

Introduction

There social structure during both the Renaissance and the Middle Ages was rigid: whatever class you were born you remained in for life. Regardless of how hard you worked you could not improve your situation. However, during the Renaissance things started to change: the Black Death decimated the population making it so peasant workers were able to receive higher wages. Some peasant farmers even managed to purchase their own land and become independent of a lord. This was rare but it happened. Farmers became merchants selling their crops at the local town market. Profits from selling crops were put towards purchasing more land. A new social class called the **middle class**¹ emerged competing with the nobility (upper class) for power. The path towards economic and social improvement was largely only available to men. This is because men were the only ones who could own land in their own right. Women could not.

The Role of Women

The women of the Renaissance were denied all political rights. They were considered legally subordinate to their husbands. Women of all classes were expected to perform, first and foremost, the duties of a housewife. Peasant women worked in the field alongside their husbands and ran the home. The wives of middle class shop owners and merchants often helped run their husbands' businesses by acting as accountants. The main responsibility of women belonging to the upper class, although attended by servants, was to maintain the household by sewing, cooking, and entertaining important guests. Women who did not marry were not permitted to live independently. Instead, they lived in the households of their male relatives or, more often, joined a convent becoming nuns.

Women were not only the primary caregivers in the home; they were also the primary healthcare providers in their communities. They acted as doctors and **midwives**² acquiring a place of importance in their towns and villages. However, once universities became widely established, women's role as healthcare providers was challenged. Men were the only ones allowed to attend universities and you could only train to be a doctor at a university. This did not stop some women from continuing to practice medicine though. For example **Jacqueline Felice** de Almania of Florence (1322 CE) practiced medicine despite not having a license. She made male physicians angry because she would not collect a

¹ Middle Class: the social group between the upper and working classes including professionals like lawyers and doctors, land owners like independent farmers, and business owners like merchants.

² Midwife: a person (typically a woman) trained to assist in childbirth.

fee if her treatments failed. Male doctors always collected a fee no matter the outcome for the patient. Jacqueline, and many other women like her, was resented by men for her influence in the community. She was placed on trial, found guilty, and at the request of the Court to no longer practice medicine. The Court pathetically reasoned men naturally understood medicine better than women (so women should not be doctors). Jacqueline Felice's legal case is particularly important because it was the precedent used for denying women access to education in medicine until well into the 19th century.

A few wealthy women of the Renaissance broke free from the **patriarchy**³ to achieve notoriety if not outright independence. **Lucrezia Borgia** (1480-1519 CE), the daughter of Pope Alexander VI (1431-1503 CE), was one such person. As pope, Alexander VI attempted to use Lucrezia as a pawn in his attempt to gain greater political power, e.g. he arranged her marriage to Giovanni Sforza (1466-1510 CE) of Milan when she was thirteen (in 1493). Four years later, when he no longer needed Milan's political support, he annulled Lucrezia's marriage to Sforza. In 1502, at the age of 22, Lucrezia was again divorced and remarried, this time to the duke of Ferrara, Alfonso d'Este (1476-1534 CE). She remained in Ferrara until her death in 1519, where she became a devoted wife and mother, and an influence in Ferrara politics and social life, and a noted patron of the arts.

Lucrezia's sister-in-law, **Isabella d'Este** (1474-1539 CE), was perhaps the most brilliant woman of the Renaissance period. She mastered Greek and Latin and memorized the works of ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. She frequently gave public performances, in which she demonstrated her skill at singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments. Isabella exerted significant influence over the court at Mantua, and Mantua became known as a center of learning largely because of her efforts. After her husband was captured in battle, she ruled Mantua by herself. She also influenced the economic development of the region. She encouraged the development of the textile and clothing industry. These became the cornerstone of Mantua's economy.

³ Patriarchy: a social system in which men hold the majority of power and women are largely excluded.