major and interrelated developments. First, "the importance of the nuclear core increased, and the influence of the surrounding kin declined"; second, "the importance of affective bonds tying the conjugal group together increased, and the economic functions of the family as a distributive mechanism for goods and services declined"; and third, "the pre-existing patriarchal aspects of internal power relationships within the family" were strengthened.¹² Elaborating on this last point, Stone argues in *The Family, Sex and Marriage* that during the period between 1450 and 1630, "both Church and state provided powerful new theoretical and practical support" for a "reinforcement of the despotic authority of the husband and father—that is to say, of patriarchy." He adds that "a new interest in children, coupled with the Calvinist premise of Original Sin, gave fathers an added incentive to ensure the internalized submissiveness of their children."¹³

Although Stone focuses mainly on the upper and middle ranks of English society, Roberta Hamilton (among others) has shown that for lower class families too the Renaissance brought significant changes. The major one was that the family gradually lost its feudal function as a unit of production and became, as it still generally is today, a unit of consumption, dependent "either on the wage labor of individual family members or on capital."¹⁴ Hamilton—like Stone, Philippe Ariès, and others who have studied the history of the early modern family—offers an important corrective to Marx's own view (shared by many modern feminists) that it was the Industrial Revolution that ushered in the most significant changes in the structure of the family and in women's roles within that unit and in society at large.¹⁵ Hamilton argues persuasively that to understand the origins both of women's typical social roles and of the crucial differences among women of different classes in modern Western societies, we must look not to the period of industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but rather to the period of "early capitalization" in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.¹⁶ For it was then that "women's work" was significantly redefined, as the opposition arose between the "idle" bourgeois wife and the proletarian woman. The role of the former is defined by her status as psychological helpmeet to her husband and mother to her children; her work in the household is not considered real because it does not directly contribute to capitalist

production. The lower-class woman's work also becomes increasingly invisible during this period; whether she labors outside the home or within it (as a spinner, for instance), and whether she lives in the country or, as increasingly occurred in England, in the capital city whose population swelled with peasants uprooted from their farms by the practice of enclosure, her wages tend to be substantially lower than those of male workers—when she receives them at all, that is.¹⁷ For as urbanization, rising prices, a rising population, and the dissolution of the monasteries in sixteenth century England contributed to the existence of pauperism "on a larger scale than ever before" in the country's history,¹⁸ a growing number of lower class women found themselves unsupported by men and unable to earn a living for themselves and their children. Although some of them received welfare aid from their parishes, many suffered. Christopher Hill notes that pauperism in England "began to increase seriously just after the traditional means of coping with it [monastic alms-giving and the tradition of manorial hospitality] had been destroyed."¹⁹

Hamilton's argument is important because it addresses a question that most historians have neglected even to ask: how did the economic changes that occurred in the early modern period affect women as a group?²⁰ A similar question needs to be posed with respect to the political changes that occurred in Renaissance societies, both in the city states of Italy, where, Joan Kelly-Gadol has argued, "the exercise of political power by women was far more rare than under feudalism," and in those large monarchies that arose out of feudal societies elsewhere in Europe.²¹ Perry Anderson's brilliant study of such monarchies—*The Lineages of the Absolutist State*—contains no separate index entry for women; moreover, Anderson explores the growth of monarchical government in France and England without ever considering the implications of the fact that the latter country was ruled for nearly fifty years by a queen. Rightly emphasizing that marriage was a crucial diplomatic as well as economic instrument of dynastic forms of government, Anderson nonetheless errs in attributing the growth of royal authority during Elizabeth's reign simply to her personal "popularity."²² Had Anderson been more alert to the political significance of Elizabeth's gender, he would have needed to give a more complex account of her popularity, which derived not only from an accident of personality but also from her skillful manipulation of the social institution of marriage. She used that institution to reward the bureaucrats who helped her consolidate her power and to weaken aristocratic families that posed threats to the crown; she also used it

symbolically to woo her people and literally to attract various suitors, foreign and domestic, to a royal hand she never finally gave.²³

