

Chapter 4

THE WOMAN QUESTION & DISSIDENCE: LAURA CERETA AND CHRISTINE DE PIZAN¹

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Introduction

Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) in *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) elaborates on the roots of the Renaissance in the Italian peninsula and the chapter “The Development of the Individual” provides a record of the birth of the individual. Burckhardt regards the Renaissance man “the firstborn among the sons of modern Europe” (2010, p. 81) thanks to his will to become an individual and an intellectual. He defines the Renaissance man as “the universal man” [l'uomo universale] as he is the one who “masters all the elements of the culture of the age” (2010, p. 83). If it is the discovery of the ancient Greek and Roman civilisation and the revival of the scientific and the literary works they have produced that marks the beginning of the Renaissance, it is the humanist thought, which locates man at the centre of universe, and the humanist faith in the power of the individual that promotes the cultivation of the Renaissance individualism. Leon Battista Alberti's (1404-1472) maxim “a man can do all things if he but wills them” (Esposito, 2000, p. 343) summarises the zeitgeist of the Renaissance age and the humanists Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola via their pieces *The Soul of Man* (1474) and *The Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) respectively focus on the agency of individuals to intellectually cultivate themselves. Interestingly enough, while Renaissance seems to be a timespan that offers unlimited opportunities to men, none of the afore-said philosophers mention the womenfolk. It is possible that “man” is used as a collective term to cover both sexes but the seemingly discriminating attitude leads one scholar to ask the most famous question of the feminist literary studies: “Did Women Have a Renaissance?”

It is the discomfort she feels because of “the widely held notion of the equality of Renaissance women with men” (1977, p. 176) that leads Joan Kelly-Gadol to ask the question that becomes an oft-quoted one ever since. Contrary to Burckhardt's assertion that “women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men” (1977, p. 240), Kelly-Gadol avers that women experience Renaissance quite different than

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Pizan and Cereta strive hard to trigger women to discover the long history of female power, worth and capability.

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