Because England was ruled so long and successfully by a female prince during a period when the relations between men and women at all levels of society were undergoing significant changes—many of which affected women adversely—that country offers a particularly rich field of inquiry for feminist scholars. Elizabeth's own strategies of self-presentation, especially when analyzed in relation to literary texts that figure and obliquely criticize her, dramatize certain contradictions in patriarchal ideology that impinged on the lives not only of court women but of their lower born sisters. As Ruth Kelso demonstrates in *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, "the theory of the favored class" did not serve "to distinguish the lady from the inferior sort of womankind," because hierarchical social theories proclaimed "as the first law of woman . . . submission and obedience. Theory does not divide women into two groups, the rulers and the ruled, and prescribe to each a different set of laws . . . Practice did just that, but not theory. Theory said that all women must be ruled."²⁴ Kelso argues persuasively that, despite the significant and growing class differences among women in the Renaissance, they nonetheless constituted a distinct group within the discourse of patriarchal theory.

The Stuart kings who succeeded Elizabeth and who presided over the decline of the absolutist state created under the Tudors also provide fascinating material for students of patriarchal ideology. Partly in reaction against Elizabeth, the Stuarts aggressively promoted the image of the monarch as a father and husband of his country; and as several essays in this volume show, the royal self-presentations of the Stuart kings were refracted in the cultural productions of the period, including Shakespeare's later plays and the propagandistic painting centered on court personalities. If the present volume contains what seems a disproportionate number of essays about English court culture, this may be a sign of the crucial twist given to the ideology of gender in both the Elizabethan and the Jacobean eras by Elizabeth's problematic presence on the throne. For this reason, and also because England underwent a uniquely swift transition from absolutist state to the limited monarchy ushered in by the bourgeois revolution of the mid-seventeenth century, the moment of England's initial imperial expansion is of special interest to scholars who are beginning to look at Renaissance culture from an interdisciplinary, feminist perspective. Such a perspective gives rise to the large questions that underlie the essays collected here: how did relations between the sexes influence, and how were they influenced by, the

new economic, social, and political arrangements of the early modern period?

To ask such questions is not only to interrogate the history of sexual difference and division of labor in our own culture; it is also to focus attention on social institutions and artistic productions that cannot be considered mere "reflections" of changes in a society's basic socioeconomic structure.²⁵ For example, an institution like the nuclear family was shaped by Counter-Reformation and Protestant ideologies as well as by changes in demographic patterns and labor relations. The family therefore needs to be studied in relation to what we shall call a society's "discourses of sexual difference." By that phrase we refer to the complex and heterogeneous sign systems that encode—and enforce—differences between the sexes. These differences are not natural; on the contrary, they constitute part of what Gayle Rubin has termed the "sex-gender system," that is, "a socio-historical construction of sexual identity, difference and relationship; an appropriation of human anatomical and physiological features by an ideological discourse."²⁶ The concept of the sex-gender system highlights the observation that while significant differences exist among women of various social classes, equally significant differences exist between men and women at all levels of society. Anatomy is not destiny, but biological differences between the sexes have, throughout human history, been translated by social institutions into codes of behavior and law that privilege men over women irrespective of class. And such codes profoundly affect the ways in which both men and women experience their sexuality.

By focusing attention on aspects of the sex-gender system of early modern Europe, the essays in the present volume contribute to the small but growing field pioneered by Alice Clark in her study of working women in seventeenth-century England and explored more recently by scholars like Joan Kelly-Gadol and Natalie Zemon Davis.²⁷ Such scholars view the Renaissance through a lens that may properly be called feminist because it places in the foreground phenomena that traditionally have been completely overlooked or relegated to the margins of scholarly discourse. By discovering or recovering previously ignored cultural documents, frequently by women who are considered to be "minor" figures (women such as Christine de Pizan or Arcangela Tarabotti, for instance, whose writings have only recently begun to receive the degree of critical attention they deserve), feminists mount a challenge to the very notion of a canonical tradition; they further challenge that notion by reading canonical texts, generally by men, in heretical ways.²⁸ Fem-

inists who attempt such heretical readings often join forces with recent theorists who practice what Paul Ricoeur calls a "hermeneutics of suspicion."²⁹ This camp includes Marxist, psychoanalytic, and deconstructive interpreters who seek, in various ways, to analyze that which is suppressed or consigned to the margin by the dominant ideological discourses of a particular society; this camp also includes the growing number of social historians who are working, often without glamorous theoretical banners, on recovering types of historical evidence overlooked by traditional intellectual historians. Because the figures of women have been marginalized, if not rendered virtually invisible, in many cultural productions, and because the tradition of male scholarship has tended, with some notable exceptions, to reinforce this marginalization, feminist scholars necessarily engage in a certain polemical effort to decenter the map of knowledge that they inherit. In so doing, they illustrate Joan Kelly-Gadol's notion of a feminist "double vision": when we "look at ages or movements of great social change in terms of the liberation or repression of women's potential," she writes, "the period or set of events with which we deal takes on a wholly different character or meaning from the normally accepted one."³⁰

The difference that Kelly-Gadol speaks of arises from a redefinition of the object of inquiry which in turn results from methodological changes in the approach to that object. *What* is seen depends on *how* it is seen. Moreover, as Renaissance artists themselves suggested in experiments with perspectival puzzles like anamorphosis, some objects (like the skull in Holbein's famous painting *The Ambassadors*) cannot be rightly perceived at all unless the viewer adopts an oblique rather than frontal perspective on the picture. Although the representations of Renaissance culture perceived and created in the present volume of essays are by no means complete or in perfect harmony with each other, they do represent a collective effort to see, and talk, across several sets of boundaries. These include the boundaries that inhibit communication between scholars of different generations, different academic disciplines, and different methodological schools within a single discipline. An equally significant boundary crossed in this volume is that between scholars whose work is explicitly motivated by feminist concerns and those whose work is not or is only beginning to respond, sometimes critically, to questions posed by the new scholarship on women. The conference "Renaissance Woman/Renaissance Man," which was held at New Haven in March, 1982, and from which most of these essays were drawn, provoked lively and sometimes sharp debate among its participants, both those

who gave formal presentations and those who spoke from the audience. Some of the questions raised there about ideological presuppositions and interpretive methods are implicitly addressed, if not fully answered, in the revised versions of the essays printed here. The volume as a whole, therefore, represents a moment in a continuing conversation and invites further exchange between two intersecting interdisciplinary enterprises, Women's Studies and Renaissance Studies.

Feminists will find in this volume illustrations of the "comparative" or "relational" mode of inquiry advocated by scholars such as Joan Kelly-Gadol, Gerda Lerner, and Myra Jehlen, among others. "The activity, power, and cultural evaluation of women," Kelly-Gadol argues, "simply cannot be assessed except in relational terms: by comparison and contrast with the activity, power, and cultural evaluation of men, and in relation to the institutions and social developments that shape the sexual order."³¹ By undertaking such comparative studies, these essays seek to define the world of women not as a separate enclave in the world of men but rather as what Myra Jehlen has called a "long border" or "no-man's land" that requires exploration—and mapping—with new conceptual tools.³² The present volume, like the conference from which it derived, contributes to that project by addressing questions about the dynamics of women's social relations to men; it therefore pursues that path in feminist scholarship that leads from an initial emphasis on women in a room of their own toward an analysis of the sex-gender system itself as it at once shapes and is shaped by other cultural productions.

For scholars trained in traditional methods of literary criticism, art history, and history, the essays in this volume also provide models and pose challenges for future work. Literary critics here can be observed venturing beyond the boundaries of written texts to ask how and where such texts intersect with other kinds of cultural production, ranging from maps and paintings to royal progresses. Art historians explore a similar seam of connection between aesthetic objects and the discourses of political power. And the essays by historians, which analyze newly discovered data about women's work and social status, pose challenges both to traditional accounts of the Renaissance as a period of "human" progress and to Marxist accounts that emphasize economic changes and class conflict but rarely address specific questions about gender as a category of social thought.³³

The essays in this volume are grouped in three sections. The first focuses on the pivotal structure of Renaissance patriarchy that served,

both in theory and in practice, to organize power relations not only in the family but also in the state, according to the well-known analogy exploited by Robert Filmer in his *Patriarcha* (1634): "We find in the Decalogue that the law which enjoins obedience to Kings is delivered in the terms of: Honour thy Father."³⁴ The essays by Jonathan Goldberg, Coppélia Kahn, and Stephen Orgel that open this first section all examine facets of that "strengthening of patriarchy" which Lawrence Stone sees as characteristic of the transitional period in England between the "feudal or community organizations of medieval society, and the participatory limited monarchy . . . of the late seventeenth century onwards."³⁵ Goldberg shows how James I used the language of the family to legitimize his assumption of absolutist monarchical prerogatives. By presenting himself as a "loving-nourish father" to his country, as "head" to his subservient body politic, and as "husband" to his wife the realm, James domesticated or naturalized his claims to power. The patriarchal theory adumbrated in James's own writings and in other texts of the period also informs the genre of the family portrait. Goldberg examines a series of seventeenth-century paintings and engravings that "offer images of domestic life converted to state use." Such representations were structured to make "the natural event of procreation" seem an extension of male prerogative and power.

Kahn and Orgel are also concerned with cultural productions in which patriarchal ideology serves both to "naturalize" the political realm and to politicize the supposedly natural relations among family members. Arguing that the family functions as "a link between psychic and social structures, and as the crucible in which gender identity is formed," Kahn analyzes the ideologically skewed conception of the family that appears in *King Lear*, where the figure of the mother is suppressed—as it is in Filmer's version of the Fifth Commandment quoted above—and where the idea consequently arises that children "owe their existence to their fathers alone." Kahn uses psychoanalytic methods to interrogate this conception of the family; she seeks to excavate the hidden "maternal subtext" of the play, focusing in particular on Lear's characterization of his madness as hysteria, or "the mother." Studying another late play by Shakespeare in which the partial suppression of maternal figures acquires ideological significance, Stephen Orgel shows how the absence of Prospero's wife in *The Tempest* and the shadowy presence of Caliban's witch-mother Sycorax illuminate the complex relation between Shakespeare's play and Jacobean politics. By presenting Prospero as if he were the sole and sufficient parent of Miranda, Shakespeare appears

to ratify the glorified image of patriarchal power that Jonathan Goldberg finds characteristic of Stuart ideology; but by showing Prospero's authority threatened by Caliban—whose own claims to power derive from his mother—Shakespeare may be commenting obliquely on the problematic derivation of the Stuarts' royal authority from two unruly "mothers," Queen Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots. Analyzing the "distinctly unstable" family paradigms figured in *The Tempest*, Orgel interprets Prospero's eventual surrender of Miranda and his relinquishing of his own art not simply as a conventional move toward reconciliation but also as a means of keeping patriarchal control over his usurping brother.

The question of patriarchal control—its strategies, its social and psychological causes—is also central in our next four essays. Louis Montrose views Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as part of a general cultural obsession with Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, an anomalous "unmastered" woman whose authority as female monarch generated peculiar tensions both for her subjects and for her royal successors. Montrose traces the ways in which Shakespeare's play attempts to neutralize the royal power to which it ostensibly pays homage; by staging the actions of all its female characters within the frame of Theseus's marriage to his conquered Amazon queen, the play symbolically places Elizabeth herself within a patriarchal frame that reaffirms the male right to "make women and make themselves through the medium of women."

Richard Halpern and John Guillory analyze another major poet's strategies for containing the complex threats symbolized by powerful women; focusing on the early and the late Milton respectively, Halpern and Guillory explore the ways in which his two dramas—*A Mask* and *Samson Agonistes*—recast, in mythological or "archaic" molds, contemporary ideological debates about relations both between the sexes and between members of different classes. The figures of Dionysus and the maenads that Milton's masque "half invokes in order to suppress," Halpern argues, embody twin threats to the bourgeois Puritan ideal of "married chastity"—an ideal that *A Mask* celebrates by depicting it as a "middle way" that avoids the posited "extremes" of savage virginity and promiscuity. The figure of the maenad, who lurks behind Milton's chaste Lady and reveals the latter's potential for deviating from the line that leads the virgin daughter to wifely obedience, points to the poet's desire to mark the limits of Christian liberty as it applied to women. For the maenad is a figure that "threatens not only the corporeal integrity of men, but also the integrity of the household as an arena for patriarchal control."

Examining the sexual division of labor as it is represented in *Samson Agonistes*, Guillory argues that Milton's characterization of Dalila, far from being a "version of a transhistorical misogyny," instead reflects specific tensions in seventeenth-century patriarchal ideology—and shows as well Milton's active "intervention" in contemporary social discourses. Milton intervenes "on behalf of a new social practice, *divorce*, which is not yet legitimated." His Dalila, unlike her biblical counterpart, is a *wife*, and this fact is central to Guillory's interpretation of the play as a "prototype of the bourgeois career drama" in which the man's work or vocation is threatened not by female sexuality per se but rather by the sphere of private domesticity that women came increasingly to symbolize within "the new discipline of the Protestant household."

Peter Stallybrass is also concerned with changing conceptions of the relations between the private and the public realms in the early modern period. His essay provides a broad overview of Renaissance definitions of woman as a male property category controlled or disciplined by codes that required of women a closed mouth (silence), a closed body (chastity), and an enclosed life in the home. Unlike medieval women—the peasant who engaged in productive agricultural labor in rough parity with her husband, or the noble lady who had the right both to inherit and on occasion to administer feudal property—Renaissance women of all classes were increasingly (although by no means universally) confined to a private sphere. Although humanist writers often defined this sphere with reference to the households of ancient Greece and Rome, it was in fact, as Stallybrass shows, a product of specific socioeconomic changes and those new canons of polite behavior brilliantly catalogued by Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process*.¹⁶ Stallybrass concludes his examination of the Renaissance enclosure of the female body with a provocative reading of *Othello*: in this play, he argues, the woman's resistance to ideological containment—a resistance often signaled by depictions of female bodies as "grotesque" in their transgression of limits—is dramatized in the character of Emilia. At the tragedy's end, Stallybrass suggests, Emilia the "unruly woman" presides over the destruction of both literal and symbolic enclosures by questioning the very idea of the female body as the property of men.

Speaking almost as if occupying the position of the unruly woman described by Stallybrass, Carla Freccero opens the second section of this volume—"Modes of Marginalization"—with an essay that criticizes the tendency of many male critics to "impose hermeneutic closure" on Rabelais's corpus. Seeking to understand her own sense of

exclusion, as a woman reader, from Rabelais's text, Freccero reinterprets Gargantua's emblem of the hermaphrodite, which most critics have taken to represent the union of male and female in marriage, as an image of erotic sameness that alludes to Plato's doubly male "circle being" in the *Symposium*. Far from symbolizing a union of sexual opposites, the emblem, in Freccero's view, figures the Renaissance ideal of male friendship in which man's love is "not for the Other, or Woman, but for that 'other' in himself, a [male] divinity."

Like Freccero, Marguerite Waller and Elizabeth Cropper are concerned with the strategies by which women are rendered marginal in works by male artists and critics. Waller notes that the tradition of commentary on Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and even the history of the play's performance, effectively reproduce the play's own silencing of those female characters who seek to articulate the "instability of identity which their losses have brought them to acknowledge." Using a deconstructive approach, Waller traces the play's revelation of the illusory nature both of Richard's construction of an autonomous and authoritative self and of Anne's participation in that construction. Waller's essay makes an important methodological point for feminist criticism by stressing the dangers of deploying a mode of discourse that revalues female characters without disrupting the conceptual dichotomies traditionally used to denigrate women.

In her study of Renaissance Italian portraiture, Cropper focuses on the problematic elision of female identity within the paintings themselves and the tradition of commentary upon them. She observes that while no unidentified male portrait is ever said to be a beautiful representation made for its own sake, "many portraits of unknown beautiful women are now characterized as representations of ideal beauty in which the question of the [sitter's] identity is immaterial." The rhetoric of Italian representations of women, like that of the Petrarchan lyrics to which the paintings often alluded, disregards the individual woman's identity: "the portrait of a beautiful woman belongs to a distant discourse from which the woman herself is necessarily absent."

History has not recorded the names of most of the women studied in the essays by Mary Wiesner and Judith Brown; but the importance of the work described in these essays (and of the original research that produced them) should not be underestimated. For if losses or gains for working women in the Renaissance are to be accurately assessed, there is no better place to begin to look for them than in the realm of cloth and clothing production. Until the late middle ages, as Wiesner

observes, "all stages of [textile] production . . . were carried out in the home, usually by female members of the family or servants." In the Renaissance, this was no longer generally the case, and the complex changes that occurred in the textile industry had profound effects on women. If many of them continued to lead lives "devoted to . . . needle and distaff," as Arcangela Tarabotti complained, the meaning of their labor in the home was altered when *home* was defined with increasing frequency as a private place separate from the place where men worked. Wiesner's study of spinners and seamstresses in sixteenth-century Germany examines the economic and ideological factors that caused working women to suffer, despite some lively protest, a substantial loss both of earning power and of legal rights during this period. Wives, unmarried women, and widows all were increasingly excluded from the higher-paying stages of cloth production—a development that contrasts dramatically with the one Judith Brown finds in her study of women workers in sixteenth-century Tuscany. There, both in the cities and in the countryside, women became "increasingly active participants in the economy," Brown argues; and they did so "despite formidable barriers related to their lack of skills and capital, to prejudice about where women could work without losing honor, and to resentment on the part of male artisans." Although Brown speculates that the "success with which women gained access to paid employment and to productive labor" may be related—as an effect if not as a cause—to the "failure of the [Tuscan] economy to modernize" along capitalist lines, she also takes issue with feminist and marxist scholars who have, in her view, drawn premature and perhaps erroneous generalizations about a causal relation between a decline in women's economic status and the development of capitalism. Her essay, like Wiesner's, continually tests explanatory models against the complex, heterogeneous, and always partial evidence uncovered, or recovered, as scholars have sought to understand the discrepancies and the congruencies between women's daily lives and the various documents, ranging from guild records to religious treatises, that described—and often prescribed—female behavior. To increase our understanding of women's lives, Brown cautions, "we need to look not only at the rules of society but at the ways in which men and women understood them, implemented them, and often circumvented them."

The essays in the final section elaborate that point by examining strategies employed by Renaissance artists and writers to transform margins into spaces of potential or actual strength. Each essay focuses on images or texts in which cultural presumptions of women's

"naturally" subordinate status in the social hierarchy are carefully manipulated; each shows the construction of a female persona who, while participating in the rule of patriarchy, articulates her own power. The most striking examples of this phenomenon appear when high-born women assumed, or were in a position to assume, significant political roles. Sheila Ffolliott and Constance Jordan, for instance, demonstrate how women who attempted to stand "upon the Slipper toppe / Of courts estate,"³⁷ as well as the men who advised or wrote about them, dealt with the conceptual and practical dilemmas presented by the very notion of a female prince. "The image . . . of a woman who is the political equal of man," writes Jordan, "is always an image of the culturally alien, a figure relegated to the borders of the culturally constituted community."

Ffolliott's essay takes us quite directly to such borders as it studies a royal widow, Catherine de' Medici, who found herself not only isolated in a foreign land but also confronted with the possibility of governing it as regent. Catherine's position, Ffolliott argues, was effectively reinforced by identification with a classical prototype, Artemisia, who figured an idea of "acceptable" female control—acceptable because it was cast as the legitimate concern of a dutiful widow and mother. Catherine-Artemisia, as depicted by French court artists, governs from a decentered position; standing at the margin of the space she controls—indeed at the borders of the tapestries that represent her—she is an apt emblem of the royal woman who would deviate from patriarchal rule. Jordan's interpretation of Thomas Elyot's *Defense of Good Women*—written, she persuasively argues, within the context of a conspiracy to depose Henry VIII and establish the regency of his rejected wife, Catherine of Aragon—also suggests that artful compromises were required in order to justify the idea of female rule. Elyot's polemical argument relies on the image of a pagan female "worthy," Queen Zenobia, who embodies, on the one hand, wifely obedience and maternal devotion but who represents, on the other, virile wisdom and strength. In the cases of both Catherines, classical allusion underscores the paradoxes of the royal woman's position.

The court of Elizabeth I, the royal woman who most adroitly manipulated the paradoxes inherent in her role as ruler, is the context for the works analyzed by Lauren Silberman and Clark Hulse. Figuring his most powerful reader in the very title of his epic—*The Faerie Queene*—Spenser, Silberman argues, was genuinely revisionary in his treatment of Petrarchan and Platonic traditions that marginalized women by objectifying them. Spenser deliberately sought to

remedy some of the "injustices" to women perpetrated by previous poets and philosophers; in Silberman's view, Spenser's poem, and particularly his subtle characterization of the martial heroine Britomart, seriously address the question, "How does one write about a feminine reality for which men have made no room in their writs?"

Hulse, in his study of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, seeks to show that the historical addressee of this sonnet sequence, Penelope Devereux Rich, is far more powerfully present in the poems than critics have acknowledged; the male speaker, Hulse argues, uses a double communicative code to address both his specific female reader (Penelope Rich or "Stella") and a male audience of courtiers. Stella, in Hulse's view, is not only presented as superior to the male audience but acquires a position of considerable authority, equal to the poet's.

Nevertheless, Stella's authority is granted—and controlled—by a male poet's text; Penelope Rich is an "absent presence" in Sidney's work as Queen Elizabeth is in Spenser's. The next essays turn to two Renaissance women who actively countered the paradoxical but powerful cultural notion that "women achieve the fame of eloquence," as Francesco Barbaro put it, "by silence."³⁸ François Rigolot's essay on Louise Labé and Ann Jones's on Labé and Veronica Franco focus on authors who were highly aware that their very act of writing was, in the eyes of male contemporaries, a transgression. Each of these poets seeks to define her place in a male-dominated discourse and to present herself as a public persona; both compose in a spirit of ambitious albeit anxious self-advancement. Rigolot shows how small grammatical anomalies in Labé's poems—variations of gender—are not accidental errors but rather sexually coded means of self-expression. A "devious yet indispensable gesture," this "gender scrambling" reaffirms Labé's identity as a woman and as a poet by subverting the "normal" order of language. Like the very existence of the Renaissance female prince, the work of this female poet challenges the ideological construct that defines the human as the male. Ann Jones expands Rigolot's interpretive frame of reference from text to social context by studying both Labé and Franco in their urban, middle-class settings. Both poets' rhetoric, she argues, is "shaped and contained" by the fact that men—who control entry into the social, cultural, and economic elites—are their "ultimate critics"; by refusing male injunctions to silence and modesty, however, both poets speak to and for women in ways that necessarily transform the sexual economy of traditional lyric.

This volume suggests that it is still too early for a definitive answer to Joan Kelly-Gadol's famous question, "Did women have a Renais-

sance?" We need to know much more about women's position relative to men of various social classes, in various countries, and at various moments of that period before we can speak confidently about what happened, during this geographically, politically, and temporally heterogeneous era, to women as a group. The conclusions drawn here, will, we hope, provoke discussion and may, in many cases, need to be revised as our knowledge of the period increases. Further work should take into account the growing body of information about aspects of women's "nature" and roles in early modern society that are mentioned only tangentially in these essays; definitions of women in medical theory and practice, for instance, and in legal systems that altered the rights of wives and widows during this era.³⁹ This volume shows scholars trained mainly in literary criticism, history, and art history working to broaden their perspective on a culture in which the boundaries among different fields of knowledge were much less rigidly drawn than they are today. By attempting, with varying degrees of boldness, to break down such barriers, these essays invite the reader to consider historical documents and aesthetic works no longer as isolated objects of specialized study but now as parts of a social text—a text constituted not only by economic forces and class ideologies but also by the complex ideologies of sexual difference.